

Leadership-in-Action

Project Report

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Introduction

My Leadership-in-Action experience took place at Nortico Cacao Farm, a social enterprise dedicated to sustainable cocoa farming. The 6-hectare farm of cocoa agroforestry systems is located in Turrialba, Costa Rica.

This region of the Central American country had a remarkable development in the late nineteenth century, thanks to the economic boom brought by coffee and other exports that resulted in the building of the Atlantic Train. As a key middle point between the capital city and the main port of the Caribbean, most of Costa Rica's cargo passed through Turrialba, where coffee and sugar cane crops also contributed to the local economy. Nowadays, the train is decommissioned, and the region has been relegated from the important tourism sector. The nostalgic feel of a better past is seen at the bakery Santo Pan, where I went for coffee inside an old-style train wagon.



Nortico's mission looks to uplift the local community through cocoa, a crop that prior to coffee was an important economic driver and is deeply integrated with the country's history as a sacred product for Indigenous peoples. In addition to their own farm, Nortico leads the Soil Alliance, which supports 50+ farmers in the region to grow cocoa sustainably, giving them seedlings, agricultural training, and price assurance. Through this initiative, they aim to promote the sustainable development of rural communities in the region and broaden their cocoa supply chain.

My role within this organization was to bring new insights from my scientific background and previous experience in cocoa to help solve key issues. Nortico is a small family startup that is still working to be financially viable, so there are strategic areas that remain to be addressed among the demanding day-to-day operations. I identified two main areas I could work in: data management and aerial imagery. The former is key for any farm technification and for data-driven solutions, and the latter resulted from a recently purchased drone and allowed high-tech innovations in plantations such as mapping or carbon capture estimates. In addition to this, I was able to help and learn from operations in the farm, such as informative tours or agricultural management.



Challenges, Skills, Learnings: My time at Nortico

Prior to arriving here, I had a whole other different project in mind. I wanted to build on my research from last summer related to pollination, which has a great potential to sustainably improve yields in cocoa.

However, during my first days at Nortico, I became more familiar with the reality of a smallholder operation, which is how 90% of the world's cocoa is grown. I realized that prior to proposing management strategies to boost pollination, there were much more pressing needs that had to be addressed.



Therefore, an early leadership lesson during my LiA was flexibility. Often, we come with a strong plan for a project that we want to carry out. But a good leader must be humble enough to recognize that a change of direction is needed to better suit the community's needs. It was challenging for me to arrive at a clear direction on the go, since suddenly all my plans changed. I found that building connections with the local stakeholders and developing my communication skills was key to successfully arrive at a new path and take it to completion. Further, I used the autonomy I have developed in my studies and previous projects to build self-confidence and discipline necessary to keep going despite the obstacles in the way. These two sets of skills were instrumental within the type of organization I was working with, where there are few people to deal with the entire operation, so time and resources are very valuable.



Two realities about cocoa-growing that I got to witness firsthand guided my priorities during the LiA. First, the demanding labour the crop requires for individual farmers, and the need for solutions that are innovative but grounded to the local needs and capacities. I got to learn this through taking the time and energy to really get to know the local dynamics, going further than what I assumed was the reality. I learned that even in a scientific, high-tech approach project, the social and humanity aspect must remain central, as solutions should always be centered around the people that they are intended to serve. This was also personally nourishing, as I built connections for a lifetime and got to really integrate with the local community.

Finally, I strengthened my resilience and my creativity. I faced issues in using a technology that I had never used before, but that did not stop me from embracing the challenge and building new skills in the process.

Conclusion

My time at Nortico Cacao Farm taught me that leadership is about listening, adapting, and serving with humility. I arrived with a different project in mind but quickly realized that the farm's needs required a shift in direction. This flexibility allowed me to contribute meaningfully through data management and aerial mapping.

I learned the importance of building trust slowly and genuinely, as well as how connecting with people beyond the work environment strengthens collaboration.

Technical challenges pushed me to be resilient and creative, while cultural engagement reminded me that leadership must always center the people it aims to serve.

Moving forward, I will carry these lessons into future projects by working collaboratively with communities while using my skills and taking the challenge to build new ones.

