Walking out of my first MGMT317 lecture I was thinking, ‘frick, I don’t know if I can do this, I’m not a leader!’ But I realized I wanted to challenge myself, and boy oh boy I was challenged- me and 4 am Skype calls don’t work well the next day. The past three weeks represent the most stressful time of my university life, but reflecting on it now, it was a truly amazing and rewarding experience. Would I do it again? Absolutely!

Our group got off to a quick start and creating a united team was my first priority. Prior to sending my launch email, I created a Facebook page on which I posted a welcoming status, the team bios, and a poll to determine which communication and writing platforms we would use. My launch letter focused on building excitement towards working as a team and collaborating to produce amazing results. I firstly asked my team members to read the bios, and after WhatsApp had been voted the top app for communication, we began messaging. The bios and messaging were great for getting to know each other. However, we truly connected as a team over Skype video calls. By acknowledging the diversity of our team and the opportunities that this would present, and by emphasizing that any ideas, opinions or concerns that my team members had were valuable, I was able to develop a more personal, safe and supported environment. This helped create unity as my team members felt that they were not on their own, and they were able to recognize that their diversity, thoughts and feelings were important to the success of our team. Creating a united team from the get-go was one of the best things I could have done. It helped everyone feel more comfortable, which was a key factor in the success of our team. Private messages from them showed how appreciative they were of my efforts to connect everybody.

Next, we needed to generate creative ideas. I set up a Google Doc which allowed us to work collaboratively. During our first Skype call, some team members felt they were not creative. To encourage creative thinking I asked them to think about a United Nations Sustainability Development Goal they were passionate about, or an issue in their country and the ways we could address this. This led to some great thinking as they felt strongly about their topic. Having already established a supportive environment, five great ideas were produced. As a leader, I needed to be a role model and demonstrate my commitment to the team. So, I quickly shared my idea on Google Docs- to produce water bottles made from bagasse. This idea developed into bagasse coffee cups, bagasse coffee cups with a waterproof bamboo lining and eventually our idea became bamboo bike tours in Kenya. Google Docs allowed us to communicate as a team effectively because, at the time, all team members could access the tool and we could work collectively to develop ideas.

We began researching and writing our draft proposal. I was very fortunate to have a productive team and I think there were a few reasons for this. I delegated tasks according to the strengths of my team members, which worked a treat! Generally, my team’s strengths related to their interests. Therefore some enjoyment could be found in completing the tasks which motivated them. I created a schedule so the team was aware of due dates, scheduled times for calls and how we should be progressing. Effective communication was also very important. I made a Facebook Messenger chat after we realized we needed a platform to facilitate quick communication for questions and comments. I found it really important to give them any information they could need and make it accessible. On our Facebook page and shared Google Drive folder I posted the mark sheet, summaries of our Skype calls, helpful hints and information from previous years, and a proposal layout. I needed to help them so they could help me. In doing so, they felt confident in what they needed to do. I also posted reminders regarding important dates and I gave them ideas on what content and criteria should be covered in their section, based on the market sheet and my own research. Effective communication allowed us to successfully progress towards a shared goal. Incentives also contributed to productivity. I would acknowledge any good ideas and work produced to ensure they felt valued which encouraged them to work hard. I also posted information about the rewards that were available which motivated them as they want to make the most of these opportunities.

Then we struck problems! One member stopped responding but I could see he was active on Facebook. Eventually, I made the decision to let him go- in fact to this day he has not opened my dismissal message. At first, I was reluctant to let him go because he had finance skills that the rest of us did not have. But in fairness to the team, I knew it was the right decision. We decided that I would do the finance section as I had the time, consistent access to Wifi and people who could help me. I arranged a Skype call with Deb. I was expecting to complete an income statement with her help, instead, she told me what we needed to hear- our idea wasn’t going to work. We had planned to purchase bamboo bikes from Ghana Bamboo Bikes and have them transferred to Kenya- it just wasn’t logical! I was gutted, we had already started writing our proposal. I worked with Deb to brainstorm new ideas. I produced a detailed description of the new idea, including the product, how it would meet the topic criteria, how it would successfully operate, our target market, and I explained why we had to change. To my relief they loved it, but I wanted to give them the chance to provide feedback before making a decision to proceed with it. I also sought help from a friend who does accounting so that I could complete the finance section. I used my initiative to develop solutions to problems we incurred. I also learnt the importance of optimism. In a tutorial activity, I was determined pessimistic. Before sharing the new idea with my team I cried and I didn’t feel like I could do this project anymore. But I didn’t want to let the team down and I snapped out of it. A change in attitude meant that I realized I needed to be proactive to produce successful ends results, and I became determined to find solutions and keep going.

I made a huge effort to help my team succeed. One team member part way through the experience could no longer access Skype, Facebook or Google Docs. I was able to empathize and recognize his struggles, so I found a way for him to contribute. Before every Skype call, I messaged or called him to talk through the agenda of the call. He could share his questions and ideas which I would then share with the team. I would then contact him after the Skype call and update him. Every update and message I sent to the team on Facebook I sent to him. He sent pictures of his completed work which I then typed up into the Google Doc on his behalf. I have always been a people pleaser, but this taught me you cannot please everyone. Originally I wanted to find new communication and writing tools that our whole team could use, but this wasn’t realistic. So I had to do what worked for the majority and find a solution that meant he felt part of the team, without directly talking to the whole team.

Fast decision making regarding the original creative idea did not work well. We didn’t set aside time to look at the logistics of our idea. We had progressed far with this original idea and then had to take a massive step back. While it did slow us down, it was not a mistake because I learnt from it. Next time I would ask team members to describe their idea in terms of meeting the GEE topic, how it will operate and who we will target. This means potential problems can be identified and addressed early on. My team members also responded positively when I provided a similar description for our new idea, as it sets a clear direction for the proposal.

This experience helped me become a leader I never thought I could be. I delegated, planned, communicated effectively and I was supportive of my team. One thing that helped me in my leadership was seeking help from other experienced leaders. I was originally reluctant to contact Deb, I thought asking for help on the finance section would be seen as a weakness. But I realized asking for help isn’t a weakness, I wasn’t expecting her to give me the answers, I just needed her to share her knowledge and experience. I also reached out to a previous student of the course. I asked him what he wished he had known before completing the experience and for any advice he had. This knowledge helped me to become a more effective leader. For any future participants, I would recommend utilizing the experience and skills of the people around you. So after all this, I would consider myself a good leader. I can say this with confidence as the messages I received from my team both during and after the experience make me feel extremely proud of the way I led our team. Trust me- no one is more surprised at this than me.

This experience has made me feel more confident in my own abilities. Next time I think I can’t do something, I’ll think back to that time when I didn’t think I could lead a team of 8 global citizens and then did it. I am so proud of myself and my team, and I hope they are really proud of themselves too. My team was great to work with- heck some of us are even friends on Instagram now.