

The context

I completed my leadership in action project in Mexico City with Hagamos Composta, facilitated by Makesense Americas. Hagamos Composta is a project which aims to reduce the amount of waste in urban areas by collecting organic waste from homes and businesses and transforming it into compost to re-incorporate it into the soil, provide nutrients and reduce pollution. The compost is then returned to the people who are part of the project. Beyond this Hagamos Composta also collects pet waste and dead pets to compost as well as working with events, running a community cafe and donating to conserving the Mexican grey wolf.

Hagamos Composta already operates all across different areas of Mexico as well as in other countries, and our project mission was to help Hagamos Composta professionalise and systematize its regenerative impact to ensure its scalability. This overarching mission was split into two specific categories: operations, which required analysing internal processes and relationships to identify bottlenecks and opportunities for organisational improvement, and seed funding which was a resource guide for funding opportunities and proposals for local branches to adopt infrastructure. Overall the main advantage of having our team of Laidlaw scholars do this project was to enable an outsider perspective.

The day to day reality

As this was a centrally planned project I worked with 3 other Laidlaw scholars with Hagamos Composta and there were also 3 other groups working with other organisations. All of the groups came together to work with the Makesense facilitators to learn about design thinking so that we could then apply it to our project. This is an approach involving empathising, defining, ideating, prototyping and testing, in a non-linear process with the main feature being that it is human centered and involves designing from real concrete needs rather than assumptions. Learning about the theory behind designing solutions alongside working on a project which required problem solving meant that it was easier for me to see what actions or perspectives to carry to future leadership opportunities and in which ways I need to improve in the future.

While most of our work was completed at our accommodation or at the Hagamos Composta cafe we did get a chance to visit their composting site outside of Mexico City as well as the sites of the other group's projects. This experience made it really obvious how important seeing something actually operating is when you are trying to problem solve as just hearing about it or doing desk based research didn't give me a full understanding of their operations.

The project

For the seed funding deliverable we produced a report with : a timeline with funding opportunities and alternative financing; a template for grant proposals; and a list of possible corporate partnerships and how to contact them. The work needed to produce this was mostly desk based research but one challenge I came across was that grants often have certain requirements which may include legal status, this was difficult for me initially because as an outsider I didn't understand the Mexican legal framework, I also found a similar problem later in discussions with branch leaders because different states in Mexico have very different political goals and therefore approaches to supporting an environmental project like Hagamos Composta. In the 6 weeks I was there it would have been impossible to get a full sense of the different legal and political systems across the country but this shows the importance of recognising where there may be systemic differences across the globe and how you ask people who are actually within the system for support. This period of desk based research revealed to me that I have a problem with prioritisation and time management, because I wanted to produce the best list possible I kept on researching when I should have stopped earlier and worked on another section of the project and this led to a delay in our first draft. During this part of the project I needed to consider the long term impact of the report, because grants can be quite short lived and specific. To do this I included a methodology for how I found the grants and prizes as well as including a list of databases that can be used to find grants in the future.

For the operations deliverable our report included : a friction point map; a strategy for classifying different branches linked to the equipment they need; an alternative communication software option; a social media strategy; an analysis of user feedback and a plan for an annual general meeting. Initially this deliverable seemed less attainable than the funding one as we were slightly confused about what they wanted us to produce and it was hard to get a full understanding of the project's operations from the presentation they gave us. Our first step was to try and gain an understanding of Hagamos Composta and so we spoke with different people in the organisation to understand the reasons they got involved, what they love about Hagamos Composta and what challenges they face and later on we also sent a survey to people within the organisation and those who follow them on social media. One thing I took away from this experience was the benefit of having an outside perspective as some things are difficult for people to see from within an organisation. After collecting information and understanding both the human side of Hagamos Composta and what the friction points actually were we began creating possible solutions. A very useful step in this process was a meeting with the Hagamos Composta team as they encouraged us to condense the ideas and prioritise the best ones, while prior to this meeting our planned report was likely becoming unmanageable which would mean that we would have struggled with it and not produced our best work but more importantly that it wouldn't be useful to the organisation as they would have to do a lot of work to get any benefit out of it and they don't have the time for that.

My own reflections

I am going to preface this section by saying that I loved this whole experience: Hagamos Composta was a great organisation to work with as they were very communicative and very

open to sharing their knowledge and hearing our perspectives; I enjoyed spending time with the other Laidlaw scholars and learning about their lives; I was able to see a Volcano in person for the first time which made me appreciate the beauty of the world again; Kenia and Aide, the Makesense coordinators were so knowledgeable and helpful; the food was amazing and it was great to try some very different things; Mexico City is an amazing place to experience history and art and I have come away so much more knowledgeable and it was also great to have conversations with the volunteers who worked with us, the hiking guide and the branch leaders as I would not have spoken to them otherwise. I have genuinely come out of this experience feeling more confident in my abilities and more hopeful for the future.

When reflecting on an experience it is important to look at what was challenging and what mistakes you made so that you can learn from them and improve in the future. In my personal opinion our group did not work as collaboratively as we could have in the beginning although over time we improved in this regard. Instead it felt at times that we were working parallel to each other rather than with each other, and I think this is partly due to a tension which exists everywhere and is also the core of some of the challenges that Hagamos Composta faces, which is between being idealistic and socially conscious and being successful and practical. Hagamos Composta already is very ambitious in creating a more environmentally friendly and socially conscious world which means that the outside perspective would likely be more business orientated, which is not a role I'm completely comfortable with. Luckily other members of my group had more experience in this and relate more to this perspective. However Hagamos Composta isn't a business, it was started by a guy collecting his neighbour's waste because he cared about biodiversity and our report wouldn't be useful to them if all our recommendations ignored this. Throughout the experience I needed to become less rigid in my perspective in order to become someone that could collaborate, this didn't mean abandoning my views but it did mean I had to listen more to other people's perspectives, and assess why I have those views, what biases I have so that I could recognise my gaps and also communicate their benefits better.

Another personal challenge I had was feeling unmotivated at times with the project because of the lack of control I had over our suggestions being implemented and because I wouldn't be able to see the results even if they are. On a logical level this is obvious, I am an outsider, who while I did my best to gain an understanding of the social context and operations is an impossible task for 6 weeks, and this was only a short project, but emotionally this lowered how ambitious I felt about what we could achieve. What I'll carry forward from this experience was while you can't stop your emotions you can control how you respond to them, and this feeling was actually very useful as it reminded me that I am unimportant in terms of Hagamos Composta and any ambitions I had would be based on assumptions rather than the actual need. So in response to this feeling I shifted my focus because the only way to ensure that I made an impact was to make sure the recommendations were useful to Hagamos Composta including through prioritisation, breaking problems into more achievable steps, and considering the design and communication method of our report and presentation. In a more practical sense this taught me the importance of design in leadership as a way of communicating something effectively, which is something I overlooked before.