

LiA Reflection

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Before starting my Leadership-in-Action project, I had a pretty clear idea of what I wanted to do. I'd spent the previous summer researching cocoa pollination and was excited to build on that. I had a plan, a vision, and a sense of purpose. But once I arrived at Nortico Cacao Farm in Costa Rica, all of that shifted. And honestly, I'm glad it did.

Nortico is a small, family-run farm trying to make sustainable cocoa work—not just for themselves, but for over 50 farmers in the region through their Soil Alliance. It's a beautiful mission, but also a tough one. They're juggling everything: fieldwork, admin, training, logistics, and trying to stay financially afloat. Within days, I realized that pollination wasn't the priority. What they really needed was help with organizing their data and making sense of their farm layout. So I pivoted.

That pivot was harder than I expected. I had to let go of something I was passionate about and start from scratch. I didn't know much about drone mapping or building data systems for farms. But I figured it out. I designed a data management tool using Google Forms and Sheets, and later used drone imagery to create a georeferenced map of the farm. I trained staff, made mistakes, fixed them, and kept going.

One of the biggest lessons I learned was that leadership isn't about having the best idea—it's about knowing when to change direction. I had to be flexible, not just in what I was doing, but in how I was thinking. That meant listening more, asking questions, and being okay with not having all the answers. It also meant accepting that sometimes the most useful thing you can do is not what you planned, but what's needed.

I also learned that leadership is deeply tied to relationships. Nortico is small, and everyone knows each other. You can't just show up, do your thing, and leave. You have to earn trust, and that takes time. I'm not the most outgoing person, but I tried to be present—helping with tours, joining community activities, and just being around. Over time, I built real connections with the staff. That made everything easier and more meaningful.

There were moments that really stuck with me. Like the time I had to redo all the drone imaging because I hadn't accounted for elevation. I wasted hours trying to fix it with software before admitting I needed to start over. That was frustrating, but also humbling. I learned that mistakes are part of the process, and that owning them is better than hiding them.

Another moment was visiting the Guayabo Ceremonial Center, where we held a cocoa workshop. It was the first time I saw cocoa not just as a crop, but as something sacred—part of Indigenous history and identity. That shifted my perspective. I realized that even in scientific work, the cultural and human side matters just as much. Maybe more.

This experience also challenged how I think about Latin America. As a Colombian, I initially wanted to go somewhere “different”—maybe Africa or Southeast Asia. I thought I already knew what Latin America was like. But Costa Rica showed me how wrong that assumption was. Every culture has its own depth, and there's always more to learn. I saw that in the language, the food, the values, and even in how people treat sloths crossing the road (yes, that happened).

So what does all this mean for me moving forward?

I think I'm starting to understand the kind of leader I want to be. Someone who listens first, adapts when needed, and builds things that actually help people. Someone who values relationships and context, not just results. Someone who's okay with being wrong, as long as they're willing to learn.

This reflection isn't a highlight reel. It's a snapshot of growth—messy, unexpected, and real. I didn't do everything perfectly, but I did things that mattered. And I came out of it with a clearer sense of who I am and what I care about.