

Katarina Spasojevic

Professor Pattison

Leadership for Global Change

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Reflection and Transformation

Many people apply to this program to boost their resumes. They seek leadership training to achieve prestige and power. However, the program serves a larger purpose: to train and educate the next generation of leaders to generate positive global change. In this essay, I will reflect on my leadership in action experience in Ecuador, share my revised leadership vision, and argue that ethical collectivist leadership driven by empathy rather than individualistic leadership creates positive global change.

To provide context and clarity to the argument, I will define individualistic and collectivist leadership. Individualistic leaders value their achievements and goals above all (Nelson 1). In contrast, collectivist leaders prioritize group interests (Nelson 1). These two concepts exist on a continuum and are influenced by culture. Segundo from Regent University states that Anglo culture scores high in individualism, while Latina American and Asian Confucian culture scores high in collectivism (Segundo 110). My time in Ecuador was my first exposure to a collectivist culture, allowing me to compare and contrast the US northeastern culture I grew up in and the collectivist cultures I was exposed to in Ecuador.

My experience in Lago Agrio revealed how individualistic goals and a lack of empathy generate negative global consequences. While there, my cohort went on a toxic tour and learned about Texaco's pollution in the area: "The harm done by Texaco ... could be measured in cancer deaths, miscarriages, birth-defects, dead livestock, sick fish, and the near-extinction of several

tribes” (Keefe 199). Like every corporation, Texaco had an individualistic goal: to maximize its profits. To achieve their goal, they cut production costs by avoiding cleanup and social costs, leading to widespread contamination, toxicity, and sickness. Creating and continuing this suffering, as well as environmental and social injustice, demonstrates a lack of empathy. Their leadership, although successful, demonstrates how individualism and indifference work together to generate destructive global changes.

By contrast, my experience with Pachaysana this summer and my interview with Maria Itturalde, the executive director of Pachaysana and the founder of Humans for Abundance, demonstrated that positive global change occurs through community-oriented leadership catalyzed by empathy. Humans for Abundance combines social, economic, and ecological health by funding people to become ecological restorers and rekindle their Indigenous ways of living. It has had numerous positive impacts in communities, improving financial stability and life satisfaction. In the interview, I asked her what triggered her vision for Humans for Abundance. She responded that the toxic tour in Lago Agrio and Texaco's contamination was the flame that set fire to her vision (Itturalde). Her motivation did not originate from a personal ambition, but rather from witnessing human suffering. Her experience on the toxic tour triggered an empathetic reaction, which caused her to focus on communities and the environment rather than herself. Itturalde's empathy is ultimately what catalyzes her community-oriented leadership and the associated positive global change. It is the key difference between the negative global changes by Texaco and the positive changes from Pachaysana.

The themes of empathy and individualism in leadership appear in my experiences in Ecuador, most notably in Cotopaxi and Mushullakta. In Cotopaxi, I experienced the

consequences of individualistic leadership, whereas in Mushullakta, I encountered collectivist leadership.

While I was in Pintag, my group decided to climb Cotopaxi, the second-tallest peak in Ecuador. When we arrived at the parking area, already 15,000 feet high, I opened the van's door and a gust of wind almost tipped me over. Volcanic ash and gravel cascaded into my eyes as my lungs searched for oxygen in the sparse air. The first thought that came to my mind was: "I don't think I can do this". Everyone else stumbled out of the car and faltered as they braved the reality of this hike. Even in these circumstances, people headed for the top at their own pace. I walked backwards to save my eyes and balance against the wind, however, for every three steps I took, a gust of wind would slide me down. The farther I went, the stronger the wind was. After a while, I could no longer progress and stood with my back against the wind, facing the embarrassment of having only walked a hundred feet. I looked around and everyone was gone. I looked up the mountain, and I could not recognize anyone. A wave of doom crept from my stomach as I realized I fell behind.

What I thought would be a group experience quickly turned into a solo endeavor. The harsh circumstances turned people inward, including myself. I could not think of anything but how I was going to make it up the mountain, and did not have the mental bandwidth to think of the group. Such harsh circumstances weeding out any opportunity for empathy. The rise in individualistic thinking led to the group's fracture, rendering its members vulnerable. This experience exemplified how both harsh circumstances and their effect on minimizing empathy catalyze individualistic thinking and undesirable group outcomes.

On the other hand, my experience in Mushullakta exemplified how empathy catalyzes community-based leadership, creating positive group outcomes. In Mushullakta, we hiked to the

sacred waterfall, which was the lengthiest trek we attempted in Ecuador. We started at eight in the morning and returned at five. We had three people from the community helping us walk across rivers, climb rocks, and swim through streams. We had people leading from the front and the back to make sure no one fell behind.

When comparing the experiences, they were similar in overcoming a difficult physical task. However, the leadership was disparate. In Mushullakta, the community was empathic towards us when we were struggling. They never got frustrated with our pace and ensured our safety. Their empathy led to a collectivist leadership goal that prioritized group achievements over individual ones. The collectivist goal resulted in a positive outcome for the group, even becoming a cherished memory for some.

This experience also illuminated the role of responsibility within community-based leadership. In Mushullakta, everyone took responsibility for each other's achievements, while in Cotopaxi, that was not possible. The duality in the experiences expresses the interconnection between empathy and responsibility, where empathy leads to accountability towards others.

Responsibility and empathy within leadership introduces another concept related to collectivist leadership: ethical leadership. Ethical leadership, according to Harvard Professional Development, is characterized by leaders who have a responsibility to be clear and transparent, considering everyone involved when evaluating situations and making decisions (Kirk 2024). When leaders consider others in their decision, they accept accountability for their outcomes, expressing the role of responsibility within ethical leadership. Ethical leadership is a necessary addition to collectivist leadership, as collectivist leadership alone can lead to inter-group conflicts. The sense of belonging for one group and the disregard for the out-group contribute to us-versus-them mentalities and spark conflicts. When incorporated with collectivist leadership,

ethical leadership can prevent group conflicts because leaders are obligated to take responsibility for others.

The most extreme cases of negative global consequences from community-based leadership are genocidal wars. As a Serbian who has lost family in genocides, and because of the Balkan Region's notorious ethnic wars, this topic holds a particular gravity in my family. While in Serbia this summer, I decided to expand my knowledge of my family's history and researched the Yugoslav wars. I came across a Serbian paramilitary group known as the Serbian Volunteer Guard, also referred to as Arkan's Tigers. It was a nationalistic organization during the Bosnian War responsible for numerous war crimes and massacres (*Zeljko Raznatovic "Arkan" I*). It consisted of young males unable to find employment during the economic crisis in the nineties and saw the guard as an opportunity to improve their self-image (Schlichte 315). Arkan's Tigers became a community where people could find acceptance, glory, and a sense of belonging. With the dehumanization propaganda against another community: Bosnian Muslims, an us vs them mentality sprouted. The Tigers relinquished all responsibility towards them, leading to ethnic hatred and the atrocities that followed. Instead of generating positive global change, their community-oriented leadership led to a genocide, emphasizing the importance of ethical leadership within community-based leadership.

Pachaysana embodies how ethical collectivist leadership sprouts positive global change by welcoming international students. Through this practice, they educate international students on decolonialist action, heal their relationships with the earth, and expose them to Indigenous Knowledge and community-based living. The communities we encountered have a strong sense of identity, which could be a catalyst for group conflicts. However, they have avoided such conflict by taking responsibility for the well-being of out-group people, demonstrated by hosting

international students. As a consequence, they have expanded the scope of their positive impact, spreading it across the globe.

I plan to incorporate ethical collectivist leadership in my future leadership objectives. My approach will be to identify and manipulate my leadership strengths to incorporate ethical collectivist leadership. According to the Clifton Strengths Report, my current strengths are learner, developer, achiever, analytical, and empathy. I intend to harness my strength as an achiever to focus on group objectives rather than my own individualistic goals, and my strength in empathy to stimulate a sense of community.

Likewise, I would like to alter my vision from being egocentric to allocentric. As an environmental and sustainability major, I have focused on biology and ecology mostly because they interest me. Now, I would like to focus on applying these interests within ecological and human communities by conducting global research that seeks to improve agricultural yields and economic outputs, while minimizing agriculture's associated negative environmental consequences. This vision will address the UN SDGs' financial well-being, sustainable communities, and climate action; however, I want to reiterate that addressing these UN SDGs is a byproduct of my interest rather than the objective.

Overall, my leadership in action experience in Ecuador has profoundly changed my values and my life's trajectory, and I am excited to apply my improved leadership philosophy in my future endeavors.

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