

Leadership Reflections from My Laidlaw Experience in Ecuador

Participating in Cornell's Laidlaw Leadership Program last summer was a transformative experience that enriched my understanding of leadership by immersing me in community driven environmental and educational projects in Ecuador. Over the course of six weeks, I worked closely with the Pachaysana Foundation in Pintag Amaru and the community of Mullushakta. Our work focused on environmental restoration, such as extensive tree planting, and cultural initiatives, including decolonization of education for children, fostering cross-cultural exchange, and exploring indigenous spirituality. This opportunity deepened my own leadership philosophy, which is naturally collaborative. I actively lean on others' perspectives while trusting my intuition, and inspired a vision for my future leadership aligned with pressing global challenges outlined by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs). Additionally, an insightful interview with my father, an IT and product manager, provided a valuable real-world example of leadership that combines empathy, technical expertise, and team empowerment.

My leadership style has always emphasized collaboration because I believe that diverse experiences and viewpoints provide invaluable guidance in decision-making. While I trust my intuition to steer the course, I actively seek out insights from those around me to ensure a holistic approach. This mindset was both challenged and strengthened during my time in Ecuador. The communities we worked alongside exemplified leadership rooted in collective effort and respect for local knowledge. Leadership was not about authority or a single visionary, but about making connections, sharing responsibilities, and empowering individuals at the grassroots level. This contrast to the hierarchical leadership models I have encountered in academic settings caused me to rethink what it means to lead effectively.

At Pachaysana, one of the project highlights was participating in bioconstruction, an environmentally sustainable practice that uses locally sourced materials to build or repair structures. For example, we constructed the base of a meditation room entirely from mud mixed with natural adhesives. This work was physically demanding, but more importantly, it was a communal effort that connected us tangibly to the land and the indigenous wisdom that has preserved it for generations. It was a vivid demonstration of leadership through action, where every contribution mattered, from mixing the mud to shaping the walls.

Our days often included planting trees, steps toward restoring the environmental balance that had been threatened by deforestation and degradation. This work aligned closely with UN SDG 13: Climate Action, reflecting the urgent need for community-led solutions to environmental crises. The leadership I witnessed here was reflective of servant leadership principles: community members prioritized the well-being of their land and future generations over personal gain, inspiring me to consider leadership as a selfless service to a cause greater than oneself.

Cultural exchange was equally vital to our mission. In Mullushakta, we organized language learning sessions with children, where we taught English while they shared their native languages, Spanish and Kichwa. This was no patronizing exercise; instead, it was a mutual learning process that honored their rich cultural heritage. Such experiences reinforced my belief that true leadership requires humility and openness to learning. The connection we built through simple games like Pictionary went beyond language barriers, fostering genuine relationships and mutual respect.

Traveling to sacred mountains introduced me to the spiritual practices that underpin these communities' relationship with nature. I found fascinating parallels with Hinduism, my own

faith, particularly in the respect for Mother Nature as a living entity deserving respect and protection. The indigenous belief systems are integral to their leadership models, drawing strength and guidance from spiritual connection to land. Witnessing this reinforced my understanding that leadership often involves honoring traditions while innovating for the future.

Despite enduring government neglect and environmental threats, these communities demonstrate remarkable resilience and resistance. Local leaders tirelessly advocate for their sacred lands against corporate and political pressures. This grassroots activism embodies transformational leadership, motivating communities to challenge injustices and envision a sustainable future.

The most memorable aspect of the trip was the Toxic Tour in Lago Agrio, where Chevron's petroleum contamination in the 1990s devastated ecosystems and caused elevated cancer rates, particularly among women who rely on contaminated water for everyday tasks. As a pre-med student, this brought the intersection of environmental justice and public health into sharp focus for me. It underscored UN SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being and SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation, highlighting how environmental degradation directly impacts human health.

Learning about the disproportionately high cancer rates among women who wash dishes and clean with polluted water was deeply sobering. It inspired me to become not only a better physician but also a more informed and compassionate leader who advocates for health equity and environmental justice. The courage of the guide and his daughter, who face threats yet continue fighting for reparations, showed me that leadership sometimes demands immense personal sacrifice for the greater good. This motivated me to think about how medical

professionals can extend their roles beyond clinical settings to community advocacy and systemic change.

Interviewing my dad offered additional perspectives on leadership that resonated with my experiences in Ecuador. As an IT and product manager, he leads by empowering his team members, carefully taking in their ideas while also confidently making final decisions. He balances technical expertise with emotional intelligence, fostering an inclusive and innovative environment. His approach aligns with Strengths Based Leadership, where recognizing and leveraging team members' unique talents drives collective success.

My dad's leadership style demonstrates the importance of adaptability and continuous learning, qualities I saw reflected in Ecuadorian leaders who respond to environmental and social challenges with resilience and creativity. His example motivates me to cultivate these traits in my own journey as a leader.

My Laidlaw experience has shaped a vision for my future leadership rooted in global citizenship and sustainable development. I am committed to addressing critical challenges outlined by the UN SDGs, especially focusing on health, environmental protection, and education equity. I aspire to integrate science, community collaboration, and advocacy to create lasting impact. Leadership, as I now understand it, requires humility, empathy, and openness to diverse perspectives. Whether advancing climate action through grassroots engagement or promoting health equity in medical practice, I aim to build bridges across cultures and disciplines, just as I did in Ecuador.

One of the most profound leadership lessons I learned in Ecuador was through the decolonization of education efforts in Mullushakta. Decolonization, in this context, means

dismantling colonial influence embedded in educational systems and restoring indigenous knowledge, languages, and rich cultures. The community's dedication to preserving Kichwa, their native tongue, as a living language for cultural identity was powerful. Our educational exchanges, where children taught us words in Kichwa as much as we taught them English, were small but significant acts of reclaiming knowledge and respect for their heritage.

Living and working in unfamiliar environments presented real challenges that tested my leadership resolve and adaptability. One day, while mixing mud for the meditation room, I struggled with the physical labor and the precision required to ensure the mixture was viable. I felt frustration and doubt but saw how the experienced community members moved with practiced ease, supporting and encouraging me patiently. From this, I learned an important leadership lesson, humility and patience are just as crucial as confidence. Leaders often face moments of vulnerability, and embracing them can foster stronger connections and growth.

Reflecting on these experiences, I see how servant leadership, the idea that leaders serve their communities first, was embodied by the Ecuadorian communities' environmental practices and their dedication to passing on culture and knowledge. These leaders prioritize the welfare of their people and the land, inspiring me to embrace a leadership style focused on empathy, stewardship, and long-term vision.

As a pre-med student inspired by my Laidlaw experience and the Toxic Tour's revelations, I recognize that leadership extends beyond clinical practice. I envision a career that integrates patient care with advocacy for environmental health and community education. Addressing cancer rates linked to polluted water supplies means understanding the social determinants of health and advocating for systemic solutions like clean water infrastructure, regulations on pollution, and health education.

Leadership in this context means being both a healer and a catalyst for social change. By embodying empathy and scientific rigor, I hope to contribute meaningfully to UN SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being and SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation. My experiences have emphasized that health and environment are inseparable, and that leadership is most effective when it bridges these goals through collaborative, informed action.

My time in Ecuador through the Laidlaw Program transformed my understanding of leadership from a concept of individual authority to a shared process involving mutual respect and service. Inspired by both indigenous community leaders and my dad's example, I am motivated to pursue a leadership path that integrates collaboration with conviction, scientific insight with cultural sensitivity, and personal integrity with global responsibility. This journey has equipped me with invaluable lessons and a deep commitment to making a meaningful difference in the world.