John F Kennedy once said, “leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.” If there is one thing that the GEE has taught me, it is that a great leader is continually learning. Especially from their team members.

I have always been a naturally competitive person, and admittedly a slight control-freak. I grew up in a family where excellence was encouraged and, in some cases, expected. As a result, I considered having leadership titles as something that would look good on my resume. However, I never fully understood what “leadership” truly was.

Starting the GEE experience, I had no real idea about what I had signed up for. My definition of leadership was someone that took charge and made things happen. I believed that to be a successful leader you had to delegate, manage people and lead by example. I viewed being automatically designated the team leader as a way for me to ensure our report was of a high quality and completed on time.

However, the competition quickly made me realise that having the word “leader” next to your name does not actually make you a “leader”. Leadership is earned and is more reliant on you making genuine connections with your team, than it is about producing a successful end product. Further, the competition was not just about me “leading” a team at all. It was about making meaningful connections with people all around the world, understanding their different perspectives and cultures, and learning to lift each other up in the challenging times.

My Key Takeaways:

Due to an enrolment mishap, I was assigned to a team late and therefore appointed as co-leader. At first, I was concerned about how the leadership dynamic would work. However, co-leading taught me the importance of effective communication. I always made sure I confirmed any group messages with Sam, my co-leader, first to confirm we were on the same page. Further, after every team meeting, we would call and de-brief on how we thought the meeting went. I am very grateful I got to be a co-leader because it taught me the importance of cooperation and Sam helped me stay focused and calm even in the most stressful times.

During our creativity brainstorm I learned that for an effective team everyone has to feel comfortable with each other. While we undertook some icebreakers at the beginning, I realised that sometimes you need to lead by example. Therefore, I proposed a creativity brainstorm and offered to go first. I shared some crazy ideas involving paper balloons and knitted socks to show that no idea was a bad one. I wanted my team mates to realise that we were in a non-judgmental zone and no one was better than anyone else. This ended up working really well and majority of the team followed by sharing their own ideas or built on to others.

I entered the competition with a few pre researched ideas that I thought would work well for our team. Initially, we chose my idea of creating biodegradable containers from pumpkin packaging. However, halfway through the competition, some members decided that the idea was ultimately not viable. This was frustrating as I had done lots of research into the project and believed it was a strong idea. However, the benefit of a diverse and global team is the multiplicity of thought everyone brings. Paul, Faith and Pim came up with a brilliant idea of using coconut husks to create the packaging instead. While I was upset that my idea had been so greatly criticised, I realised that I needed to put my
preconceptions aside and **not take the criticism personally**. As a result, I am really excited by our enterprise and I think we made the right decision to change.

During our meetings I also noticed that some team members would not participate or would be quite reserved when they did contribute. We also had difficulty with ensuring some team members were included as they had poor internet capabilities and could not join our video calls. This was concerning as it was hard to ensure everyone participated equally. However, after a coaching meeting with John, I realised that some of my teammates may have felt unheard or underappreciated. I realised that successful leaders must learn to **adapt their leadership style to suit their team**. Therefore, in the next meeting Sam and I made sure that everyone had the opportunity to share their ideas but also their concerns and that the team spent time discussing these and addressing them.

Additionally, leaders mutually, must trust their team members and **know when to step back and let the team come to a decision on its own**. It is difficult for me to let go of control and delegate. However, my team taught me how to let go and just trust them. We delegated different sections of the report to the team, and I was nervous that people would forget or not make deadlines. However, I had nothing to worry about and was so impressed by the results when everyone shared back. If I could do this differently, I would have delegated and given more independence to my team members from the start.

Lastly, I believe that our team has worked so successfully because we all respect each other. **Leadership is earned.** To do this **leader’s make sacrifices**, like having meetings at 4am to accommodate different time zones or staying up late to summarise meeting notes and confirm next steps. But they also do not see themselves as leaders. It is just as important to **listen to your team members** as it is to guide them.

The GEE has certainly been challenging but I feel very fortunate to have had such an amazing team to work with. If it were not for my team I would not have learned nearly as much as I did. The GEE has given me a different perspective on what it means to be a leader and has also enabled me to grow as a team member. I now know that the best type of leaders are those that are always learning. I will continue to seek opportunities to learn in everything I apply myself to and will no longer just settle with having the title “leader.”