



Ecosystems of Leadership

*Laidlaw Research
Report*

Laidlaw Scholar: Javeria Ahmed
Supervisor: Zachary Walker

Laidlaw Research Report

Ecosystems of Leadership

Introduction

In the summer of 2025, I aided in the research and outlining of Professor Walker's book on the ecosystems of leadership under the Laidlaw Research and Leadership Programme. For six weeks, we examined the pillars of leadership, including the underlying systems and the culture, to assess how these elements interacted and influenced each other. Through this exploration, we moved beyond conventional leadership theories by utilizing practical examples and anecdotes to convey how leadership actually functions in practice.

Crucially, this project did not follow the mold of a traditional research project, but rather organising a set of cluttered notes and observations over multiple years into an organized outline prepared for publication; the ultimate goal being to turn the academic research into an accessible book that general audiences can learn from.

This report will detail how our team, composed of myself, Professor Walker, and an amazing student volunteer, Lynn, carried out this hefty task by identifying the research problem and using an orderly five-step methodology.

Research Problem

The project at its early stages encompassed only a single, very dense document of around 45 pages that the professor had built up over several years with any and all related tidbits concerning leadership. Thus, the research problem was fairly straightforward: we needed to sort through the notes to create a cohesive structure. To carry out this task, we could construct a methodology with the desired outcome to provide a solid outline for the book.

Methodology

In order to streamline the process, our methodology spanned five steps, those being determining our deliverables, ordering the primary sections, organizing the notes, developing each section, and finally constructing a table of contents and outline.

1. Determine Deliverables

A necessary step when writing a nonfiction book is drafting a proposal to send to publishers. Only once a publisher decides the book is viable in the market or worth investing in can the writing begin. To determine the required deliverables for this project, we conducted an analysis of the proposal submission requirements across multiple publishing houses, including Penguin, Taylor & Francis, Oxford Academic, Springer Nature. While there were some differing components needed for each publisher, a standard set of key elements emerged: the book title, subject area, summary, keywords, listing the target audience, sample chapters, and, importantly, a detailed outline of the book. Based on these findings, our subsequent steps were geared towards the development of a comprehensive outline for the book.

2. Order Primary Sections

The four main components of the professor's theoretical ecosystem of leadership were Strategy, Systems and Procedures, Culture, and People. However, the sequence of these sections in the book was critical since that would fundamentally shape the course of the book and alter how the reader perceives the framework. The selection criteria for the final order prioritized logical progression. Specifically, the sequence should ideally position the more innovative and unique contributions at the opening and concluding sections, with the synthesis of existing theories placed in the middle. Furthermore, the less conceptually dense sections should be at the beginning to maintain reader engagement and interest.

3. Organize Notes

To progress into the development of the outline, the initial notes needed to be sorted into the four key sections of the framework. Four documents were created, one for each section, with related subtopics as well, such as teambuilding for the main topic of culture. As the notes were not in any particular order, we examined each note manually, identified the main group it aligned best with, and then sorted it into the subtopic in the individual documents.

Generally, notes related to visions, missions, action plans, and models were placed in Strategy. Those focusing on decision making, underlying routines, techniques, and processes ended up in Systems and Procedures. Emphasis on identity, environment, stories, behavior, and values were in Culture. And finally, the People section consisted of notes on teambuilding,

inclusion, and personal leadership. These organized notes provided the springboard for the subsequent fleshing out and evolution of each section.

4. Develop Each Section

Once the foundation was laid, further research was imperative, which our team collected through three main sources. Firstly, we chose relevant anecdotes, such as those from the professor or a prominent leader, that fit into each section's core ideas. These were usually found in the existing notes, allowing us to quickly categorize and determine the utility of the anecdotes. Additionally, the professor's own insights as part of the University Leaders Programme, Laidlaw Programme, and more were incorporated into this step.

Next, we delved into academic research, such as papers and studies, on each topic and subtopics, often tying them to the anecdotes to determine whether the observations were supported. Even when an idea did not enjoy a proven basis, we kept it in since disproving a commonly-held concept can be just as useful. Under each paper, we would denote a quick summary of its main ideas, how it specifically relates to the topic, and key relevant findings.

Finally, we extracted content from leadership courses online, such as one on Corndel that the professor was enrolled in. We sifted through the modules, with particular emphasis on relevant units such as Strategy and Change Management, Personal Effectiveness, and Inspirational Leadership. At the end of each unit, there were numerous links to academic studies, podcasts and talks from managers at companies like Google, and articles exploring these issues further. Examining these allowed our team to get a stronger grasp on the relevant discussions in the leadership space, alongside providing inspiration.

5. Construct Table of Contents and Outline

The final step required organizing the documents, now filled to the brim with notes and research, into cohesive sections to form an outline. Our strategy began by creating broad statements that applied to each section, rooted in the research we had conducted. For example, for the Systems and Procedures section, our broad statements included: process will set you free (to do the more important things), simplify as much as possible, and constantly evaluate systems to adapt, modify, eliminate, or pivot as necessary. Underneath these statements were the "paragraphs" with each containing a quote, research, and story. Using this framework, we filed our notes neatly into the structures. Eventually, we began grouping the broad statements into

their own subtopics. Under the Strategy section, for example, the larger sections were Vision and Mission, Strategy, and Action Plans. Ultimately, we constructed our final outline consisting of our four primary sections, the approximately three subtopics within those, and the main statements and themes the subtopics would comment on.

Conclusions and Next Steps

At the end of our six weeks, we accomplished our goal of a cohesive and detailed outline, bringing the professor one step closer to completing the book proposal. While the outline may only seem a small part of the overall project, it is absolutely critical to moving forward. The intensive brainstorming, structuring, and research coalesced the scattered notes and ideas on the ecosystems of leadership into the essential components of a book.

The next step is decidedly to identify the chapter most ready to be written, likely based on the density and maturity of the ideas. Once edited and refined, that chapter would be used as the writing sample mandatory for many book proposals.

Subsequently, the general book proposal template would be filled out with the necessary details, and this template could then be tailored for selected editors and publishers when submitting proposals. It is difficult to plan beyond this step due to the numerous variables that would determine whether the book will be published, so I wish Professor Walk the best of luck!

Reflections

Though I had written numerous papers before, the process of researching and writing a nonfiction book was completely unfamiliar to me. Hence, this opportunity revealed to me several aspects of the undertaking that I can carry with me for the rest of my academic journey. One of the most important takeaways was definitely how to balance detailed and complex research with relatable personal anecdotes to appeal to the general audience. I always imagined a book written by an academic must be dense and entirely objective, mentioning only studies and statistics. Catering to the reader did not cross my mind until I began this research. The equal amount of attention placed toward anecdotes and stories in comparison to research struck me as odd at first, but as I began organizing the notes into paragraphs, I understood how crucial both are in cementing an idea in a reader's mind. In fact, a story often remained in my memory while a statistic was quickly forgotten.

Although I will not be writing a book anytime soon, keeping the importance of stories in my mind is incredibly useful for capturing readers' attention in my introductions for papers and dissertations. Moreover, I gained valuable insight for my future dissertation in the process of finding gaps in current research. I had expected that the work of writing would begin immediately, but much time was dedicated towards dissecting the ongoing theory and discourse surrounding leadership. While taxing, a thorough examination allowed us to expand on our initial ideas and discover the areas that need further research or opposition, instead of repeating existing concepts.

Professor Walker's attitude for the brainstorming process also taught me a lot about being accepting of change throughout the process. As a chronic perfectionist, the urge to cut supposedly unnecessary notes was irresistible, but we were told to preserve all the notes, even if they did not seem relevant at the moment. This proved crucial since many dismissed notes, such as those on mission statements and goal setting, were incorporated into the outline after Professor Walker decided to shift the Strategy section to reflect Vision and Mission as well. Though we had already established the different sections, making this change was relatively simple due to the flexibility we embedded in our mindsets and the process. I learned that stubbornly adhering to one formula limits creativity, and really the potential of the project.

My final takeaway pertains to accountability within a team setting. Since many of our tasks were divided, holding meetings at the end of every week to check-in on the progress, make suggestions, and dole out the next assignments aided greatly in pushing the project forward and keeping the entire team on the same page.

When examining this project in its entirety, there is little I find that we could have carried out differently. Our methodical, if a bit slow, process allowed us to parse through our material efficiently. However, as the saying goes, there is always room for improvement.

One suggestion I would have is to spend more time on finding and inspecting the supporting research. Although we did create summaries for each source, I believe a greater in-depth look into the research itself would have resulted in even more ideas for the content. For example, scrutinizing a researcher's methodology could result in disproving a commonly-held claim or discovering relevant statistics that were not included in the abstract. At the current stage, it might be more difficult to accommodate new ideas since we have a solid outline; nevertheless, since we are only writing a sample chapter, the rest of the sections still have an

opportunity for further development, and certainly these findings can be incorporated into the book while writing the first draft.

Another change I would have implemented is fleshing out the anecdotes before placing them into their respective sections. There were many sentence fragments or half-formed ideas that weren't completely clarified or expanded upon; doing so would have allowed us to determine the viability of that anecdote faster in the process so that we don't have to weed out unnecessary or confusing ones while writing. Essentially, some more attention and care early on might save the hassle that comes after.

Still, many of these suggestions are quite minor and can be implemented even now. Otherwise, I would say our research team did great work into constructing a foundation for the rest of the book.

Overall, I truly enjoyed this project and getting a deeper look into the work that goes into writing, planning, and researching an academic book. Thank you to the Laidlaw Research and Leadership Programme and Professor Walker for this fantastic experience and I look forward to seeing this book published!