

Kathryn Simmons - Newton Fellow 2026

My leadership point of view has been shaped most deeply by adversity, resilience, and a strong commitment to making systems better for others. Growing up homeless and in foster care required me to become independent at a very young age. I had to learn how to advocate for myself, navigate instability, and make difficult decisions without the kind of support many young people are able to rely on. These experiences shaped me into someone who is highly self-sufficient, resilient, and determined. At the same time, they also made trust difficult and taught me to rely on myself before relying on others. As a leader, this has meant that I am often strong in advocacy, persistence, and problem-solving, while still continuing to grow in collaboration, vulnerability, and trust.

Because of these experiences, my leadership is rooted in a desire to ensure that others do not have to endure the same hardships I once did. My core passion is helping improve the lives of others, especially those impacted by child welfare systems. The word that best reflects my leadership point of view is ameliorative. To me, that means working to make things better, whether that is systems, environments, or individual outcomes. I believe much of my life has been defined by the process of taking difficult experiences and transforming them into purpose, growth, and action. This passion shows up clearly in the work I do and the future I am building. My interests in advocacy, research, and empathy all connect directly to my long-term goal of pursuing doctoral study through a JD/PhD path so I can contribute to policy reform and research that supports more trauma-informed and equitable child welfare systems. My leadership is not separate from who I am. It is deeply tied to both my lived experience and my commitment to changing systems for the better.

My values also play a central role in the kind of leader I am becoming. The three values that guide me most are education, equity, and integrity. Education is my highest priority because it has been one of the most powerful tools in my life for creating opportunity, growth, and change. It represents more than academic success to me. It represents freedom, empowerment, and the ability to make meaningful contributions. Equity is another core value because I care deeply about fairness and about improving conditions for people who have been marginalized, overlooked, or harmed by institutions. Integrity grounds both of those values by ensuring that I act in ways that align with my principles and maintain honesty in how I show up in the world. Having clarity about these values helps me lead with more purpose and consistency. They give me a framework for making decisions and help me stay grounded even in difficult situations. At the same time, reflecting on my values has shown me where I still need to grow. I strongly nurture education, sometimes to the point that I place my goals above my own well-being. I often neglect my personal needs in order to meet expectations, survive, or keep moving forward. I also recognize that confidence, especially in relation to appearance and self-esteem, is an area where I still have work to do.

In considering my talents, I see empathy, a growth mindset, and intelligence as the qualities that most support me as a leader. Empathy allows me to connect deeply with other people and to understand issues not only intellectually but emotionally. It helps me lead in a way that is compassionate and people-centered. My growth mindset has been essential in helping me move through hardship without becoming defined by it. I believe in continuous growth, learning, and transformation, and that perspective has helped me persevere in difficult moments while also striving for more. Intelligence, especially in the form of critical thinking and intellectual curiosity, supports my ability to analyze systems, understand complex social problems, and

develop thoughtful responses. Together, these strengths shape a leadership style that is reflective, determined, and rooted in both understanding and action.

At the same time, I know there are leadership competencies I still need to develop. One of the most important is teamwork and collaboration. I am naturally introverted, and because of my past experiences, I often prefer to work alone rather than depend on others. Independence has been necessary for me, but I recognize that effective leadership also requires trust, collaboration, and the ability to work collectively toward shared goals. Learning how to rely on others, seek input, and build stronger collaborative relationships is an important part of my continued growth. I want to become a leader who can balance independence with connection and who can work effectively with others without feeling that I must carry everything on my own.

Reflecting on this past year and on the Newton Fellows program, one of the most meaningful parts of the experience was the coaching I received from Karen. That coaching helped me become much more aware of how I communicate and how my internal patterns affect the way I show up in leadership spaces. One insight that stood out to me was recognizing my tendency to fill silence with words because silence feels uncomfortable. I also became more aware of how often I over-explain. These habits are not just communication patterns. They reflect deeper emotional habits connected to survival, discomfort, and a desire to be understood. Through coaching, I realized that leadership development is not only about gaining skills but also about doing the inner work necessary to heal, reflect, and grow. It helped me see more clearly that there is still healing from trauma that I need to do and that this work is directly connected to becoming a stronger and more effective leader.

Overall, this reflection has reinforced that my leadership is deeply shaped by both my lived experiences and my aspirations for the future. I lead from a place of advocacy, empathy, and purpose, but I am also learning that leadership requires continued self-awareness, healing, and growth. The Newton Fellows program has helped me better understand my values, strengths, and areas for development, and it has given me language for the kind of leader I want to become. I want to be a leader who not only succeeds personally, but who uses that success to create more just, supportive, and trauma-informed systems for others.