

THE JOURNEY SO FAR IN OIKOS LEAP - A SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP PROGRAMME FOR YOUNG LEADERS

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ABSTRACT

oikos was founded in 1987 by students who, in consequence to the absence of sustainability in their formal educational programmes, aimed to empower young leaders to drive sustainable change (oikos, 2016). Close to thirty years later, the majority of universities still fail to integrate sustainability holistically and struggle to develop sustainability leaders, resulting in a “leadership crisis” (Myatt, 2013; Green, 2013). This paper seeks to present the methodology and impact of oikos’ leadership programme (oikos LEAP), created to provide young leaders with an opportunity to discover and practice sustainable leadership in their lives. In 2015, oikos LEAP, was attended by 40 young change agents, of which 17 voluntarily committed to the Advanced Track experience. Whilst oikos LEAP offers three tracks, this paper focuses on the Advanced - an online-offline experience providing formations from webinars with Robert E. Quinn (2005) to personalized coaching hours. This paper presents observations by oikos LEAP managers who discuss feedback expressed in individual and Peer2Peer reflections to imply transformation. Numerous participants claim their perspective on leadership has evolved, others feel enlightened by the practice of self-discovery. Though in its early stages, oikos LEAP has, thus far, proven to fill an educational and personal gap in the lives of young change agents.

Keywords: Sustainability, leadership, youth, experiential, education

INTRODUCTION

With the signing of the Paris Agreement in April 2016, sustainability is an anew a key priority on the agenda of all major actors worldwide. Twenty-first Century challenges guide debates on various aspects of sustainability such as climate change or energy efficiency. However, a key element to drive the desired transformation of society towards sustainability is often overlooked: the necessity to develop sustainability leaders (Werft, 2015). Sustainability leaders are “individuals who are compelled to make a difference by deepening their awareness of themselves in relation to the world around them, and thus, adopt new ways of seeing, thinking and interacting that result in innovative, sustainable solutions” (Visser & Courtice, 2011). In recent years, the terms “responsible” and “sustainable” leadership appear to have attracted growing interests from both universities, governments and businesses. For instance, Unilever’s CEO, amongst others guiding the World Business Council on Sustainable Development, argues that it should be as important for leaders to have “a positive impact on

society” as it is “vital [for] companies' [to make] profits” (Riley, 2015). Moreover, numerous authors suggest leadership should move on from business as usual (George, 2016) as “it’s time for more sustainability” in leadership roles (Eccles, 2016).

The struggle for formal education to develop sustainability leaders was already observed in 1987, when a group of students at the University of St Gallen (Switzerland) founded oikos, a student-driven organization for sustainability in economics and management. Despite recent attempts for sustainability mainstreaming, opportunities for young generations to mature into sustainability leaders, ones who “inspire and support action towards a better world” (Visser & Courtice, 2011), are “socially just, resourceful and promote diversity” (Hargreaves & Fink, 2004) are scarce. Tertiary educational programmes still struggle to integrate sustainability, and keep up with the growing pressure by regulators and businesses placing sustainability at their core (The Guardian, 2011). To stay on par, young change agents require skills such as creativity, constructive thinking and self-awareness, amongst others (Soffel, 2016). As Wright (2013) and Sledge (2014) share, these skills remain challenging for mainstream education to implement and thus, institutions miss an opportunity for larger development of sustainability leaders.

In order to tackle this observed gap, in 2014, oikos designed an educational project that could provide an experience to young change agents to lead for a better world and develop themselves: oikos LEAP. oikos LEAP aims to inspire young leaders to become responsible in their decision making and equip them with insights, knowledge and tools. It is, thus far, available for oikos members to pursue. This paper presents the methodology utilized in the oikos LEAP journey with the guiding question: how does oikos LEAP transform mindsets towards sustainable leadership? It is hypothesised that oikos LEAP has an impact on participants as it fills a gap in the educational process of young change agents relevant for personal development, improved action and a ‘sustainability’ worldview. This paper debuts with a presentation of this journey describing the methodology of the Advanced Track. The personal transformation claimed by participants is then described, based on their feedback. This paper concludes with a discussion on the lessons learnt. It is depicted that by utilising experiential learning and placing the individual at the centre of his or her learning, lasting impact on young people and their communities is realisable.

THE LEAP PATH

oikos LEAP is designed to address a gap in current mainstream educational opportunities for young people and, thus, encourage sustainable leadership to develop, spread and last. To achieve its purpose, the programme is founded on the principle of experiential learning (Moon, 2004; Baker, Jensen & Kolb, 2002) supplemented by three guiding methodological concepts: exploring, sharing-practicing and reflecting. Exploring signifies engaging in internal and external discovery in order to grow, sharing-practicing allows to put into practice lessons learnt by sharing them and teaching them, further learn and improve impact; and reflecting refers to the practice of taking time to think and to question. These are complemented by two core elements: the recruitment of participants committed to their personal development as change agents and the creation of a ‘sacred space’ (Quinn, 2015). The former necessitates a simple selection where students individually assess whether they are willing and able to commit to the process. The ‘sacred space’ element refers to a space in which participants feel safe to express their genuine self and bare their being. These concepts and elements are referred to throughout the following section.

To address students’ needs, LEAP is divided into three tracks. It is believed that learning occurs best when one owns the process. Therefore, participants are encouraged to choose a track in line with their availability. The first is the Basic Track which consists of three webinars throughout the year, on skill-oriented and directly implementable topics. No previous knowledge is required to attend. The second is the Intermediate Track, allowing to gain more skills to effectively run local projects, become aware, and experiment, with sustainable leadership and carry these values into the future. This track consists of two in-person meetings and the Basic three webinars. The third is the Advanced Track which is available to those willing to fully commit. Participants engage in four in-person meetings, six online webinars and a guided reflection process. This track was attended

by 17 people in 2015/16. The group comprised of a 50/50 gender balance, participants originated from 9 countries with an age range of 20-29. Six participants were in a Masters programme and eleven in their Bachelor's.

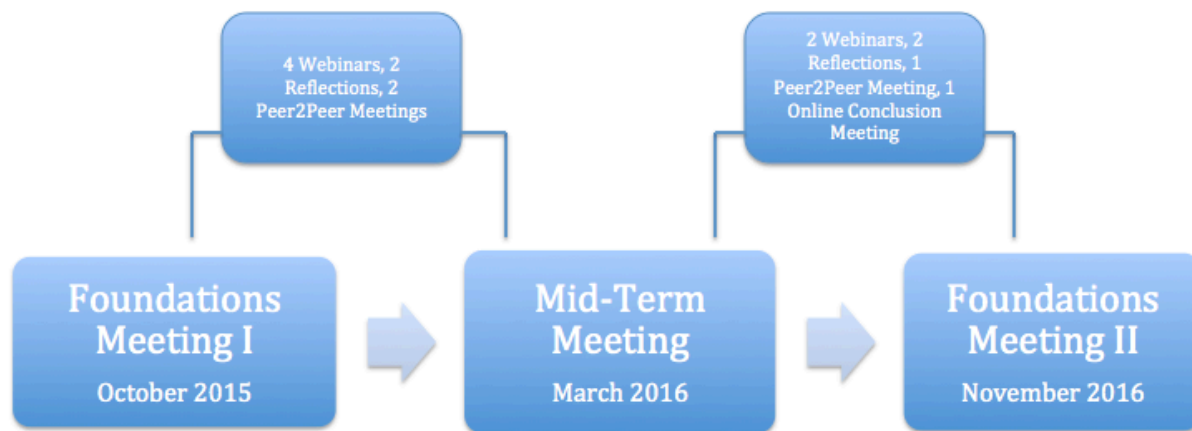


Figure 1 – The oikos LEAP Journey

The LEAP journey commenced with a four-day Foundations Meeting I, as illustrated in Figure 1. In 2015, it was developed with Transformational Leaders and Legacy Coaching (both US-based consultancies), Ivey Business School (Canada) and Word and Deed (a Swiss inspirer) to entail a holistic experience. To illustrate the idea of this meeting, two elements are presented: (1) the moderation and (2) the exercise to define sustainable leadership. The moderation of the Foundations Meeting I was alternating. The managers of LEAP compiled learning goals for each session and left the floor to participants. Participants could decide to moderate a session individually or in pairs. By following the learning goals, that reflect the purpose of the programme, they adopted creativity to execute the sessions. This enabled to get out of their comfort zone, think outside the box and achieved all three LEAP methodological concepts (exploring, sharing-practicing and reflecting). Likewise moderated by participants, an exercise to define sustainable leadership was executed. Whilst in formal education students are often exposed to the same books, in this exercise papers were selected that gave a pluralist approach to sustainable leadership. Papers included topics of developing leadership character, seeing opportunity out of the comfort zone, action-reflection learning (Rimanoczy, 2006) and achieving sustainability through storytelling (Visser, 2012). Participants reflected on the readings, challenged assumptions and presented their observations. A journaling exercise (Business Dictionary, 2016) followed, where participants got in touch with their personal aspirations and estimated the impact and influence they wished to live.

The first webinar took place in the month following the Foundations Meeting I. LEAP webinars (75 minutes) were opportunities to not only listen to leading experts in the field, but also to explore and interact with them. Webinars addressed topics that gave participants varied perspectives on sustainable leadership. The webinar content addressed was co-decided with student representatives through a survey to meet their needs and with the advise of two leadership experts. Throughout the Advanced Track, webinars enable the enhancement of the 'sacred space' even when participants are not physically present. Following the conclusion of each webinar, a reflection guide was created by the managers of LEAP. Reflection guides encouraged participants to reflect and practice in their own environment, creating the opportunity to reflect independently and share their findings within their LEAP groups moderated by a coach. These coached Peer2Peer online meetings (90 minutes, composed of 3 to 5 participants each) were a space for LEAP groups to share reflections, current challenges, experiences in their personal and work lives; and find solutions. They took place after every reflection guide.

In the first webinar with Robert E. Quinn, author and professor at the University of Michigan, participants learned about the Fundamental State of Leadership (Quinn, 2005). In particular, participants were inspired to move from a conventional thought process to one of positive leadership, following up directly on the Foundations Meeting I to continue deepening the understanding of their personal purpose. The exercise of the first reflection guide consisted of working on the four questions expressed by Quinn enabling to move from a normal state to the fundamental state: "What results do I want to create?", "Am I internally directed?", "Am I others focused?" and "Am I externally open?". The second webinar saw the participation of Julian Treasure, a TED speaker and sound and communication expert, who confronted the topic of listening and communicating effectively. Treasure shared skills and data on how to succeed at these challenging elements of good leadership. The third webinar hosted by Martin Cadee, an educational innovator and social entrepreneur, made a direct link back to Quinn's. Cadee provided elements to create a vision that guides one's life path and follows a passion. Post Cadee's webinar an ulterior reflection guide was provided entailing concepts such as the vision board (Goodman, 2012) and context maps (The Grove, 2016). These were both applicable to personal leadership and organisational strategy. In February 2016, Michèle Joannis, a partnerships and fundraising expert, contributed to the learning in an applicable and practical way, sharing techniques on how to build sustainable partnerships that enable to raise funds and beyond. Joannis further linked the importance of a vision and cooperation to leadership and Cadee's insights.

The reflection to follow these webinars was a Mid-Term Meeting, as laid out in Figure 1, that gathered participants in-person to learn from each other's experiences and pursue personal development for improved local impact. As custom throughout oikos LEAP, the creation of the 'sacred space' was crucial to enable the concepts of exploration, sharing-practicing and reflecting. To illustrate exercises utilised in this meeting, two elements are depicted: (1) the somatics exercise and (2) listening-presence-questions exercises. All exercises were facilitated through ontological coaching methodologies as Cox (2014) argues that "human cognition is more than thinking", "emotions and body" facilitate "change and learning" (p. 114). Similarly, the BEL Model suggests that Body, Emotion and Language are coherent, and listening is a central component serving as inspiration to LEAP exercises. The somatics exercise entailed learning about four dispositions: flexibility, resolution, stability and openness (Coady & Olalla, 2011). These were executed via a session on adopting stable or flexible body positions, for example. Links were created to listening-presence-questions exercises, where participants transformed assessments of each other into questions that led to a more internal and self-driven journey. Participants learned that it is important to trust that individuals asking for advice are capable of finding their own solutions. Through attentive listening and inquiring it is possible to help others and oneself to find inner motivations and answers. To conclude the first section of the Mid-Term gathering, Advanced Track participants joined the Intermediate Track for two days to share experiences and continue a tool-oriented formation.

A reflection guide followed the Mid-Term Meeting related to somatics and listening-practicing-questions, encouraging its practice and becoming aware of when it makes a difference. Two final webinars tackled the importance of responsible education and students' role in triggering it, with Mehdi Maijdi, a professor and international consultant, and how to manage conflicts, with Michael Dues, a professor in conflict resolution. The latter highlighted the relevance of dealing with conflict to find unexpected solutions. A final reflection will be completed subsequent to Dues' webinar that aims at examining the entire journey and mentally downloading one's progress. The final Online Conclusion Meeting consists of a coached group reflection to find a common agreement on sustainable leadership and share the commitments each participant will pursue. A reunion of the entire group is realised with a Foundations Meeting II, approximately one year after the start of the LEAP journey. The Foundations Meeting II allows the alumni group to meet the new group, share lessons learnt, inspire actions, pursue their passion and connect with sustainable leadership into the future.

LESSONS LEARNT

At the core of oikos LEAP is the potential for transformation of its participants. This section discusses three levels of transformation in line with the received feedback: personal development, local action impact improvement and the personal definition of leadership. A discussion is then presented on the lessons learnt whilst carrying out the programme.

First, participants encountered increased personal development through the programme. For instance, one participant from Germany stated that she “always had a fixed plan” but she had “never had the time to reflect on it, whether it was something [she] really wanted to do or an external pressure” (personal communication, March 19, 2016). Her discovery came through exercises such as the journaling, which numerous participants had never been exposed to. This was complemented by a life-line exercise, at the Mid-Term Meeting, where participants reflected on their life to find how they evolved to who they are. They, moreover, understood that different lifelines bring different individuals to similar places. The reflection guides that participants completed monthly, allowed her to take regular “time to reflect, and ask: who am I? What do I want to be?” and “discover yourself, develop yourself, go forward” (personal communication, March 19, 2016). Similarly, a participant from France shared that she has become more comfortable with the unknown and the act of asking more questions. Her view was that she entered “LEAP with a lot of questions and [she] has more questions getting out of the programme”. However, she “learnt to reflect and process questions, so [she] can take better decisions and more efficiently” (personal communication, March 19, 2016). This same French participant realised that understanding others and “knowing how to work with others better”, is part of the discovery journey. Participants created strong bonds within their Peer2Peer groups which became support groups for development and attentive listening hubs. Further, the creation of the ‘sacred space’ and the openness of guest contributors, encouraged to “learn how to share and respect different opinions coming from so diverse backgrounds”, an Indian participant expressed.

Second, participants emphasised the improvement of their local action and impact as a result of oikos LEAP. As some participants state that “LEAP has been a mind-changing process”, it is important to realise that without the share-practice element of the methodology one could not attain the full potential of the programme. When participants put the learnt theory into practice in their local organisations, several encountered positive experiences. A Danish participant, for instance, stated she “received many tools to become a responsible leader, more reflective skills, more practical skills, communication skills, all part of the personal development” (personal communication, March 19, 2016). Likewise, an Austrian participant shared that she received “a lot of [inspiration] for the [local organisation]”. The webinar with Martin Cadee had involved the presentation of exercises such as the vision board or the context map as tools for following a vision one is passionate about. This Austrian participant was enthusiastic to “apply it in [her] [local organisation] and develop a long-term strategy with it”. This local exercise resulted in higher motivation in local members, who “just wanted to keep moving forward” (personal communication, March 19, 2016). Other participants expressed that their annual projects were boosted by tools provided during the journey such as ones provided by Julian Treasure, which an Indian participant found “improved [his] communication skills” (personal communication, March 19, 2016), important for good project management. These testimonials suggest that oikos LEAP impacted beyond just the 17-member-Advanced-group, possible due to the element of continuous practicing and sharing.

Third, participants re-defined their definition of leadership and their aspirations as leaders. Participants had ample occasions to reflect on what it signifies to be a sustainability leader, the guiding purpose of the programme. During the Foundations Meeting I, webinars, Peer2Peer groups and Mid-Term Meeting, participants were exposed to pluralist articles, given the opportunity to challenge and discuss with pioneers and practice what preached. These exercises broadened their horizon, enabled them to further understand leadership and influence and what differentiates a sustainability leader from a regular one. Some common elements resulted from the journey. Participants shared that a sustainability leader is a “good listener, values transparency, senses the bigger picture, privileges the long-term common good over financial returns, keeps an open mind, embraces the potential of necessary risks and owns the capability to empathise”.

An Indian participant closed the round stating that her “concept of leadership changed and [she] is, since day one, attempting to apply it in [her] daily life” to simultaneously “influence others to think differently” too (personal communication, January 4, 2016).

As any contemporary programme, oikos LEAP remains to be re-questioned and improved yearly. Thus far, several observations have been made that can contribute to improving education as a whole. First, participants that reflect, practice and re-teach are most likely to embed changes in their behaviour and actions. Since they are rarely exposed to notions of purpose, vision, reflection, acceptance of failure, the LEAP methodological concepts allowed them to discover a hidden inner and outer world. Second, participants are used to formal ‘teaching’ and once exposed to the idea of ‘facilitation’ and active engagement of the group, their view of ‘teaching’ shifted. Their motivation towards learning and spreading different ways of learning increased. Third, experiential learning encourages enlightening moment and supports the participant to move forward in his or her ambitions. For this to become reality, education should encourage people to trust in their commitment to learn and have a passion for engaging in hands-on practice. Experiential learning leads to more usage of curiosity and the accepting of others, oneself and one’s possible failures. Fourth, even though Peer2Peer groups were created, and they were effective, the amount of meetings was deemed few to keep up the conversation. It is suggested that all educational experiences utilise methods of learning in smaller groups and give as much space as possible to students to engage in them. The presence of a coach was highly appreciated and made the group grow together, in a safe space of support and motivation. Fifth, diversity and interculturality are imperative. Participants realised that struggles are similar and developing the capacity of empathy is important. Diversity in teaching and studying allows reaching new heights. Sixth, the personal journey of exploration, towards both internal and external factors, is important to be an active part of the conversation, conceptualise lessons learnt and comprehend how to implement them. Facilitators of educational programmes should be aware of how to mentor and incite an exploratory journey.

CONCLUSION

As sustainability is a growing priority for organizations worldwide to tackle key challenges of our times, the availability of sustainable leadership is as important as the availability of capital and new regulatory tools. In recent years, some successful practices have been designed such as courses on the sustainability mindset and sustainability values at the Master’s level. Or institutes which innovate the agenda have commenced such as the Institute for Sustainable Leadership or the Institute for Sustainability Leadership. Likewise, on the business side, numerous make sustainability a core value within their companies (Dill, 2015) as it is understood that there is “no other way forward” (Carboni, 2015; Triple Pundit, 2015). Nevertheless, the educational offer still seems insufficient to support new generations of sustainability leaders, leading to the creation of oikos LEAP.

The LEAP programme aims to inspire young leaders to become responsible in their decision making and equipping them with insights, knowledge and tools and founded on the belief that encouraging a basic sustainability mindset, lays the ground for good decision making and capabilities in one’s life to confront challenges. oikos LEAP was designed on the basis of experiential learning supported by three concepts: exploring, sharing-practicing and reflecting. The journey composed of in-person meetings, webinars, Peer2Peer groups and reflection exercises, resulted in an impact on the personal, local action and ‘sustainability’ worldview level. It is observed that LEAP can serve as inspiration for a larger number of educational initiatives to support the development of new generations of sustainability leaders.

Overall, oikos LEAP fills a gap and creates a space for a new understanding of leadership and learning. The journey also illustrates that awareness for a sustainability and long-term mindset is present amongst young change agents but they do not yet have the opportunities to dive deeper in such practices and experiment with them. oikos LEAP proposes a journey that teaches a broader range of skills and encourages personal development, that go beyond hard skills. As an Azerbaijani participant claimed, the 9-month oikos LEAP experience can be compared to “childbirth, as you discover yourself in new ways” (personal communication, March 15, 2016), possible due to the experiential learning and placing of the individual at the centre of this learning.

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