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Laidlaw Leadership Essay

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Going into my Leadership in Action experience, my idea of leadership was clear-cut and straightforward: someone who directed and guided others. I imagined a leader as the person at the front of a group: the person responsible for making decisions, delegating tasks, and telling others what needed to be done. Throughout my Leadership in Action experience, however, that definition became much less straightforward. I began to understand that leadership does not always require being the person in charge. It can instead come from the way someone thinks, listens, builds relationships, and contributes to a shared purpose. My experience in Montréal particularly showed me that leadership can happen through small contributions to a much larger goal.

My two strongest CliftonStrengths, Intellection and Relator, helped me understand why this form of leadership feels natural to me. Intellection reflects my tendency to think deeply, be introspective, and engage with ideas, while Relator reflects my desire to form meaningful relationships and work closely with others toward a common goal. Gallup describes Intellection as a Strategic Thinking strength and Relator as a Relationship Building strength, meaning that these two strengths approach leadership from very different but complementary directions (Gallup 1). Together, they have shaped my understanding of leadership as both thoughtful and interpersonal. I want to understand problems deeply, but I also want to understand the people experiencing those problems.

My LiA experience at the Douglas Research Centre in Montréal gave me the opportunity to see these strengths in practice. This summer, I worked at Dr. Jai Shah's Laboratoire Traverse,

where I was surrounded by researchers and clinicians committed to improving mental health care in Quebec. Although I entered the lab as a student with much less experience than the people around me, I learned that I could still contribute through curiosity, observation, and relationships. My work on the Innowell Project, in particular, demonstrated how research and relationships can come together to create change. This project is also connected to the UN SDG3, that focuses on good health and well-being as the project's goal is to streamline mental health care for patients in Montréal and Quebec, in the future.

The first of my two strengths, Intellection, describes my tendency to enjoy deep thinking and reflection. Gallup explains that people with strong Intellection are characterized by intellectual activity and introspection. They enjoy thinking, questioning, and spending time developing their ideas (Gallup 1). At first, I did not necessarily think of this as a leadership quality. I associated leadership with action rather than thought. However, Strengths Based Leadership argues that effective leadership begins with recognizing and developing one's natural talents rather than trying to imitate a particular model of leadership (Gallup 2). This helped me recognize that the time I spend thinking and reflecting can actually be one of the ways I contribute to a group.

My Intellection strength was especially relevant during my work at the Douglas Research Centre. My internship involved a variety of activities, including completing literature reviews, organizing case files, observing clinical meetings, and learning about the work being done with patients. Rather than simply completing these tasks, I found myself thinking about what they revealed about mental healthcare. I became interested in the relationship between research and the healthcare system: how exactly does a research finding actually become a change in practice?

How do clinicians decide what methods to use? Why do some patients have difficulty accessing care? And what can be done to make the system more responsive?

These questions became particularly important to me because of the challenges surrounding mental healthcare access in Quebec. Although Quebec has a universal healthcare system, patients seeking mental health services through local community clinics can face waits of several months. Seeing this problem made me think beyond the individual patient and consider the larger system surrounding them. I began to understand that improving mental healthcare requires not only helping individual patients, but also examining the structures that determine how and when people receive care.

One of the projects I worked on concerned Innowell. Innowell is a mental health platform that allows clinicians to use questionnaires to track patients' progress over time. The project was a pilot intended to determine whether the platform could be used throughout Quebec and potentially help clinicians monitor patients who were waiting for care. I found the project compelling because it involved a problem that did not have an easy answer. Technology could potentially improve the process of monitoring patients, but simply introducing technology does not automatically make a healthcare system better. It requires research, evaluation, and an understanding of how the technology fits into the experiences of patients and clinicians.

This is where I began to see Intellection as a leadership strength. I may not have been the person making decisions about the project, but I could contribute by asking questions and thinking critically about what I observed. Leadership, in this context, was not about telling others what to do, but about developing a deeper understanding of the problem so that future decisions could be more intentional

The members of the Traverse Lab came from different academic and professional backgrounds. Some were pursuing master's degrees or PhDs, while others were involved in clinical work and research. Despite these differences, everyone was connected by a shared commitment to mental health. I learned that a successful team does not require everyone to have the same role. Instead, people contribute different forms of knowledge and experience toward a common goal.

I became interested not only in the work people were doing, but also in understanding their perspectives and experiences. I learned from watching how researchers interacted with clinicians and how different roles contributed to the same larger mission. This changed the way I thought about leadership. A leader does not necessarily have to stand above a group. Sometimes, leadership means helping create a community where people feel comfortable contributing what they know.

My interactions with participants through the Innowell Project also reinforced this lesson. One of my responsibilities involved interviewing and meeting participants at the CLSC in LaSalle. This experience reminded me that research is ultimately about people. It can be easy to discuss mental healthcare in terms of statistics, systems, technologies, and research findings. However, behind every research project are individuals who have their own experiences with the healthcare system and research, especially in this field, is

My experience in Montréal also taught me about leadership through the Personal Leadership framework presented in *Making a World of Difference*. Schaetti, Ramsey, and Watanabe describe Personal Leadership as a methodology particularly useful in unfamiliar environments, rapidly changing contexts, and situations involving uncertainty. The framework

includes practices such as attending to judgment, attending to emotion, cultivating stillness, engaging ambiguity, and aligning with vision. (WorldCat 4)

This framework became particularly relevant because Montréal was an unfamiliar environment for me. I was not only working in a new research setting, but also adapting to a different cultural and linguistic environment. I attended clinical meetings where people sometimes spoke French, even though I did not understand everything that was being said. I had to become comfortable with being the person who did not know everything. This was challenging because my first instinct when entering an unfamiliar environment was sometimes to observe rather than participate. However, I learned that observation can be valuable when it is paired with curiosity. Instead of being embarrassed that I did not understand everything, I could treat unfamiliar situations as opportunities to learn. As I spent more time at the lab, asking questions became much easier, despite that I had resisted asking any even with encouragement.

Outside of the lab, I also immersed myself in Montréal by exploring different neighborhoods, using the city's bike paths and community spaces, practicing French, and experiencing the city's culture and food. These experiences taught me that being part of a community requires more than simply being physically present. It requires curiosity and willingness to engage with the environment, even if it meant biking for a longer distance than I was used to!

This is an important lesson for the kind of leader I want to become. If I want to work on problems that affect communities different from my own experiences, I cannot assume that I already understand those communities. I need to listen, ask questions, and allow my understanding to change and grow.

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