I clearly remember the feeling when my lecturer begun describing the course requirements for the innovation management paper, which centred around leading a Global Enterprise Experience team. My heart immediately sunk and the nerves set in. A week later, due to changes in my majors I had to rearrange my timetable and was faced with the decision to drop innovation paper and consequently not participate in GEE, or drop an ethics management paper which I had been looking forward to all year. It seemed like the obvious choice, I was relieved that I had dodged the bullet of leading a team, but by the end of the day I eventually came to the realisation that I would never overcome this fear and gain confidence in myself without taking things head on. I dropped ethics, and continued with this innovation paper, and each week the butterflies grew in my stomach as GEE grew closer, I wished it was from excitement but reluctantly had to admit that I felt exceedingly out of my depth. I didn’t even know how to lead successfully in my own culture, and now I’m expected to lead across cultures?

The Experience

I was pleasantly surprised about the reaction from my launch email, within hours all but one members were successfully signed up to Basecamp and chatting with excitement. We quickly set up a time to Skype groupchat to also use as it was easier than Basecamp and set up a call for a couple days later. I remember shaking the whole day leading up to the call, terrified that I wouldn’t make a good impression, or they’d doubt my leadership potential.

The call was successful in terms of innovating ideas, surprisingly everyone was hoping to work towards the same UN goal, and by leading them through a creativity technique we were able to produce many potential ideas. Unfortunately, it was not as successful in terms of getting to know each other, as many members had bad internet that kept cutting out leaving them having to type responses but through talking everyday on the chat, we ended up building a great team bond and learning about each other’s strengths and cultures. After more research into the profitability and feasibility of a couple ideas we settled on an idea and begun conducting additional research. One week into the challenge, we came to the realisation that although the idea utilised solar power, it did not necessarily combat the impacts on an UN goal enough to produce a winning report.

I called an emergency meeting where we bounced off new ideas until settling on one that were proud to produce a report about. This is where I felt like the challenge got difficult. We had limited time left and multiple team members would not participate in discussions, or reply to my private messages. I tried to keep the team motivated, expressing how impressive it was that we have managed to change our ideas halfway through and how it’ll be worth it in the end. Running out of time, I identified the four main parts of the report, and wrote up a document that briefly outlined what was expected in each section. I then split everyone into pairs, with someone in their time zone, and as a team we delegated each pair a section of the report, setting a due date of our next meeting where we could then read over each other’s parts and ensure everyone was happy with the report a couple days before the official due date.

Life Lessons:

1. Discomfort is the key to success: One of the most important things I learnt through this experience is that with discomfort comes a range of incredible opportunities, that would not be experienced without stepping outside your comfort zone. Competing in this experience not even as a group leader is so far out of my comfort zone, let alone leading the team, so I nearly let me nerves get the better of me, and I would never have learnt so much about different cultures and how people work around the world.

2. There is time for collaboration and there is time to be a leader: Throughout my life, I was always scared of coming across too bossy or rude when making decisions and throughout the experience, I found myself constantly trying to gain reassurance from my team members that I was leading them in the right direction, or making the right decision, which at first, I disguised as making sure everyone had a chance to contribute, which is extremely important, but as I moved through the experience I found myself realising that I was using this an excuse to not set decisions. An example, was the delegation of the report parts – as people kept missing meetings I kept pushing the delegation of tasks to the next day as I wanted everyone to have the chance to express which part interested them, and would keep pushing it back a day even when people were
unresponsive in group chat and direct messages, hoping they’d come online and share. Eventually I realised I was hindering the team members that were being active, and it was in their best interest for me to keep the ball rolling. Once I started taking more charge and confidence into my messages/decisions/thoughts, I found the team begun to more actively contribute and discuss ideas, and as the confidence grew in my thoughts, so did their confidence in sharing their opinion.

3. **Your job as leader is to utilise the team’s talents:** After trying to get to know the members on a more personal level, I soon found that many members had individual talents that they hadn’t even thought about to mention on their bio’s and that it was my job to extract these talents, and find a way to apply them to our project as this would only help us excel. Learning about their lives and listening to their unique perspectives showed me so different sides to the world, and how to tackle our report problem.

4. **There is no I in team:** In the challenge, I ended up in hospital for on-going health problems that affected me throughout the remainder of the challenge. I was having difficulty just keeping in contact with the team, let alone leading them. My first thought was to extract myself from the team, surely if I emailed my lecturer she would understand these circumstances? I quickly realised that this experience was bigger than just me, and leaving my team leaderless was unfair, and that I needed to put my own troubles aside as it was in the team’s best interest to continue. I communicated with my team how I was feeling and it ended up strengthening our bond as a team.

Looking back on my journey of leadership, I am so grateful to the little voice in my head that told me to do it. I’ve seen myself grow in ways I could not imagine, with the confidence and life lessons I learnt from this experience overflowing into my everyday making processes. It was an honour to learn how different cultures worked firsthand, and I will be applying this knowledge into my future endeavours.