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All of my past leadership experience has been in an entirely Kiwi context. Culturally homogenous, with collective decision making and no discernible hierarchy. New Zealanders have a very laid-back attitude to leadership, so it was a culture shock when I found that my team looked to me as definitively in charge and in control as the leader. Overtime I encouraged more collective leadership, but also evolved my approach to better fit what they were looking for in a leader. Navigating cultural differences like these took time, but they soon became a strength for us.

My teammates often looked to me to make key decisions, which I was initially uncomfortable doing. Even though I did so as democratically as possible, it still felt very “un-Kiwi” having my team entrust me with decision-making power. I worried that this more autocratic style would be received negatively, but my group responded really positively to specific guidance and structure. With time zones and time constraints, an approach of voluntary work distribution would not have worked. What I found most effective was giving everyone tasks that suited their skillsets. Alongside specific research points, I asked everyone to explore their own ideas to help build a broad knowledge base. It made me realize that implementing more direct control as a leader is not necessarily a bad thing. By doing so respectfully with team approval, it worked extremely well alongside my usual “Kiwi” style of collaborative leadership.

Unexpectedly, dividing up the workload also helped to build team unity. Having distinct tasks to complete ensured participation during meetings. I could ask people to be “experts” and share what they had been working on, helping further our discussions. This not only eased my workload; I think it produced higher quality work, as people felt personally responsible for the group’s success. It worked especially well with my teammate Sherita who became a co-leader for our marketing section. We would meet to discuss our broader vision for the project, but I gave her full autonomy. I also told her to co-opt other team members when necessary. It paid off, with our marketing becoming a real highlight of our proposal.

What I did find challenging was dealing with underperformance, specifically two team members who did not participate. I initially took a nurturing approach, contacting them individually with small tasks to complete. When this did not work, I had to be firmer, eventually exiting both from the group. Despite how difficult I found it; I think it was a real point of growth for my leadership. I became far more comfortable reinforcing my expectations and those of the team.

I found further difficulty in fostering creativity. Before our first Zoom meeting I had sent out a creativity exercise that I had found useful. Unfortunately, I was met with deafening silence and blank pages. From this terrible start, I asked everyone in the group to take turns sharing what problems their country is facing. Together, we worked through how we could address them, and we soon had an agreed-upon idea. However, it was an uphill battle in the beginning. Given another chance, I would focus on first developing our group dynamic, to make sharing creativity less intimidating. Using a combination of Zoom, WhatsApp, and email helped with this team building, because we could easily stay in touch. Our Zoom meetings were the most effective tool, allowing us to interact organically. Once we got comfortable, I really enjoyed seeing the dynamic change. People called on each other for ideas, supported each other’s contributions, and asked constructive questions in a respectful way. It made for a great leadership experience.

Overall, the GEE has helped me understand that taking charge as a leader is not necessarily a bad thing. I learnt how to actively lead progress rather than just facilitate it, and in doing so developed a more balanced leadership style.