The 2020 GEE contest was an extremely interesting and challenging experience that forced me to critically evaluate my leadership style. This was both uncomfortable and rewarding.

**Getting Started**

On Wednesday 29th of April I sent my launch letter email. I was pleasantly surprised that everyone promptly replied with genuine interest and excitement. However, little did I know that this would be the easiest part of the journey! On the 2nd of May I created a Whatsapp group and basecamp page which could be accessed by all members of the team. The Whatsapp chat was most effective which allowed instant messaging.

**Sensitivity towards others**

The first call to action was when team member Joey created a spreadsheet that included the different timezones of members. However, I didn’t realize that when I posted this spreadsheet into the group chat China timezone was missing. This resulted in our member from China feeling upset expressing concern that she felt this was done on purpose asking for an explanation. I found this difficult as I wasn’t sure why China had been left out from the spreadsheet in which Joey was offline unable to provide an immediate explanation. I had to step up as a leader explaining that this would of being an innocent mistake in which I reassured Floria that she was a vital member of the team. This helped ease the situation in which Joey personally thanked me for addressing the situation and later explained himself to Floria. I perceived this to be an innocent mistake but it made me realize that we must be sensitive to others who may have different feelings/interpretations.

**Timezone challenges**

We had our first Zoom meeting on Monday the 4th of May. This included 5 members of the team. I was able to record each zoom meeting and upload this to basecamp. This ensured that those who couldn’t attend the meeting due to differing timezones had access to the meeting. This was important with a newfound sensitivity towards others I realized I had to find a way to make sure everyone felt included.

**Changing leadership style**

There was one week before the final deadline and our team had not come up with an idea that we all loved. I knew that coaching sessions were available but I was afraid of rejection and to admit that my team was struggling. I finally decided to book a coaching session which was one of the most valuable experiences of my life. I had only planned for a 1-hour coaching session but was privileged to have 3 hours of coaching. This changed my leadership style and approach completely. Although we had 1 week before the deadline this coaching session helped me realize that the creative process I first initiated could have been improved. This initial process generated a limited number of ideas and I soon realized that the best ideas were generated through positivity and no criticism. I was tempted to stick with the original idea that we had reluctantly agreed on but I realized that members within my group were not confident. Consequently, I decided to re-do the creative process but in a very different way. I re-read everyone’s bio’s and made sure that I truly understood each member’s passion. I felt stressed and overwhelmed at the time but realized that uncertainty and deadlines was not the best approach. Instead, I used objectives and goals which helped members work towards a common goal rather than putting pressure on them to complete certain deadlines.

**New Creativity Process**

We started a new creativity session one week before the final deadline. This process was very different from the first one due to the strong reflection against my leadership style. Some of the team members on the zoom call were privately messaging me saying they had no good ideas. I built a positive team environment in which no ideas were deemed bad and all ideas were encouraged and recognized. This helped increase the number of ideas in which team members were excitedly bouncing ideas off each other. We came up with a completely different idea but this time we felt more confident and excited to tackle the team proposal. I also felt that each member had a greater level of confidence as I continued to reinforce my excitement and certainty.

**Encouraging others**

During this GEE experience I realized that one member in-particular was rather quiet and under-confident in her ability. I received messages from this member stating she wasn’t good at using technology and that her ideas were bad. Language was also another barrier which made some of the zoom meetings difficult. I knew that each team member’s contribution was vital in which we decided to use the 'chat' zoom feature to help overcome language issues. I also tried to make this team member feel more comfortable through emphasizing that this was a team project and we will work through any issues together. This team member showed growth throughout our journey and sent me documents filled with extensive research. I think encouraging others and recognizing their ability and potential is vital to strong contribution.

**Reaching Out**

Another difficult challenge was dealing with team members that didn’t contribute. Time was passing and I realized that one of the team members was no longer stopped participating. I emailed this team member checking in and didn’t receive a response. I then decided to message this team member on Whatsapp asking how he was stating that his participation would be very much valued. He then responded apologizing for his lack of contribution due to personal circumstances and that he would start being more actively involved. This team member remained silent and I was tempted to exclude this member from the report. However, as a leader I had to realize that the new pandemic environment everyone was facing was extremely difficult. I messaged this member one last time encouraging him to
Charlie Davison, New Zealand, English 1st Language

share his ideas and that there was still time to contribute. Consequently, this team member ended up helping us with the financial section – a section that we were struggling with. This taught me that we must never give up as a leader and must never give up on our team members. We must try to understand their situation and encourage them to take part especially in difficult circumstances.

Overall it is difficult to describe this experience in just one page. This GEE contest was truly a life-changing experience. Initially, I saw this project as a school project but it was much more than that. I learned new things from my team members and also learned qualities about myself that needed changing. This can be represented by figure 1 in which I believe I went from a good leader to a great leader through the many challenges faced and important self-reflection.

Figure 1