

Leadership as a Way of *Being*

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“Get it done!” That is often my motto, not only in leadership but also in approaching daily tasks. I’ll write down a checklist of tasks, and the day is a success when I check off each and every one of those boxes. Consequently, it was not surprising that my most dominant leadership domain, according to CliftonStrengths, was “executing”. As an “achiever”, I set clear goals for myself and update them constantly as I accomplish each one. I notice that I tend to utilize my relationship-building strengths, “harmony” and “relator”, outside of my official leadership positions when I’m simply building friendships. As I look back on my time in Ecuador, however, my “executing” as well as my “relationship building” strengths synergized in my leadership more deeply than they used to in the United States. As some of my fellow scholars and I worked on our reflection project, not only did I help us divide up the work to finish our presentation on time, but we built camaraderie just in living and *being* with each other. In the reforestation commission in the Mushullakta community, I enjoyed tackling the immense task of potting and planting dozens of cacao and coffee trees, but found that our team was stronger, more productive, and enjoyable when we took the time to have snacks together and crack a few jokes along the way. Thus, while relying on my top three “executing” strengths have helped me find success in my more individual pursuits, like in education, I see that this mindset has limited me to trying to accomplish tasks on a more linear, narrow path. When I tapped into those relationship-building strengths, I realized that the path to achievement and success doesn’t have to be so one-directional. When we had time to stop, laugh, celebrate, and reflect in community, I saw that leading myself and others can give people so much more than accomplishment for our

work; it can make us care more about the well-being of those around us, develop deeper emotional intelligence, and drive us to be more civically engaged.

Upon exploring Clifton strengths more intently for this reflection, I came upon an article demystifying some of the myths of the program. In “Eight Things to Know About Clifton Leadership Domains”, the author notes a very common misconception around Clifton strengths: a certain talent theme can only succeed in the domain it is officially categorized in (Seet). Prior to the Ecuador trip, I (subconsciously) believed this. I simply thought that I lacked any special skill in “influencing and strategic thinking”. However, both “Eight Things To Know...” and my experiences in Ecuador have shown me that talent themes can still function well in other domains. For instance, I feel that my “consistency” leadership strength serves me in the “influencing” domain by motivating others around me to strive to be more consistent in their work as well.

My experience in Ecuador built on my insights with engaging ambiguity during our personal leadership seminars. As I mentioned before, I crave structure in my daily life, especially when that structure is decided for me. At school, for instance, my schedule is mostly determined by my classes and club meetings. Furthermore, my assignments and my club tasks almost always have a “right” and a “wrong” way of being done. In Ecuador, on the other hand, I found myself not always knowing what we’d be doing next. Even during our workshops, our reflections and our outputs were extremely open-ended. For example, in Mushullakta, an indigenous community in the Amazon, our project required that we connect the goals of the community with our dreams for our communities at home. Yet, our interpretations of the prompt and our outputs were entirely up to us. This experience forced me to come back to the practice of engaging ambiguity, cultivating stillness, and accessing creativity. Rather than knowing when I was on the “right

track” with my project I had no choice but to cultivate internal stillness. I had to trust that the insights that arose from within me should be listened to and that I could develop my own creative solution based on these personal reflections. These components of the Personal Leadership Method will help me to better combine fact and intuition in my leadership capacities. Normally, I like to gather all the information that I can and understand all the angles before I make any decision for myself or for a team. Now, however, I’d like to give more weight to my own “heartspace” (as they say in Pachaysana - the organization with which Cornell Laidlaw scholars partnered) as well as the intuitions and opinions of my team (even if they are not considered “experts” in the field) when directing work. To rely on facts alone is to rely only on what is already known. By incorporating our deep intuitions into decisionmaking, we allow emotion and our physical sensations to direct our work, ultimately leading to more creative and novel action.

My Critical Moment Dialogues helped me explore these concepts further and to realize just how much my cultural programming influences me. During the Inti Raymi celebration, I often found myself thinking that these celebrations were not productive and that we were “wasting time” when we could be doing something more helpful for the community. Having these recurring thoughts pop up in my mind was rather startling for me because I tend to think of myself as an open-minded person who keeps his biases in check. However, realizing this taught me that, like it or not, we all have been biased by our culture and, while we may not realize it at home, our biases can emerge in situations of difference. By attending to these judgments, rather than just ignoring them or wanting them to go away, I was able to consciously open myself back up to the new experience and receive more insight. Instead of seeing it as a mere celebration, I thought about how Inti Raymi gave the community space to *create* together (such as when we

built the symbol of the Chakana together) and to laugh, dance, and play. These sorts of shared spaces are rare, I find, in western culture. Usually, the places and people with which we work and lead are completely separate from those with which we spend leisure time. Combining these people and places I found is quite powerful. Celebrating in community gave them the relationships, the positive energy, and the motivation to work together more seamlessly, more productively, and with more joy. Overall, this Critical Moment Dialogue reminded me that life doesn't have to be as compartmentalized as it is in the United States. Work, play, and community can all be in one. Leon Moores, in "Leadership as Service: A Focus on the Needs of Others," sums up many of the connections that I was making in Ecuador with the phrase: "take care of your people first". In order to know when a team member is struggling or when they might need extra support, one *must* build and maintain relationships with one another.

José, a spiritual leader in Mushullakta, also shares a similar approach. He describes the essence of leadership as *sharing* information and what he has learned with others in the community. Specifically, in his situation, José prioritizes transferring ancestral knowledge (conservation and reforestation) to the younger generations through the forest school. For him, it is about helping those around him get involved. By being involved, they can be more connected to and invested in the community. José's leadership approach exemplifies the communitarian, horizontal leadership structure that I saw throughout my experience. Hearing this woke me up to the stark contrast between José's style and Western leadership. Accumulating and holding knowledge tends to be the theme of U.S. leadership. It is a race to *accumulate* more expertise than others around you in order to become a leader.

In my everyday life, I hope to incorporate José's teachings through my work in the clubs I help to run at Cornell. Often, we don't think about passing down our knowledge to the next

generation so that they can lead in future years. Rather than only focus on the tasks and issues at hand for that year, I want to make time to intentionally pass down my knowledge.

Furthermore, my Leadership in Action experience has helped me reconsider what I would like the focus of my research to be for the next summer. In one of our last reflection activities with Pachaysana, Daniel Bryan reminded us that being a leader isn't about simply fixing the problems of today's world; it's about creating a *new* and *better* one. In my Laidlaw research summer, as well as when I transition into my career, I want to have the goal of making a new world at the forefront of my mind. Often, research and jobs serve to put a "band-aid" on a problem or try to come up with a "quick-fix" for a systemic issue. As I go forward as a global leader, I'll consistently consider whether my work is creating new and more just systems or simply trying to mend what we already have. I think that an effective and practical way to remind myself of this vision is to place some physical reminders of it in my work space. This could be a picture of people that I've met that I'm working to help, or written reminders. Whatever it may be, the object would serve as a reminder for me to check in with myself from time to time and really consider whether my work or my research is aligning with this vision and how I can adjust if it isn't quite lined up.

In my more immediate life, I plan to implement the practice of engaging ambiguity. This school year, I am taking on the role of Arts and Sciences Student Assembly Representative as well as Vice President of my improv comedy group. I'm relatively new to both of these organizations, and I worry that I won't have the right answers or expertise because I'm still learning myself. Here, I really want to lead with *ambiguity*. Being honest when I do not know will make it easier for others to pitch in their ideas and build something new and innovative. I hope it will also ease the burden on myself as being the "commanding leader" and rather as a

facilitator that opens a space for us to connect and create. To ensure that I am on this path, attending to physical sensation can serve as a powerful tool. When uncertainty arises in a situation, I tend to feel tightness and discomfort in my chest. As I notice this feeling, I can actively open myself up to it, rather than try to shut it away. At the same time, I plan to remember what I learned about trusting my intuition. I may not always have all the facts, but I have strong instincts that I can rely on to guide my decision-making.

As I look to enter the world of international relations or foreign affairs in my career, I want to remember UN Sustainable Development Goal 17: creating partnerships for all the goals. Oftentimes, in this field, it can seem like diplomacy is used to extract negotiations and deals for the betterment of our own country. Personally, I want to see myself in a career that emphasizes creating meaningful connections with other countries and communities that are collaborative and open up more resources and knowledge to more people.

Overall, my LiA experience was unforgettable. I was challenged to trust myself in uncomfortable situations and new environments, to think about how I can lead my own life rather than leading others, and, most importantly, to consider how leadership is not just about fulfilling a task or completing a project, but building and nurturing a strong community that lives, works, and plays together.

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