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29 September 2025

Leadership and Potential for Change: My Summer In Ecuador

I have always believed that leadership is embodied differently by every person I have come across. Growing up, my mother's quiet, but firm presence in our family and community was leadership to me, although I knew it wasn't quite the style for me. This spring, in preparation for our Leadership in Action experience, we learned about leadership skills through readings and discussions as a group. Identifying my own strengths and weaknesses and setting goals made me feel more confident leading into the trip. During the trip, incredible conversations, collaboration, and connection helped me expand upon what I already knew about leadership and what I knew about myself. More than ever, I am sure about what kind of leader I am and can be, and what change I can be a part of as that leader.

The first step in deepening my understanding of leadership was taking the *CliftonStrengths* test back in March. I got the opportunity to take it again in August for another program, and funnily enough, I think the change between the two results in a span of just under six months reveals how transformative my experience in Ecuador was. In March, my five top themes were Learner, Individualization, Strategic, Context, and Arranger ("CliftonStrengths" a). Nearly six months later, they were Empathy, Learner, Arranger, Developer, and Individualization. While there is still plenty of overlap, Context and Strategic were swapped out for Empathy and Developer ("CliftonStrengths" b).

The presence of Learner, Arranger, and Individualization as strengths in both reports stands out as quite significant. My commitment and love for learning as a strength in leadership had never been a thing I considered too deeply, but in a larger context: an innate willingness to learn allows for connection and respect to form between myself and others. Learning, in both non-academic and academic contexts can help foster leadership skills as well as self-reflection and deeper understanding (Aas 2). Learning about my strength as a Learner has given me new ways of interpreting my education and the world around me.

Reading *Making a World of Difference: Personal Leadership* this past spring was rewarding because its main point was to embrace the nuances of our individual leadership and accept what we may perceive as “weaknesses” as facets of leadership. I realized that while I have always been the sort of person who thinks through a decision very soundly, I wasn’t always as careful with my judgments. The authors emphasize the importance of acknowledging that judgment is natural and having a good relationship to the way you make judgments (Ramsey et al. 42). I had to face becoming comfortable with the ease of making a split second assumption about a person, a place, or an idea if it is unfamiliar or uncomfortable. Analyzing why I assumed the things I did or felt what I felt was immensely rewarding in the latter half of my last semester at Cornell. Where I often entered discussions defensively and tended to assume the worst in my peers, I became open to seeing the good in the varied perspectives at this institution. For a person coming from my background, letting go of judgments based on societal constructs and past experience was difficult but not impossible. People coming from different walks of life can come together for the biggest issues facing humans, even if those issues impact different people differently. It is collective empathy that should be a key assumption when working with others.

Going into our Ecuador trip, I was incredibly apprehensive. While I am not from the exact places we visited, there were commonalities between myself and the communities we were in. I felt strangely protective and fearful. My beloved homeland through the eyes of foreigners. Would they see what I saw? The beauty of our flora and fauna? The resilience of our people? The joy in our laughter and our steely determination? I had set goals before leaving Cornell: I wanted to connect with community members, I wanted to lead by learning, I wanted to learn how to *do*, and I wanted to find joy in every moment and bring every memory back with me. But in the weeks I was in Ecuador before the rest of the cohort arrived, my frantic energy led me to set more goals: I wanted to be patient with my peers and I wanted to be accepting when moments of discomfort arose.

I learned a lot about leadership through conversations about everyday life. In the community of Mushullakta, I lived with Andrés Narvaez, his wife Meche, and three of their children, Janis, Evelin, and Iker. My conversations with Andrés helped me understand myself and the kind of leader I want to be. One evening after dinner, we were sharing creation stories and he mentioned all strong men and women are led by love. It stunned me for a second. He was correct. One should lead out of love and care for those that they are leading, love should drive your decisions and commitment. In Pintag, conversations with members of the Pintag Amaru collective impacted how I saw myself and how I present myself to the world. It was perhaps the third or fourth day we were in Pintag when we were eating lunch outside and by chance I ended up sitting in a circle with several members of the collective. Sairy went first.

He asked, “So I’ve been told you’re Ecuadorian. Is that true?”

I replied, “Yes, I am. My family is from Chimborazo.”

He prodded again. “But were you born in the US?”

I nodded.

“Well that makes you an American, doesn’t it?”

I paused. My instinct was to get defensive, but a part of me forced myself to think and consider his point. He was testing me. Was I going to get defensive and lash out because I was insecure in my identity? Or was I going to assert myself? It is easy to claim identities but it is much harder to actually *live* them. Was I an American with Ecuadorian parents or was I Ecuadorian-American?

I finally answered, “I consider myself Ecuadorian because that is the culture I grew up in. I grew up surrounded by other Ecuadorians, participating in Ecuadorian traditions, and eating Ecuadorian foods.”

He grinned and went back to eating. Other members jumped in. They asked me about my family, about how long my parents had been in the US, about my research, my summers and winter breaks in the mountains, the music I grew up singing, and my efforts to relearn Kichwa.

Lucio dealt the final question. “Do you want to live here one day?”

I smiled. “My dream will always be to come home. My mother will return one day, as will my father and my cousins and my aunts and uncles. What would I do all alone in the United States with my family thousands of miles away?”

They all nodded. They understood what I was trying to say.

I consider that my critical moment dialogue. I knew that my experience in Ecuador would be different from everyone else’s but I could have never predicted in which ways. At any point in the trip, I felt seen and I felt loved. From the manager of our hostel the first week in Quito asking if I was Ecuadorian because of the way I said good morning, to our Uber driver on our last day in Quito asking where my accent was from, I felt such a joy being recognized by other Ecuadorians,

to be granted acceptance and open arms. Even when being tested by Sairy, I knew that it was out of love, a reminder that you are not entitled to a community, you must make an effort to be a part of it. It was a critical lesson to learn.

My experience was defined by the incredible people I met in all the communities we visited. Above all, I want to highlight conversations with José and Andrés, both community leaders in Mushullakta. While sorting coffee, I asked José about his life. He shared that his father had been a *yachak*, a knower, a keeper of knowledge. He spoke about interpreting dreams and rituals he had undergone as a young man with his father, in preparation for the role he would occupy one day. Finally he told me that as a young man, he had seen a vision of himself walking across an unfamiliar landscape. That vision came true on his first trip to the United States, in Colorado, nearly a decade ago. I asked him about his experience traveling to universities and sharing his knowledge, the traditions that make him a keeper of knowledge for his community. He said that everything he did was out of love. Love for his language, for his people, for the world, which should know that there are people everywhere with knowledge to learn from.

Similarly, I spoke to Andrés about how Mushullakta and the larger community of Rukullakta fought back against extractivism. He explained that the whole reason they were facing off against the company that wanted to mine in the river was because of a former leader in Mushullakta. This leader still lives and works in the community. I asked Andrés how the community reacted when they realized he had signed off on something the rest of them did not approve of?

“We were upset,” he admitted. “We had to sit down and discuss honesty as the most important thing we could have as a community.”

That former leader was not re-elected. Yet Andrés assured me, no one has any hard feelings. Everyone makes mistakes, and being a community is sticking together and loving each other through those mistakes. He said often leadership was about taking responsibility, executing corrective action, and moving on. I was inspired by the simplicity of it all.

“What’s the point of holding grudges?”

What’s the point indeed? Good leadership and progress would only be held back by it.

My time in Ecuador reaffirmed a lot of things for me, while teaching me so, so much. For one, the passion and commitment of Puma Wasi and Pintag Amaru community members to protecting and restoring their lands was nothing short of admirable. I want to be part of that fight. More than ever, I am sure that I want to go into environmental law and stand up against exploitation and environmental degradation. Our environment is the most important thing we have. Healthy ecosystems support the people within them, reducing hunger and poverty. Healthy ecosystems make for healthy humans. Healthy ecosystems have clean water and they are sustainable. I return from Ecuador secure in who I am and what I want to do. I want to be a champion for my people and all people who believe our Earth should always be our biggest priority. In loving her, we love ourselves.

Works Cited

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