



When I first contacted Ms. Sheena Haywood at Adaptive Snowsports Whakatipu (ASW) about completing my Leadership-in-Action experience in Queenstown, New Zealand, I came in with a couple of ideas for how I could contribute. I knew I wanted the project to involve more than simply volunteering on ski lessons for six weeks. I wanted to leave behind something that could make adaptive snowsports easier to access even after I had gone home.

The main issue I became interested in was pretty simple: skiing is **EXPENSIVE**.

There is obviously the cost of a lift ticket and renting skis or a snowboard, but that is only the beginning. Someone also needs a jacket, snow pants, gloves, goggles, transportation to the mountain, and potentially adaptive equipment or additional instruction. For a family with several children, those costs add up extremely quickly. This stood out to me because I was coming from the United States and living in Canada, so converting my money into New Zealand dollars sometimes made prices feel like a discount. However, I quickly realized that this was a very outsider way of looking at the situation. Kiwis are earning New Zealand salaries, and living on an island separated by enormous distances from many of the places goods are manufactured means that everyday products can be quite expensive. For a family already dealing with the additional costs associated with disability, purchasing an entire set of snow clothing just to try skiing could easily become another reason not to participate.



My first project idea was therefore to develop a low-cost snow-wear rental system for ASW. The idea was to collect donated jackets, snow pants, gloves, goggles, and other usable winter clothing and make them available extremely cheaply to participants who needed them. Donations could come from locals who had old gear sitting around their homes, while monetary donations could be used to fill gaps in the inventory. Since Queenstown and the surrounding towns have such large skiing communities, it seemed like a good place to find hand-me-down equipment that still had plenty of life left in it.

This became my first SMART goal. During the first part of my six-week placement, I planned to identify suitable donation locations, understand local permitting requirements, and create the groundwork for a system that ASW could continue using. I spent roughly my first two weeks scouting possible areas in Queenstown, Arrowtown, Wanaka, and the surrounding region. I looked at markets and areas where we could potentially set up a table, and I began reviewing what permissions and regulations would apply. The goal was specific because it focused on snow-wear access, measurable because I could identify locations and develop a usable system, achievable because of the large local ski community, relevant because clothing represented a genuine financial barrier, and time-bound because I intended to begin collection during my six weeks in New Zealand.

Right as we were about to move from planning into actually setting up the tables, however, the project hit a major roadblock. My supervisor experienced a family emergency that required time at the hospital. This made it very difficult to move forward with the original plan because much of what we needed was connected to her. The equipment was at her home, we had planned to use her truck for transportation, and some of the permitting arrangements depended on her as well.

This was probably the first major leadership challenge of my LiA because I had already invested a significant amount of time into the rental idea. My first instinct was naturally to figure out some way to keep pushing it forward. However, it became clear that trying to force the plan to continue would not be practical or respectful of what my supervisor was dealing with. I had to separate the method from the actual goal. The method was building a snow-wear rental program, but the real goal was improving access to adaptive snowsports. Once I looked at it that way, I realized there were other ways I could have an impact.

Fortunately, I had proposed another idea when initially contacting ASW: creating stronger coordination between ASW and schools or disability organizations in the region since when discussing the needs of the organization initially, she had mentioned we needed more publicity and presence in the area. This became the main focus of the rest of my project and developed into my second and third SMART goals. I believed the best way to reach people was through schools where kids who loved to share what they did at school, would share with their parents about ASW!

My second goal was to contact local schools and introduce them to the adaptive instruction available through ASW, particularly for students with special needs who were already attending school ski trips. I set a target of reaching approximately seven schools during my remaining time in New Zealand. This was achievable because many schools in the Queenstown region already organize ski days, meaning the infrastructure for getting students onto the mountain already existed. The missing part was making sure that students who required additional support could participate as well.

I contacted schools including Shotover Primary School, Remarkables Primary School, Kawarau Primary School, and several others in the region. I explained what Adaptive Snowsports Whakatipu did and how their instructors could work with students who might not be able to participate comfortably in a standard group ski lesson. The response was far better than I expected. Several schools were very interested because they already had students with additional needs participating in upcoming ski trips.

By my final week in New Zealand, I was able to see one of these connections actually materialize. A primary school student from one of the schools I had contacted came up to the mountain for a half-day adaptive lesson. She spent the morning receiving additional support through ASW and was then able to ski with her classmates in the afternoon. Seeing her on the mountain was one of the moments where the project stopped feeling like a bunch of emails I had sent and became something tangible.

The other schools I contacted were also planning trips, although most were scheduled after my six weeks in New Zealand had ended. At first, I was a little disappointed that I would not be there to see them. Looking back, I actually think this became one of the best indicators that the project had some sustainability. The goal was never for me personally to take every student skiing. If the relationships I helped establish continued operating once I had left the country, then the impact was no longer dependent on my presence.



My third SMART goal expanded that same idea beyond school-aged participants. I wanted to help ASW connect with at least one community organization supporting adults with disabilities. This goal was completed through a visit my supervisor and I made to Living Options in Alexandra, an organization supporting adults with special needs.

Rather than simply emailing them information, we visited the residents in person and brought some of the adaptive equipment with us. We showed them the sit ski and explained the different types of adaptive snowsports available. This was important because describing adaptive skiing is one thing, but actually seeing the equipment made it much easier for residents to picture themselves using it.

The visit was honestly a slam dunk in terms of the outcome we were hoping for. The residents were extremely interested, including two paraplegic residents who were excited about the possibility of using sit skis. By the end of the outreach, two ski days had been arranged for Living Options residents at The Remarkables in September. I unfortunately would already be back at the University of Toronto by then, but again, the fact that the trips were happening after I had left made them even more meaningful as an outcome of the project.

These experiences also changed how I understood the community ASW serves. Before beginning the LiA, it would have been easy to think about adaptive snowsports simply in terms of helping people with disabilities ski. The longer I worked with ASW, the more I realized that disability was only one part of the access problem. Cost, transportation, clothing, awareness of available programs, school coordination, equipment, confidence, and previous experiences with sport could all affect whether someone ever reached the mountain in the first place.



That was why the “why” behind the project mattered so much. The goal was never simply increasing the number of ski lessons ASW taught. It was helping remove barriers that prevented people from having the option to participate. For a student with additional needs, that could mean receiving an adaptive lesson in the morning and then being able to join classmates later in the day. For an adult at Living Options, it could mean finding out that being paraplegic did not automatically remove skiing as a recreational option.

Adaptability was probably the leadership skill I developed most strongly during the project. I went into the LiA with a clear plan and initially thought successful leadership would mean carrying that plan through from beginning to end. Instead, I learned that being overly attached to the original plan can actually prevent progress. When the rental project became difficult to continue, I could either spend the rest of my placement waiting for the circumstances to change or redirect my effort toward another approach.

I learned that persistence and stubbornness are not the same thing. Persistence means staying committed to the purpose of a project. Stubbornness means insisting that the first method you chose must be the one that succeeds. Moving into school and community outreach allowed me to stay committed to improving access while changing how I worked toward that outcome.

Communication also became a much bigger part of my LiA than I originally expected. Reaching out to schools required me to communicate with people who had never met me and explain very quickly why ASW might be relevant to their students. I had to introduce myself, describe adaptive snowsports, explain what ASW could offer, and make the message clear enough that a busy school administrator or special education contact would actually want to respond.

I also learned that communication could not be identical for every group. Talking with a school about supporting a child during an already scheduled ski trip was very different from speaking with adults at Living Options who might never have considered skiing before. During our visit to Alexandra, showing the sit ski and allowing people to ask questions was much more effective than simply explaining everything verbally. These experiences made me more aware that good communication is not just about delivering information clearly. It is also about understanding what the person on the other side needs in order to engage with that information.

Cultural humility was another important part of working in a country that was new to me. One of the simplest examples was my original perception of affordability. When I arrived, some New Zealand prices appeared cheaper because I automatically converted them into Canadian or American dollars. I had to recognize that this was not the perspective of the community I was actually trying to serve. The relevant question was not whether a ski jacket felt affordable to me. It was whether it was affordable for a New Zealand family already paying for the other costs of snowsports.

I also entered a school and community system that I did not completely understand. I was unfamiliar with some local terminology, how individual schools organized support for students with disabilities, and how different organizations communicated with one another. Instead of assuming that the systems I knew from North America worked the same way in New Zealand, I had to ask questions and learn from my supervisor and the people I contacted.

That experience helped me understand cultural humility less as knowing everything about another culture and more as being aware that I did not know everything. I was in New Zealand for six weeks. ASW, the schools, families, and community organizations had far more knowledge about their own needs than I ever could have gained during that period. My responsibility was to contribute what I could while listening to the people already doing the work.

There were also ethical considerations throughout the LiA, especially because the project involved people with disabilities. One of the most important was avoiding the assumption that participants needed to be “fixed” or that skiing was automatically something everybody should want to do. Our responsibility was to make the opportunity available and adapt it when necessary. Whether someone wanted to participate was still their choice.

I saw this same principle during adaptive lessons. Participants were not passive recipients of help. They communicated what felt comfortable, what they wanted to try, when they needed a break, and what goals mattered to them. The instructor might have technical knowledge, but the participant still understood their own body and experience better than anyone else. This reinforced the importance of active listening and respecting autonomy rather than assuming that leadership means always knowing what somebody else needs.

Safety was another major ethical responsibility. Snowsports naturally involve risk, and adaptive lessons can require specialized equipment or additional support. Wanting someone to experience an exciting breakthrough could never take priority over their safety or comfort. One

lesson I repeatedly learned was the importance of taking breaks, checking in with participants, and paying attention to signs that someone might be tired even if they were excited to continue.

The situation involving my supervisor's family emergency also taught me something about ethical leadership. My project mattered to me because I had travelled across the world to complete it, but that did not make it more important than the personal situation she was facing. Expecting her to continue providing transportation, permits, and logistical help so that I could stay on my original timeline would have been completely unreasonable. Changing direction allowed the project to continue without treating another person as simply a resource necessary for completing my goals.

Collaboration ended up being at the center of almost every successful part of the project. ASW instructors provided their technical experience, my supervisor helped me understand the community and make connections, schools coordinated with families and ASW, and community organizations helped identify participants who might be interested. The project worked because different groups brought different knowledge and resources to the same problem.



One thing this taught me is that stakeholders do not necessarily look at the same project in the same way. ASW may be thinking about instructor availability and adaptive equipment. A school may be thinking about how to include one student during a larger ski day. A family may be thinking about cost, transportation, safety, and whether their child will enjoy the experience. The participant may simply be wondering whether skiing is actually going to be fun. Good leadership meant considering all of those perspectives rather than assuming everyone cared about exactly the same outcome that I did.

The impact of my LiA can be measured through several immediate outcomes. Approximately seven schools were contacted, multiple schools expressed interest in working with ASW, at

least one student participated before I left New Zealand, and additional school visits were planned afterward. Our Living Options outreach also resulted in two future ski days being scheduled. Even the snow-wear rental project, although it could not be fully launched, produced planning and a framework that I handed over to ASW before leaving.



The longer-term sustainability of the project can be measured by whether these connections continue without me. ASW can track whether the schools I contacted return in future ski seasons, whether additional students participate through the same relationships, and whether schools begin referring other schools or families. The same applies to Living Options: if the September trips lead to future visits or connections with other disability organizations, then the outreach has gone beyond a one-time event.

Participant feedback would also be important. Numbers alone do not show whether someone actually felt included or enjoyed the experience. Feedback from participants, families, teachers, support workers, and instructors could show whether adaptive lessons met participants' needs and whether they would want to return. If the snow-wear rental program is eventually implemented, ASW could similarly track how many items are donated, how many participants use the gear, and whether access to inexpensive clothing genuinely removes a financial barrier.

My Leadership-in-Action experience therefore ended quite differently from how I originally imagined it. I arrived thinking the main product of my six weeks would be a physical snow-wear rental system. Instead, much of my impact came through emails, conversations, introductions, and relationships that connected ASW with people who could benefit from its services.

At first, I thought this meant I had moved away from my original project. By the end, I realized the project was never really about collecting jackets. It was about improving access to adaptive snowsports. Once I understood that, changing the method did not feel like abandoning the project. It felt like adapting it to the situation in front of me.

That is probably the leadership lesson I will carry forward most strongly. A good leader does not need their original idea to be the idea that succeeds. They need to understand why they are doing the work in the first place, listen to the community they are working with, and be willing to change direction when a better opportunity appears.

The experience also changed how I think about sustainability. Some of the outcomes I am most proud of are ones I will never personally see. Students from schools I contacted will go skiing after I have returned home. Residents from Living Options will visit The Remarkables in September. ASW can continue using the relationships and planning developed during my placement. Instead of seeing my absence from those moments as something disappointing, I now see it as evidence that the work did not depend entirely on me.

For my future leadership practice, that is the standard I want to keep: contribute something useful, listen enough to know when the plan needs to change, and build things that can keep working after I am no longer the person leading them.

