

LiA Personal Leadership Journey Report

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Introduction

My Leadership-in-Action project took place in Brussels, working with Bruegel.

Bruegel is an economic policy think-tank based in Brussels. It works to create a positive impact on the European community through influencing and improving policy across several economic areas.

In doing so, Bruegel's work spans across many of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. My role at Bruegel, fitting into this broader mission, was to analyse the issue of Water Scarcity in the Mediterranean. This involved reviewing and synthesising existing work on water scarcity more broadly, learning about the Mediterranean's hydrological cycle and how this is being disrupted due to climate change, and understanding how worsening water scarcity will impact communities both on the Northern and Southern shores.

Water scarcity will be a deeply significant issue for communities across the Mediterranean – indeed, its impacts are already being experienced. As such, this project is important in laying the foundations for a dialogue between policymakers and their communities both in Europe and the MENA region regarding water management. Ensuring sufficient and equitable access to freshwater as demand rises and supply is put under strain will be crucial for securing the prosperity of Mediterranean communities as climate change progresses. My project is intended to open up a debate on how policymakers on both shores of the Mediterranean can work with each other to tackle the imminent issue of water scarcity head-on, recognising the common interest in protecting the commons resource of freshwater that is so important to communities in the region.

During this LiA, I was utterly privileged to have the opportunity to use, sharpen and reflect on my leadership skills. This ranged across leadership capacities, from effective communication to rapid problem solving. I'll explore these broadly, but two key leadership learnings stood out to me – the importance of understanding how resilience, confidence and humility interact, and the importance of adapting and exploiting communication to lead for impact.

Challenges faced

Beginning the project, I immediately faced the formidable mental challenge that comes with trying to get to grips with a complicated and broad subject matter that one hasn't tackled before.

I knew nothing about hydrological cycles, patterns of freshwater extraction, and the typical sources of community livelihoods in the Mediterranean at the outset of this project.

This wasn't a new situation for me – I have often needed to learn about a topic very quickly in order to complete a project or an academic task. The distinction here that made getting started on Mediterranean water scarcity so daunting was that I knew that I had never really researched this kind of topic before.

I've long been aware that a key aspect of my leadership style is being entirely honest with myself and those that I am working with about my strengths and my weaknesses, and correspondingly where I can exploit opportunities or where threats to the project could arise. That honesty enables me to connect with my team and allows me to deliver.

At this early stage of my LiA, I found that that honesty and humility was undermining my ability to exercise another key leadership capacity – resilience.

An excess of resilience is undesirable for a leader – a good leader, in my view, doesn't repeatedly throw themselves against intractable problems that they don't have the capacity to solve. It's more effective to take a step back and think about alternative approaches to the issue at hand, or to consider how else one might deliver positive impact.

But the flip side of this is that recognising your lack of capacities can make it difficult to have the prerequisite courage to exercise the skill of resilience. My experiences at the beginning of the LiA illustrated this to me. I recognised at the outset that I was deeply unfamiliar with the task at hand, exercising the honesty and humility that is important to me as a leader. But off the back of this, I struggled to find the grit needed to push through the early work of learning about hydrological cycles and Mediterranean communities. I didn't feel like I was making progress, and I didn't have an evaluative standard to understand if the progress that I was making was effective or not – and crucially, I was aware of both of these facts, undermining my ability to exercise the resilience that I typically display as a leader.

I was able to understand this challenge, however, and use it as an opportunity to build a more durable relationship between humility and resilience in my leadership style. In particular, I became aware that my understanding of humility and resilience trading off against each other within my leadership style was misguided, because I had failed to consider the role of personal confidence in allowing humility to coexist with resilience. It's a simple solution, but I understood as my LiA progressed that it was important for me as a leader to recognise my strengths and weaknesses, but also to recognise my capacity to build on my weaknesses and to adapt to new situations. That capacity is the capacity that has allowed me to succeed as a leader so far, and it's the capacity that underpins my resilience.

The key leadership learning for me therefore was you can exercise humility as a leader and also display remarkable resilience, because that resilience is warranted by your capacity, proven by past experiences and constantly being cultivated, to improve and rise to the challenges facing you. Confidence in that capacity is the crucial key to establishing a link between humility and resilience.

Another challenge I faced throughout the project was needing to adapt my approach in order to meet agreed timelines. I had to exercise the leadership skills of problem solving, adapting to changing circumstances and conscious reflection simultaneously. For example, I had been taking a very thorough approach to learning about e.g. how farmers in the Mediterranean use water for irrigation, but I realised that this approach was unsustainable if I wanted to cover the breadth of issues in sufficient

depth that I was aspiring to by the end of the LiA. I therefore changed my approach to be more rapid, skimming resources with a point I wished to extract in mind and quickly finding what I needed. This allowed me to ultimately succeed in covering all the content that I wished to during my LiA.

The key leadership learning for me from this challenge was that it pays to not be wedded to an approach. It's important to plan, and to know how you're going to tackle a challenge before you attack it. But it's equally as important for a leader to continuously and relentlessly reflect on whether the chosen approach really is the best for the task at hand. The ability to pivot approach and adapt nimbly is invaluable, and allows a leader to deliver ambitious projects quickly.

Collaboration and Team Dynamics

I had the privilege to learn from incredibly intelligent and talented coworkers during my time at Bruegel.

Firstly, I worked on this Water Scarcity project alongside a Senior Fellow. We met biweekly to discuss my progress and the key takeaways that I had found that would be relevant for future work to help Mediterranean communities adapt to water scarcity.

Naturally, these interactions were astoundingly rich in learnings for me. I have always understood the importance of communication for a leader primarily in terms of organising a team, delegating and coordinating tasks across individuals, and facilitating productive dialogue to integrate the best ideas and address pressing concerns. My discussions with the Senior Fellow showed me that the learning component of communication is equally as important for a leader. I was able to gain knowledge and direction from these discussions in the early stages of the project, helping to underpin my resilience, and later on when I was more confident I was able to sound ideas and develop a more critical mindset towards water scarcity issues through these discussions. Not only did this help me deliver more effectively within this project, but I've now developed long-lasting new capabilities that will allow me to be a more able leader in a future.

An important learning from these interactions was that it is important to carefully navigate the trade-off between managing stakeholder expectations and aspiring to meet them. For example, I was asked to investigate the current frequency of protests in communities across the Mediterranean about water scarcity, but whilst doing so I realised that the data to effectively do that simply did not exist in one clear place. I understood then that I could procure and collate that data myself (through web-scraping for example), but I felt that that time and effort would be better spent elsewhere. I learned that in cases like these, it's importance to have the integrity to recognise the importance of managing expectations, and the courage to in fact do so.

Beyond my project, I became friends with other Research Assistants and fellows at Bruegel. This was an interesting experience as I was the youngest person in the organisation by a substantial amount, the other RAs being 24 or older. I found this a valuable experience once again because it reiterated the importance of communication for leadership learning – I gained familiarity with new tools and new subject areas through my interactions with my peers. If I were to repeat my LiA, I would take the opportunity to speak to and learn from the older Fellows at the organisation. Frankly, I was intimidated by their expertise and didn't have the courage to attempt to build connections with them – with the

greater understanding of the relation between humility and confidence that I have now, however, I will ensure to overcome that feeling of intimidation in the future.

Importantly, I gained the new skill of understanding how to modulate my communication style to the context I was in without losing authenticity. My communication style is typically geared to others of my peer group, these being the people who I interact with most often both in my life and in leadership contexts. At Bruegel, I quickly learned to adapt that communication style in order to connect effectively with those around me, whilst ensuring that that connection still felt authentic.

Cultural humility

Brussels and Bruegel were incredibly international working environments. I didn't know what to expect boarding the flight to the capital of Europe, but I quickly realised that I wasn't mentally ready for just how diverse the city of Brussels was when I arrived.

Within Bruegel and at the Bruegel Annual Meetings which I attended during my LiA, I had the opportunity to meet and work with people from across Europe. The biggest cultural learning for me was grasping the sheer privilege that I experience across the world in virtue of being an English speaker, and a native English speaker at that.

I was expecting a language barrier to impede my experience of Brussels, and had studied some French prior to my LiA to prepare for this, but I was honestly shocked by how rarely speaking in English didn't suffice for the occasion. Because Brussels is such a diverse community composed of citizens from across Europe, English is a lingua franca in many European spaces. This meant that as a native speaker of English, I had a comfortable and easy access to interaction in most if not all of the spaces that I interacted with during my time in the city. By the end of my LiA experience, I couldn't help but reflect on how lucky I was that that was the case, but also how difficult it might be for someone to find their way in this deeply diverse community if their command of the language wasn't as strong. This privilege really set in for me when I participated in a meeting at the European Parliament – the entirety of proceedings took place in English, and I found that utterly fascinating given that Britain wasn't even part of the European Parliament anymore.

I did honestly find the diversity of the community disorientating at first. It is such an incredible privilege to speak to a French person, a Spaniard and a German all in one conversation, but this was my first time experiencing that level of diversity that often – interacting with people from other countries is the rule rather than the exception in Brussels, and that was new to me. This being the case, it was so exciting to learn about my peers' upbringings in their home communities, their different cultures' customs, and how they perceived my own British and Indian cultures.

A standout experience in terms of cultural learning for me was at the Bruegel Annual Meetings, where I ended up entirely accidentally meeting the Chinese Ambassador to the EU and touring a museum with him. During this interaction, we had the opportunity to discuss his experiences as a Chinese diplomat who had worked in the US, the UK and now in Europe. This was a conversation that I'll remember for a long time, because I've never quite had to navigate cultural sensitivities in such a keen way. I was aware that there can be large cultural and political disagreements between members of the Western community that I consider myself part of and members of the community that the Ambassador

belonged to, but I hoped to perhaps explore and discuss some of these differences in the brief time we spent together in a respectful way. And we did! I was able to learn about how the attitudes of young people in China are different to those of older generations, which was a truly fascinating cultural learning.

Ethical considerations

The primary ethical dilemma that I sat with throughout my LiA was one that I've always considered to be associated with this intellectual, almost technocratic approach to leadership for impact. Last year, I and some other Laidlaw Scholars from Oxford undertook our Research Project learning about the importance of community engagement for a longitudinal study regarding the provision of extra-curricular activities in the local community by University students. During that project, we heard from the local community about how important it was that they had a real role in designing the study, and how any connection between the University and the community needed to be a 'generational commitment' rather than merely fly-in, fly-out as previous connections had been.

With this Water Scarcity project, I was aware of the salience of these considerations to the work that I was doing. I wanted to open up the debate regarding Water Scarcity in the Mediterranean, but I wanted to do so in a way that would underline the importance of putting community engagement first for any adaptation initiatives, rather than in a way that would lead to top-down initiatives that were insensitive to the needs and views of local communities.

This taught me a valuable lesson for ethical leadership: control what you can control. Not all of the consequences of our actions are known to us when we act, and not all of those consequences are within our control. I knew that after my LiA was over, I would have no control over which direction the project was taken, over which way the discourse would evolve and ultimately over which way adaptation initiatives would develop. I also knew, however, that I could underline the importance of communities repeatedly throughout my project. One way that I did this, for example, was picking out case studies of local community initiatives for controlling water access such as Spanish *Huertas* and Algerian *Foggaras* that have been historically effective for hundreds of years, and noting how these were able to maintain community buy-in and compliance in a way top-down interventions on water access have not been able to. By doing so, I controlled what I could in order to achieve what I considered to be the most ethical outcome.

Conclusion

For me, the environment of the LiA project provided me with a stimulus and sandbox to understand the tensions within my own leadership style.

I learned through my interactions with others at Bruegel that communication for leaders is not just about coordinating a team to achieve a particular project, but also about learning to improve your ability to tackle challenges beyond any one particular task. Importantly, I've always struggled to find the right balance between seeking to tackle challenges on my own, learning in the process, and asking others around me for guidance. This LiA showed me that it really is right sometimes to do the latter – there is so much accumulated expertise around us, and it's utterly irrational as a leader to not tap into that when the situation demands it.

Finally, I discovered that finding the right co-existence between humility and self-belief will be a defining leadership challenge for me going forward. I think this realisation has been a long time coming, but the LiA made it clear to me that acknowledging my shortcomings and simultaneously believing in my ability to rise to the occasion is a difficult but vital capacity that I need to develop as a leader. I learnt the importance of this capacity and put it into practice, but navigating this tension is a long-term leadership journey that I'm excited to tackle – and extremely thankful to have begun during this LiA.

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