



Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme

Leadership in Action Reflection

Beyond the Imperative to Command: Facilitation as an Ethical Discipline in Global Advocacy

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When I arrived in Brussels for my Leadership-in-Action placement at the European Brain Council (EBC), I had a research background in Parkinson's disease research, my first Laidlaw summer heavily in neuroimmunology, a foundation in academia and experiences in biotech and industry as well. I didn't have any real understanding of how the European Union makes policy, or how the worlds of research, industry, patient advocacy, and government actually converge, or, more often, fail to. Six weeks later, I had designed, built, and led an international advocacy workshop that brought those worlds into the same space. Looking back, that gap between what I knew and what I needed to know is where most of my growth as a leader occurred.

My role at EBC was intentionally broad. I contributed to communications, programming, and social media and event materials across several brain health initiatives, and I welcomed the variety; it let me understand the organization from multiple angles before I had to lead anything myself. But the centre of gravity for my placement was the HEREDITARY Advocacy Workshop, a workshop I was responsible for conceiving, designing, and executing as part of a broader EU-funded consortium project.

The objective was ambitious by any measure: bring together researchers and industry representatives in the brain health space and give them the tools to meaningfully engage with EU policymaking, while helping policymakers understand what resources and support researchers actually need to bridge that gap. At the same time, I wanted the workshop to centre patient-lived experience as the driving force behind research priorities and policy decisions; not an afterthought, but the starting point. The discussion to advance this initiative occurring during the workshop was intentionally a direct collaboration with patients themselves, alongside HEREDITARY consortium partners, civil society representatives, and industry leaders.

I had six weeks to learn a policy landscape I knew essentially nothing about, identify and secure the right speakers for every panel, structure a programme that could hold space for very different stakeholder priorities, and design a post-workshop resource package so that the researchers and industry professionals who attended could stay engaged with policy long after the event ended. There was no roadmap handed to me for this; I had to build it as I went, which meant a lot of the leadership I practiced that summer was less about directing others and more about directing myself: setting priorities under uncertainty, learning quickly enough to make credible decisions, and trusting that I could figure out a domain I hadn't formally trained in.

The moment that tested me most, though, had nothing to do with programme design. During an EBC General Assembly, an authority figure made a comment expressing skepticism about the gut-brain axis and its implications for neurodegenerative disease, which I touched on in one of my weekly reflections. This topic is one the workshop was set to explore, and one that sits at the core of my own research background. The evidence base for this link is substantial and hearing it dismissed in a room full of senior stakeholders was unsettling to be frank.

It would have been much easier of a choice to stay quiet since I was new, temporary, and speaking up meant contradicting someone of authority in front of the entire assembly. Despite my hesitancy, I stood up and walked them through the evidence. It took nerve, and in the moment I was indubitably scared. What stayed with me afterward was that my boss and colleagues told me they respected me for it. That experience taught me something about

leadership I hadn't fully internalized before, that credibility isn't just built by being agreeable or by deferring to hierarchy, but by being willing to risk discomfort in defense of what you know to be true. Leadership, in that moment, looked like intellectual courage more than raw confidence.

If I'm honest about what made the workshop and the placement succeed, a lot of it came down to how I showed up with people. I leaned heavily on my personality and my ability to connect with a genuinely diverse range of stakeholders, from policymakers to patients to industry executives, and on staying positive and steady when problems came up, which they inevitably did. My team told me, unprompted, that I meshed well with them and that my confidence and attitude shaped the energy of the group. That feedback mattered to me, because it confirmed something I want to carry forward: that leadership is often relational before it's technical.

What I would do differently, though, is manage my mindset outside of work. I found myself, more than I expected, dwelling on how different life in Brussels was from home in Toronto, and when homesickness hit, it hit in a negative register; wishing I were elsewhere rather than being curious about where I was. This wasn't about the workplace itself; EBC exceeded my expectations in every way, from team morale to genuine support. It was about the loneliness of not having a life outside of work, having made few friends in Brussels, and I think that gap raised the stakes I placed on my work output. I became more self-critical of my professional outputs than the situation actually called for. That's a pattern I want to watch for going forward, making sure I separate personal loneliness from professional self-worth, because conflating the two doesn't serve either.

By the end of the placement, I had delivered a workshop that brought together top actors in EU policymaking, HEREDITARY consortium partners, civil society organizations, major industry partners, and influential researchers from around the world; not just Europe. I walked into that placement not knowing the country, the language of EU policy, or a single person in the space, and I walked out having delivered everything I set out to build, and exceeding what my team expected of me.

What this experience solidified for me is a confidence that I can walk into unfamiliar, high-stakes spaces and find my footing quickly, without waiting for permission or expertise I don't yet have. It also taught me that leadership isn't only about competence in a domain; it's about the willingness to learn fast, speak up intentionally and when it matters, and stay human: curious, warm, self-critical in the right ways while doing it. Those are the aspects of this summer that I intend to keep building on in my growth as a leader.