



Student Leadership Academy **PhotoVoice Project** **2025-2026**

Student Leadership Academy

PhotoVoice Project

PhotoVoice is a pedagogical tool aimed at empowering students to delve deeply into relevant issues while considering the implications for social justice and change. In this project, students engage with a focal topic, expressing their perspectives through photos and narratives. The aim is to foster critical thinking, enhance advocacy skills, and promote civic engagement. Through this process, students develop writing and communication abilities, apply concepts to real-world scenarios, and collaborate effectively (Brecher, Day, Ezekiel, Litonjua, Shaffer & Tandon, 2021).

For their PhotoVoice projects, participants were asked to reflect on their leadership journey through the prompt “I engage in transformational leadership when...”. Participants shared personal anecdotes reflecting on moments of engagement, or observations on leadership. Emotions associated with transformational leadership were discussed, and participants used photographs to visually depict their reflections on transformational leadership.





“Each field has its own vocabulary, its own tools, and its own blind spots. When you bring them together and ask people to problem-solve across that boundary, you get something none of them could produce on their own.”

–Jeremiah Philips

I engage in transformational leadership when I am a builder. Not in the sense that I execute on other people’s plans, but in the sense that I see a gap, imagine what could fill it, and then do the work to make that real. That instinct sits at the intersection of the three things I care most about: medicine, technology, and entrepreneurship. Each one individually is powerful. Together, they are how I think problems should actually be solved. Medicine gives you the clinical grounding to understand what matters. Technology gives you the tools to act on it at scale. Entrepreneurship gives you the mindset to build something sustainable where nothing existed before.

The National Canadian Medical Datathon was built on exactly that foundation. The event had been piloted at another institution, but scaling it into a national initiative was uncharted territory. There was

no standardized framework, no defined roles, and no established process. I took that ambiguity and built a structure around it, mapping the vision, reaching out to sponsors, engaging faculty and health system partners, and coordinating across institutions until something coherent existed where there had only been a rough outline. I have always believed that the most meaningful solutions come from the intersection of disciplines, not from within any one of them alone. Each field has its own vocabulary, its own tools, and its own blind spots. When you bring them together and ask people to problem-solve across that boundary, you get something none of them could produce on their own. Most medical students will graduate without ever having seriously engaged with data science or AI, despite both already reshaping how medicine is practiced. This initiative is designed to close that gap.

What surprised me was how quickly it generated momentum beyond the event itself. Conversations that started around logistics evolved into broader discussions with the Faculty of Medicine, Nova Scotia Health, Memorial University, and Newfoundland Health about sustained collaboration across the Atlantic provinces. That was not something I planned for. It happened because the foundation was strong enough that others wanted to build on it too. I learn from every version of what I build. Next year’s Datathon will be sharper because of what this one revealed. To me, that iterative process of building, reflecting, and expanding the vision is what transformational leadership actually is. Not a title or a moment, but a commitment to moving people and systems toward something better than what currently exists.



“My own leadership motivation comes from a place of lived experience and ambition to create impact with and for my community. Meaning and purpose have far richer value than any award or title.”

–Amelie McLean

When I find deeper purpose in the work I do and feel connected to the environment I am part of, I engage in transformational leadership. For me, leading starts with being a good listener; someone who chooses to lead through compassion and intention. To transform anything, it is critical to understand an issue or environment before coming in to create change. From small steps of progress to significant moments of change, perspective is everything. My own leadership motivation comes from a place of lived experience and ambition to create impact with and for my community. Meaning and purpose have far richer value than any award or title. I think of the times I could not help myself and instead

relied on others for compassion and change-making. Now, having found myself in good health and with a healed mind, I have been able to give back and create opportunity for myself and others. Working with Make-A-Wish for my capstone project has been a true full circle moment in my leadership and personal journey. The conversations I have had, and the connections I have made through the wonderful people that make up the organization, have fulfilled me in a way that's difficult to put into words. My degree and academics have equipped me with confidence and the ability to think strategically, and my own life experience has given me the ability to lead with empathy, integrity, and purpose. The combination of these perspectives has helped me find my place in creating thoughtful and informed impact. This is reflected in my work at the IWK Health Centre and with Make-A-Wish Canada, as well as in my leadership, mentoring, and professional roles. The Leadership Academy has been a transformative journey, and in over a year I have found my own definition of the leadership I want to continue engaging in.



“From my parents, I learned that empathy and trust can make people feel seen and supported. These values became the foundation of my own leadership journey and have shaped my years of volunteering and advocacy.”

–Tatiana El-Rabahi

I engage in transformational leadership when I inspire others to find the courage to make meaningful change in their communities. For me, this began long before I held any formal leadership role. Growing up, I watched my father run a small convenience store after immigrating from the Middle East. Despite his own challenges, including language barriers, he treated every customer with compassion, extending credit to those who could not afford groceries and trusting that kindness would foster trust in the community. From my parents, I learned that empathy and trust can make people feel seen and supported. These values became the foundation of my own leadership journey and have shaped my years of volunteering and advocacy.

At the IWK, I saw firsthand how small acts of care can transform someone’s experience. As a young volunteer, I remember stepping in to translate for an Arabic-speaking family in the pediatric emergency department, easing a moment of fear and confusion. In that moment, I realized leadership is not always about leading from the front, but about recognizing when you are needed and choosing to act. As a medical student and founder of the Dalhousie Building Smiles Society, I have been able to make small waves in a community that matters deeply to me. I lead a team in fundraising and advocating for pediatric cancer patients, sending support baskets to youth at the IWK. The bears represent more than just comfort; they reflect how I translate these skills into action by mobilizing others to contribute to something larger than themselves. Hearing from patients, families, and staff in this department reminds me how much of an impact kindness can have, and why compassionate leadership is important.

Through the Student Leadership Academy, I have become more intentional in how I create opportunities for others to lead and contribute. I aim to foster environments where people feel capable of making a difference, because to me, transformational leadership is rooted in compassion, lived through action, and carried forward by those we inspire.



“Building confidence and competence doesn’t happen overnight; it’s shaped through time, experience, and, most importantly, failure. I wouldn’t be where I am today without trying, stumbling, and trying again.”

–Ashoke Mohanraj

I engage in transformational leadership when I choose to speak authentically and trust in my ideas, believing that even if they resonate with just one person, that’s enough. Because every wave of change begins with a ripple of courage.

The first step is always the hardest. Building confidence and competence doesn’t happen overnight; it’s shaped through time, experience, and, most importantly, failure. I wouldn’t be where I am today without trying, stumbling,

and trying again. And I know that process doesn’t end; it’s something I’ll continue to embrace. I firmly believe that “an idea is only as good as you can communicate it.” This wasn’t always my perspective. I used to think that facts and logical reasoning were enough. But I’ve learned that real impact comes from storytelling; shaping a message in a way that moves people and shifts how they see the world. You can present all the information in the world, but information alone doesn’t inspire change, connection does.

I’m still learning what truly changes people’s minds, but I know this: your message has to resonate. For me, that message is simple: show the world that “caring is cool.” That’s what I believe in, and that’s the lens through which I’m working to create transformational change.



“I have learned that leadership is not about being the loudest person in the room. It is about creating spaces where people feel supported, included, and encouraged. It is about being intentional with the influence and abilities you have, and using them to help others feel that they belong.”

–Rabjot Kaur

I engage in transformational leadership when I not only engage in my community and mentor others, but also become a voice for the voiceless. This image reflects the two sides of leadership that matter most to me. The dog beside me represents something deeply personal: my passion for animal welfare and my belief that leadership should include responsibility toward those who are vulnerable and voiceless. The laptop represents my passion for computer science, innovation, and the process of turning ideas into something real. For a long time, I saw these as separate parts of who I was. I cared deeply about animals, and I was equally passionate about tech, but I had not fully realized that leadership could exist in the space where those two passions meet.

What makes this image meaningful to me is not just what is in it, but what it represents. It reflects the point where my values and my skills meet. A big part of my leadership journey has always been rooted in people. Through my work as a Residence Assistant, Student Ambassador, and through mentorship and networking initiatives, I have learned that leadership is not about being the loudest person in the room. It is about creating spaces where people feel supported, included, and encouraged. It is about being intentional with the influence and abilities you have, and using them to help others feel that they belong. That same thinking is what pushes me toward building something like PetBuddy. For me, innovation has never been only about technology for the sake of technology. It is about using tech in a way that feels human, purposeful, and socially meaningful. If I have the ability to build, then I also have a responsibility to ask what I am building for and who it serves. This image reminds me that my passion for tech is not separate from my care for animal welfare. Instead, one gives direction to the other. Transformational leadership, to me, is about more than mentoring others or participating in my community. It is also about becoming a voice for the voiceless and using innovation as a way to care, advocate, and create meaningful change that reflects both compassion and action.



“The leadership I’d like to embody is one that truly is transformative. It’s one that can engage in the radical imagining of a world in which our communities, the land, and our structures are thriving.”

–Maren Mealey

I engage in transformational leadership when the students around me stand with fists raised, heads held high, and their voices gathering together into a symphonic build of shared strength, beauty, and refusal. As the collective picks up chalk, we engage in a wild dance of art and creation, care and constructive rage. What remains is more than marks left on the wall. It’s an assertion of the deep belief in change as a creative, hopeful, and disruptive force.

The transformational leadership I’m interested in is the kind I see demonstrated through the resilience and the ardent hunger for a better world embodied in my peers. It’s a

fundamental belief that more just systems and futures are both attainable and worth creating. It’s rooted in solidarity and the knowledge that our liberations are bound up together. And it’s a leadership that refuses to sacrifice the disruption of comfort in the pursuit of systems built on deep care.

The leadership I’d like to embody is one that truly is transformative. It’s one that can engage in the radical imagining of a world in which our communities, the land, and our structures are thriving. With a vision fixed on a more just future, this leadership calls us to see ourselves as belonging to each other; not in a way that resembles imperial ownership, but a belonging that drives us to build structures of community care and reciprocity, and to challenge systems that harm. In this image, with chalk dust on our hands and questions and demands scrawled across stone, I recognize a moment when I engage in transformational leadership: when I stand alongside my peers in the shared work of imagining and insisting on something better. It’s in the collective, the refusal to be silent, and the creative disruption that turns a doorway into a declaration.



“It is essential to hear the stories, both the successes and the struggles, of those directly affected by the causes we work to serve. Listening to these lived experiences allows me to see past my own assumptions and identify where support is needed most.”

–Brooklyn Hipson

I engage in transformational leadership when I empower those who may be unable to speak up for themselves. I believe the quality of change you can create is determined by how well you listen to the community you serve. Whether I am acting as the Hope Engagement Lead for the CIBC Run for the Cure or as a Guider for Girl Guides of Canada, meaningful progress is only possible when we prioritize the needs of the people around us. In this moment, my team and I represent more than just funds raised; we represent the stories of a community that trusted us to lead with

empathy. Leadership is not about oversight; it is about the behind-the-scenes work of removing barriers and creating a foundation where everyone feels they truly belong.

It is essential to hear the stories, both the successes and the struggles, of those directly affected by the causes we work to serve. Listening to these lived experiences allows me to see past my own assumptions and identify where support is needed most. By prioritizing the voices of my community, the path forward becomes clear, revealing where genuine empathy and new solutions can make the greatest impact. My goal is to lead with enough compassion that the people around me feel they can simply be themselves and focus on living a happy, fulfilling life. A leader does not stand above others but stands with them, recognizing that the most important thing we can do is help each other find a way forward.



“As a leader, I aim to support others by helping them see possibilities they may not yet recognize in themselves. Whether it is through small acts of support or simply being present, I feel most aligned with leadership when I know I have made a positive impact on someone’s experience.”

–Mohammed Patel

I engage in transformational leadership when I become a steady source of guidance for others, especially in moments of uncertainty. This image of Peggy’s Cove Lighthouse represents that idea for me. Standing firm on rugged rocks, the lighthouse remains constant while everything around it shifts. In the same way, I have learned that leadership is not about controlling every situation, but about staying grounded and providing

clarity when things feel unclear. The light at the top symbolizes vision and direction. As a leader, I aim to support others by helping them see possibilities they may not yet recognize in themselves. Whether it is through small acts of support or simply being present, I feel most aligned with leadership when I know I have made a positive impact on someone’s experience. Over time, my understanding of leadership has shifted. Leadership is not about being in the spotlight; it is about creating light for others. It is about service, consistency, and responsibility, even when recognition is absent. This image also reflects my desire to give back to my community. Like a lighthouse, I want to contribute in a way that guides and supports others beyond myself. At times, leadership has felt uncertain and demanding, but through that, I have learned that growth often comes from embracing that responsibility and continuing to show up.



“Transformational leadership is about creating spaces where people feel empowered to step into opportunities they may not have previously seen themselves in.”

–Jessica Durham

I engage in transformational leadership when I help build communities where others feel seen, supported, and inspired to belong.

This photo was taken at Go Eng Girl 2025, an event focused on encouraging young women to explore engineering. I chose this image because it represents a collective effort to redefine what engineering looks like. Surrounded by supportive and inspiring women in engineering, this moment captures the power of representation and community. It highlights how shared experiences can build confidence, broaden perspectives, and foster a sense of belonging.

For me, transformational leadership is about creating spaces where people feel

empowered to step into opportunities they may not have previously seen themselves in. Through my involvement in outreach and mentorship, I strive to make engineering more accessible and welcoming by sharing my own experiences, encouraging others, and supporting them as they begin to see their own potential. I believe that when we openly share our journeys, we create connections that inspire and uplift others.

Organizing this event, alongside such a dedicated and inspiring group of women, has played a significant role in shaping my growth as a leader. Working with this team has shown me the importance of collaboration, trust, and leading with empathy, while reinforcing that meaningful impact comes from collective effort and shared purpose. Being part of this experience has not only strengthened my understanding of leadership, but also made me incredibly proud to be a part of the Dalhousie engineering community.



“Collective work is not just about professional collaboration. It’s about learning from each other, sharing feelings, and connecting our identities. It’s about not having to mask anymore and not having to hide the most important parts of you because you are afraid of someone else’s thoughts and reactions. It’s about looking at the people who work with you and thinking ‘I belong here.’”

–Leticia Magpali Moura Estevaeo

I engage in transformational leadership when I am part of a team that feels like home. In fact, speaking in the singular feels impossible, because I did not create change by myself. Every single project I have led – whether it was in teaching, outreach, or activism – has one thing in common: I only succeeded because we did.

In this picture, we are sharing a delicious hot pot after successfully planning and delivering the Bioinformatics for Everyone workshop. After many months of brainstorming, focusing, laughing, and finally travelling to meet each other in person, we celebrated the fruition of our efforts by sharing a

meal. I remember we felt happy, comfortable, and really close to each other. And I think this only happened because we connected beyond traditional work formalities, feeling safe enough to bring our whole, authentic selves to the table.

Sharing a meal is a universal bridge between differences. As a first-generation immigrant in Canada, that’s how I built my most meaningful connections. From Monday Meals to Happy Hour Fridays, whenever I made a friend there were people bonding over food and drinks. It’s a common saying in many cultures that food nourishes the body, but also the soul, and I experienced this firsthand in both teaching and outreach. As soon as people saw the food, there was an immediate change in the room’s atmosphere, gradually filling with smiles, laughter, and conversation (like a slowly cooking hot pot). By nourishing our body and soul, food has the power to bring down our walls. And when that happens, we thrive.

I believe the most impactful, inspiring kind of change happens when we thrive together. I use the word “thriving” on purpose to emphasize the main lesson from my leadership journey: collective work is not just about professional collaboration. It’s about learning from each other, sharing feelings, and connecting our identities. It’s about not having to mask anymore and not having to hide the most important parts of you because you are afraid of someone else’s thoughts and reactions. It’s about looking at the people who work with you and thinking “I belong here.” These kinds of collectives can trigger a life-changing switch in a person’s mind; when you go from thinking “I am different and that’s ok” to “I am different and that is my power.” When you feel happy about yourself, you can embrace and inspire others as their whole, authentic selves. And when people feel truly seen and embraced as who they are, that’s when they become unstoppable.



“Whether I am fostering trust through mentorship or demonstrating the courage to advocate for student needs, I strive to leave this campus more interconnected than I found it, transforming a large institution back into the intimate, supportive community I’ve always valued.”

–Steven Mata

I engage in transformative leadership by acting as a bridge between the familiar and the unexplored, turning individual connections into collective momentum. My journey on this campus has been a gradual unfolding, much like the growth of my hair over these years. My leadership has transitioned through various seasons of expansion, deepening its roots while reaching toward new heights. Coming from a small, close-knit high school where community was a given, I arrived at Dalhousie realizing that belonging is not just found; it is actively made.

My leadership is grounded in the pillars of relating and collaborating for change. When I first stepped

onto this campus, I was intentional about planting seeds of connection with everyone from first-year peers to faculty members. This was not just networking; it was an act of connectedness and humility, recognizing that I could not build a vision alone. By seeking out those whose passions for advocacy and education mirror my own, I am making sure that the spaces I help build are inclusive and sustainable. This mindset has led me to participate in various student societies, hold student governance roles, and engage in community projects. In my daily life, whether at church fostering spiritual growth, planning trips or dinners with friends and family, or working out, I have found that individually dedicating your time, effort, and responsibility within your team helps you reach the next level of achievement.

The transition from the wide-eyed student on day one (as seen in the picture on the left) to receiving leadership awards this March represents a shift from observing to acting. By trying to mobilize others toward a shared purpose, it proves that leadership is less about a title and more about the perseverance and optimism required to enable change. Whether I am fostering trust through mentorship or demonstrating the courage to advocate for student needs, I strive to leave this campus more interconnected than I found it, transforming a large institution back into the intimate, supportive community I’ve always valued.



“Every moment to help, share, lead, and learn has not only shaped and empowered me but has also inspired me to embody the kind of thoughtful leadership I have been fortunate to witness and experience. Transformational leadership is an ongoing cycle that leaves a lasting impact on people’s lives.”

–Patricia Porto de Barros Ayaz

I engage in transformational leadership in contexts that contribute to others’ growth as well as my own, across personal, professional, and academic life. Transformational leadership is rooted in values like empathy, ethics, humility, and kindness — qualities I have been fortunate to witness in my parents since childhood. Throughout my life, a number of other inspiring figures have also helped me discover and develop my strengths. Although I may not be able to acknowledge everyone here, I would like to express my gratitude to some exceptional and invaluable members of the Faculty of Graduate Studies and the various branches of the Student Affairs team, especially those from the Student Leadership Academy and the

International Centre. From a time when I was too shy to speak on the phone with relatives, to now participating in conversations with hundreds of people, this journey illustrates how supportive connections, guidance, and opportunities can foster meaningful growth. Every moment to help, share, lead, and learn has not only shaped and empowered me but has also inspired me to embody the kind of thoughtful leadership I have been fortunate to witness and experience. Transformational leadership is an ongoing cycle that leaves a lasting impact on people’s lives. While receiving so much, I also engage in transformational leadership by supporting, encouraging, and mentoring others. I have served as a mentor for incoming students at Dal for around three years and have had the opportunity to guide hundreds of people. Much of my role involves sharing information and connecting students to resources and to each other, helping them make the most of their experience. Their constant gratitude highlights the importance of these mentorship programs (e.g., Together@Dal), motivating me to develop a capstone project that involves creating a booklet containing resources useful to students before classes begin, during their time at the university, and after graduating. When I think about it, legacy comes to mind, because I am passionate about giving back to the community and this is one of the lasting impacts I hope to leave for future students and the broader university community.



“The problems I care about (climate action, energy transition, scientific integrity) are too large and too urgent to wait for the right people to find each other on their own. Someone has to try and do the deliberate work of building structures that connect disciplines and bridge the gap between research and action.”

–Isaac Bahler

I engage in transformational leadership when I recognize that a problem’s scale exceeds what I can address individually and respond by assembling the people and structures needed to meet it. The photograph included here shows my team on stage at the 2025 Mission Innovation SMART CDR competition, where we were one of three worldwide winners selected for our proposal on carbon removal measurement systems. That moment was a first taste of what strategic assembly could achieve, and it incentivized me to learn how to sustain it. Equilantic continues to grow because we took that momentum and learned to navigate the structures around us (the Ocean Startup Project, Lab2Market, Emera ideaHUB), not as funding sources to extract value from, but as systems

designed to support impact. That stage showed me what becomes possible when the right people, organizations, and systems are aligned behind a shared goal. That lesson has shaped everything I do. Through my honours thesis and my work with CarbonRun, I have spent years leveraging natural systems to drive climate impact. The scale of the crisis can make individual effort feel insurmountable, but that same scale is what makes these systems such powerful vectors for change. Doing meaningful science in that space meant learning to work across disciplines, to understand what policy and commercial frameworks needed from the data, and to be useful to people whose roles looked nothing like mine. When I contributed to CarbonRun’s work, bringing the world’s first river-based carbon credits to market, the science only mattered because it was embedded in structures that could carry it forward. When I helped revise Dalhousie’s Research Integrity Policy, the goal was not the document itself, but a lasting framework for how researchers here approach their responsibilities. The problems I care about (climate action, energy transition, scientific integrity) are too large and too urgent to wait for the right people to find each other on their own. Someone has to try and do the deliberate work of building structures that connect disciplines and bridge the gap between research and action. That is what I understand leadership to mean. Not standing at the front of something, but assembling the systems that allow something larger to hold together.



“There were times the vision felt too large and the distance between who I was and who I wanted to be felt impossible to close. Yet I kept going. I learned to say yes to opportunities I did not feel ready for, because if something helps you grow, you will never feel ready for it.”

–Andi Fabien

I engage in transformational leadership when I empower others to see and own their capacity for greatness. In this moment, I was passing down a lesson to a room filled with brilliant Black scholars and professionals. It was a lesson I learned from a great mentor of mine, which is the importance of self-belief. It was self-belief that carried me to where I stand today, and it is that same self-belief that fuels my ability to share my experiences and inspire others through them. This moment is a reflection of four years of self-development and courage I had to embody, and it traces back to the reason why I co-founded the Dalhousie Black Business Student Association. From the very beginning, my goal was inclusion by creating a

space where Black excellence inspires and learns from each other. There were times the vision felt too large and the distance between who I was and who I wanted to be felt impossible to close. Yet I kept going. I learned to say yes to opportunities I did not feel ready for, because if something helps you grow, you will never feel ready for it.

To stand before a room of Black excellence and speak my truth was an honour. It was a responsibility I carry with deep intentionality as representation truly matters. It is something I needed when I started university; to see another Black student who has walked through a similar path and grew into the confidence I aspired to have. When you do the inner work, you do not only transform yourself. You create a blueprint that others can follow. You become the mentor you once needed. My journey was not linear, and it was not easy. But every challenge I faced and every doubt I conquered brought me to this room, to this moment, and to these people. And if my story can plant even one seed of belief in someone who is still figuring things out, then every step of the journey so far was worth it.



“Every opportunity I’ve had, I’ve worked for. And everything I’m building now, I’m building so that the next person doesn’t have to figure it out alone. Transformational leadership, for me, is about stepping forward before you feel ready, taking risks, and using your journey to make sure others can step forward too.”

–Shruti Chaturvedi

When I first came to Dalhousie in 2023, I was the only first-year student on the Women in Technology Society (WiTS) Council. I had no roadmap and no guarantee that I would fit in, but I showed up anyway. That first step – nervous, unsure, and excited – has shaped my journey. Leadership, to me, isn’t about having the loudest voice in the room or being the most experienced. It’s about opening doors, breaking barriers, and creating spaces where others can rise.

After my first year, I had landed a co-op at one of the top banks in Toronto, something almost unheard of for a first-year student in my faculty. The confidence I built by showing up before I felt ready made me believe

I could go after opportunities others weren’t even applying for. And once I did, others started to as well. That’s when I understood what leadership really meant to me, my journey wasn’t just mine anymore; it was showing others what was possible.

At CanCWIC, the largest conference for women in computing, I was selected by my faculty to attend in my first year. I had never been to a professional networking event before, and I asked my mentor to walk with me to the booths to help me find my footing. But in my third year, that same faculty selected me to lead the entire first-year cohort at that same conference. I walked into those rooms, the ones that once intimidated me, and I brought everyone with me. I didn’t wait until I felt ready. I figured it out as I went, and I think that’s exactly how real growth happens. By guiding new students through the same spaces I once struggled to navigate, I was able to create opportunities for others to thrive.

Now, with my capstone project, I’m building SWIFT-the Summit for Women in Future Technology. This space allows future leaders to connect with industry partners, gain skills, and see what’s possible. Every opportunity I’ve had, I’ve worked for. And everything I’m building now, I’m building so that the next person doesn’t have to figure it out alone. Transformational leadership, for me, is about stepping forward before you feel ready, taking risks, and using your journey to make sure others can step forward too.



“Leadership is not just about fulfilling a role; it is about fostering trust, uplifting others, and creating an environment where everyone feels valued and empowered to contribute.”

–Cyril Jurdak O’Brien

I engage in transformational leadership when I collaborate with others and listen deeply. Coming from an immigrant family, I recognize the importance of hearing the stories, lived experiences, and perspectives of those around me. By learning from and empowering one another, we can reach greater heights than we ever could alone.

In a world that is becoming increasingly virtual and impersonal, it is all the more important to cultivate genuine human connection and intentional presence.

In the photo above, I am refereeing an annual charity hockey game, a tradition I have continued since 2019. Having refereed for over 10 years now, it has reinforced the importance of being a team player. This is a lesson that I have brought to every facet in my life. But more than that, it has shown me that leadership is not just about fulfilling a role; it is about fostering trust, uplifting others, and creating an environment where everyone feels valued and empowered to contribute.



“To humans, a blue whale is a gigantic mammal. To the ocean, the whale is simply a speck. My leadership journey reminds me of the vast, open ocean, filled with life, discovery, and uncertainty.”

–Gaby Pasternack

I engage in transformational leadership when I embrace the vast challenges of early leadership and take on pivotal roles within my department, student union, and university. As the youngest student in the 2026 Tier 3 cohort of the Student Leadership Academy, I have learned to navigate spaces that often demand both confidence and initiative. To humans, a blue whale is a gigantic mammal. To the ocean, the whale is simply a speck. My leadership journey reminds me of the vast, open ocean, filled with life, discovery, and uncertainty.

From the beginning of my university career, I have sought out strong leadership roles and initiatives of diverse nature. My extensive involvement during my first year of university led me to represent students at many governing bodies across the institution. This photo was taken at the grand opening of the Beaty Centre for Marine Biodiversity, an event I had the honour of attending as a member of the Board of Governors. This event fell at the cross-section of my leadership identity, where I was able to combine my education in Marine Biology with my governance on the Board of Governors and the DSU, as well as my leadership in the Dalhousie Association of Marine Biology Students. I embody these roles in my labs, at society events, and through my ongoing quest to foster strong relationships with other student leaders. Through these positions, relationships, and opportunities, I have been able to feel larger than that speck in a deep blue sea.



“Being surrounded by like-minded, driven individuals creates a space where growth is not individual, but collective. Every perspective adds depth, every voice shifts the conversation, and together, we are actively building something more meaningful than any one person could alone.”

–Wateen Sadek

I engage in transformational leadership when I create spaces that inspire collective growth and inclusion, and empower others to show up fully as themselves. This photo captures a moment of collective engagement: a room filled with conversation, curiosity, and connection. We are gathered in small groups, leaning into dialogue, exchanging ideas, and actively listening. There is no single “leader” in the frame, yet leadership is everywhere, moving between voices, shaped by each contribution, and strengthened through collaboration. This moment represents more than discussion; it reflects belonging, trust, and shared purpose.

Being surrounded by like-minded, driven individuals creates a space where growth is not individual, but collective. Every perspective adds depth, every voice shifts the conversation, and together, we are actively building something more meaningful than any one person could alone. This is what community-centred leadership looks like. For me, transformational leadership lives in these spaces. It is not about authority or recognition, but about cultivating environments where others feel confident speaking, challenging ideas, and contributing fully. I engage in transformational leadership by listening with intention, uplifting others, and helping create a culture where collaboration thrives. By valuing diverse perspectives and fostering genuine connection, I help transform not just conversations but the way we learn, lead, and show up for one another.

This experience reminded me that leadership is deeply relational and rooted in community. Being surrounded by ambitious, thoughtful individuals pushes me to expand my thinking and continuously evolve. It is a privilege to learn from others, to grow alongside them, and to be part of a space where belonging is actively created. I’ve learned that my leadership is strongest when it is grounded in humility, connection, and a commitment to building something bigger than myself.





“I came to understand that leadership is not about authority – it is about presence. It is about showing up, extending compassion, and creating environments where others feel seen and supported.”

–Marium Nawal Oishee

I engage in transformational leadership when I lead by example with a commitment to empowering, inspiring, and enabling others. At the heart of my approach are the values of unity, empathy, and kindness – principles that have shaped my own journey and now guide how I show up for others. When I reflect on my life, I often think of my younger self: the naïve eighteen-year-old who boarded a plane alone for the first time and arrived in a new country on a frigid December morning in 2017. I felt lost and homesick, yearning for the warmth of home. When personal tragedy struck in mid-2018, I was ready to surrender. Yet, even in the midst of that darkness, a small but persistent voice within urged me forward, whispering there was still light to come. For as long as there is life, there is hope, she said. And for the sake of the girl who once had dreams bigger than galaxies, I chose to persist.

Nearly a decade later, as I live the days I had once dreamed of, I reminisce on and draw strength from the people who got me here today. My journey has been shaped by family who support me unconditionally, friends who never waver in their place right beside me, mentors who encouraged me to grow, and colleagues who inspired me to learn new things each day. Through these relationships, I came to understand that leadership is not about authority – it is about presence. It is about showing up, extending compassion, and creating environments where others feel seen and supported. My leadership is rooted in lived experience. I know what it means to struggle quietly and what it feels like when someone offers empathy instead of judgment. Because I have been privileged to receive kindness that changed my life in the best way possible, I now choose to lead with it. I strive to build trust, foster connection, and cultivate a sense of belonging in every space I enter. I believe people grow when they feel valued and understood, and when individuals grow together, they create meaningful, lasting change. For me, transformational leadership is not just a concept; it is a way of being. It is a commitment to unity, a practice of empathy, and a daily choice to lead with humanity.



“Transformational leadership can only occur by stepping out of one’s comfort zone, challenging preconceived ideas, doing something new, and/or pushing the needle of meaningful change.”

–Ethan Leckie

I engage in transformational leadership when I take that scary step from safety and comfort into a space of sweaty palms, racing heart beats, and unknown consequences. There is a sweet spot between danger and comfort where meaningful growth occurs. This has been my biggest lesson as a leader over the past several years. Transformational leadership can only occur by stepping out of one’s comfort zone, challenging preconceived ideas, doing something new, and/or pushing the needle of meaningful change.

Two years ago, I co-founded a boutique travel company called “Wild Elegance” that is focused on helping Canadians explore gorgeous parts of the world. I did not know the first thing about running, organizing, or expanding a business, but I dove into this project headfirst. Along this journey, I have taken a mentality of ‘fake it till you make it’, forcing growth and learning along my entrepreneurial leadership journey. The culmination of recovering from financial mistakes, sweaty palmed speeches, and learning many new skills from my business partner led to our incredibly successful safari in South Africa this past year. Despite forward-presenting success, I feel the magic that makes a strong leader is the push and pull of imposter syndrome. It’s always staying one step removed from that space of comfort and never feeling like you are fully confident through the process. As a transformational leader, I have the courage to step into the light, out of the shadows, and facilitate personal and community growth in whatever space I step into.



“In communities that have been and continue to be psychologically and physically harmed by systemic corruption, leadership can be the act of carrying yourself through everyday life, or even naming your pain, and refusing to disappear or shrink.”

–Eve Wedderburn

I engage in transformational leadership when I become an active listener, gathering the lived experiences of others to better understand how to effectively uplift communities.

For a long time, I perceived leadership as a static concept. I thought it was a fixed destination you reach once, or a rigid formula where you simply get things done, give instructions, and lead everyone in the exact same way. But that one-size-fits-all approach is not only exhausting, it is entirely false.

My journey and engagement with the community have taught me that every generation holds a profound wealth of information. The traumas within the Black community often reincarnate themselves in different forms, yet they are deeply bound by common themes. When approaching any group of individuals, transformational leadership is the practice of taking in the varied lived experiences of others to continuously reshape how you lead across completely different contexts. It emerges in quiet, collaborative moments when we allow the wisdom of those around us, past and present, to inform our shared presence.

When I interact with Black youth in my volunteer efforts, I see the heavy toll of ingrained self-doubt. Breaking cycles that have suffocated a community for generations is a brutal, non-linear rollercoaster. I want them to know that leadership doesn't always have to be loud. In communities that have been and continue to be psychologically and physically harmed by systemic corruption, leadership can be the act of carrying yourself through everyday life, or even naming your pain, and refusing to disappear or shrink. By building a reciprocal space where these youth can safely share their realities that feel messy and confusing, we actively dismantle those inherited burdens together. True leadership starts within, but I've learned we never have to heal in isolation. When one person's inner resilience is allowed to breathe, it naturally shines outward, transforming not just their own path but also illuminating the collective power of the entire community.



“I do not lead; I follow, I sit, and I lay down on damp earth and listen to the wind howl above me. I recognize that the rocks, the rivers, and the trees have been there far longer than me and will remain long after me.”

–Eve Dewing

I engage in “transformational leadership” when I question the notion of leadership. I do not lead; I follow, I sit, and I lay down on damp earth and listen to the wind howl above me. I recognize that the rocks, the rivers, and the trees have been there far longer than me and will remain long after me. In knowing this, we rejoice, dance, laugh, and play, finding shared meaning in the fact that none of us know where to go or what to do. One person turns left, another veers right. Across plains and mountains we follow mother earth, our footsteps devoured by rain and snow. Sometimes we like to think we know why we go the places we go. Reflecting on our lives, one may say “Look at this transformation! Once I was young and now I am old!” We cheer and clap and celebrate “oh look how you’ve grown, changed, and flowed!” And in our jovial state we put a crown on our heads and say “What a leader I am! Once I was small and now I am tall! Look to me and you too can tower above the rest.” Yet, with crowns atop our heads, we stand eye to eye. We look up to the clouds as we lay back down onto mother earth’s damp soil. We lull ourselves to sleep with the wind’s howl, and nothing has really changed at all.



“Leading with authenticity means being open about why this work matters to me; sharing the experiences, passions, and moments that shaped my own journey. Authenticity invites connection.”

–Peter Shin

I engage in transformational leadership when I lead with authenticity and leave a spark that inspires others to discover their own potential. My leadership journey has been shaped by quiet moments of inspiration. They were not grand speeches or dramatic turning points, but small interactions with mentors, peers, and role models who openly shared their passions. Those interactions left sparks—small but powerful reminders that leadership is not reserved for a select few. Over time, those sparks grew into a sense of purpose that guides the work I do today. For me, leadership is not about being the brightest light in the room, but about leaving a spark—something small yet powerful that allows others to ignite their own potential. Through initiatives like student-led science outreach, I have seen how transformative it can be when students are given the opportunity to share their ideas, explore their interests, and connect their lived experiences to meaningful action in their communities. When they see others like them taking initiative, asking questions, or creating change, something shifts and they begin to realize that they can do it too. Leading with authenticity means being open about why this work matters to me; sharing the experiences, passions, and moments that shaped my own journey. Authenticity invites connection. When people see someone speaking from their own experiences, it creates space for others to do the same. In those moments, leadership becomes less about authority and more about shared curiosity, honesty, and growth. When connection spreads, so does the spark. It travels from person to person, growing as it is shared, and over time can become something more enduring, like a candle that continues to burn long after the person who first lit it has stepped away. In that way, leadership is not only about inspiring individuals, but about building initiatives and communities that continue to create impact beyond any one person. When someone leaves a conversation, event, or initiative with the confidence to take their first steps toward creating impact in their community, I know the spark has done its work and has the potential to grow into something that continues far beyond me.



“The times that I have been challenged by uncertainty, but moved forward anyway, have led to some of the most rewarding moments of my life. And I think that is where the transformation happens.”

–Kenisse Trotman

I engage in transformational leadership when I embrace new challenges. My photo depicts Kaieteur Falls, the longest single-drop waterfall in the world, located in my home country of Guyana. The falls are deep in the Amazon rainforest and can only be accessed by plane or multi-day hike. Much like completing my medical degree, seeing that view firsthand represents accomplishing something that I've wanted to do my entire life. When I began this program, I wasn't even sure if I liked leadership anymore. That's partially why I signed up; I wanted to be inspired again. Taking on major leadership roles during my medical education has made me tougher, wiser, and smarter, but it has also made me weary. Student leaders are up against such overwhelming odds. We are not power holders in academic institutions, nor are we experts in anything. Rather, we are novices, learning our jobs during gaps in the lecture schedule and trying to reconcile the slow-rolling wheel of bureaucracy with radical concepts that encapsulate tertiary education learning objectives. I think we are also dreamers, hoping to make a difference in this world without fully knowing what different means. Over the course of the year, I've been asking myself, "what was it exactly that enabled me to do good work in the past?", but I don't have a word for it. I only have a feeling: fear. The times that I have been challenged by uncertainty, but moved forward anyway, have led to some of the most rewarding moments of my life. And I think that is where the transformation happens. Being able to represent and share space with brilliant minds that ask "what if?" is my favourite thing about being a student leader. I chose this photo because it reminds me that there is so much I have yet to learn about myself. I still have lots of ideas, with little idea of how to execute, but I am leaning into that uncertainty and looking forward to seeing how it all comes together.