

Nailah Smith

Leadership Essay

September 27th, 2025

The Future of Futuristic Leaders

The definition of a leader in the dictionary is “the person who leads or commands a group, organization, or country,” but how far can one truly get in leadership with simply commanding? When many people think of leaders, they think of people with an immense amount of power, such as a governor, president, and people that we consider to have power over us. But is it possible that in actuality, leadership isn’t about power at all? Throughout my time in Ecuador, my perspectives on what leadership has significantly changed. Being immersed in a community that functions so differently than the one I’m used to, has such different leadership styles than I’m used to, but that is a thrived, engaging, and healthy community has made me realize that the way I’ve been thinking about leadership my whole life is skewed. While it’s possible that leadership means someone who takes assertive charge and does what they think is best for their community, ultimately the leadership skills I value most after Ecuador is a leader who takes a step back to listen to their community, is openminded, and functions with a future in mind.

To begin, it’s possible that leadership means someone who takes assertive charge, and does what they *think* is best for their community. An example of this could be the current president of the United States, Donald J. Trump. It’s evident that many people believe that President Trump is a strong, confident leader, as he was elected again after leaving office for a term. In an assessment across multiple different countries, “a median of 67% across the countries surveyed agree Trump is ‘a strong leader.’” (Wike et al). So why is this? What quality of Trump

is so appealing that $\frac{2}{3}$ of the world strongly believe that he is a model of leadership? Trump does mark off all the boxes stated above. He takes charge, and acts how he thinks is best for his community. But are his actions actually what *is* best for the community? Some officials believe that the quality of Trump that makes him appear a strong leader, is the fact that many of his actions resemble those of Authoritarians. In an article written on Trump's leadership, the author writes "Trump has been criticized for centralizing power around himself, often making decisions unilaterally and disregarding traditional norms and processes." (Baptist and Clark 7). Before Trump was elected, many people thought that this was an advantageous trait. Someone who takes charge, doesn't wait to consider someone else's point of view.

This could very much be attributed to the American values of individualism. Since the beginning of the United States, this country was built on individualism. It has always valued working alone, every man for himself, and this is most likely the root cause of why people value an assertive/aggressive leadership style, and why many people value President Trump so much. But could it be possible that this individualistic view could be the very thing that ruins America? Well there are some issues that are best to be handled as individuals, there are most certainly pressing issues in our community that need to be addressed as a whole, rather than separately. An example of this is climate change. President Trump is notorious for being dismissive towards numerous credible climate change scientists that speak up about these pressing issues, advocating for more community engagement and working together to solve this issue. Because our executive president is so against working to save our planet, there is a lack of community and solidarity, and not much progress has been made. In an article on the issue of individualism the author poses the issue of "whether individualism, given that it exists rather than whether or not it has increased, will contribute to or erode democracy." (Gustavsson 3). It is evident that

individualism has decreased our community's sense of democracy and working together, and that when discussing environmentalism not working together could be our ruin. So if a leader that takes charge and acts alone isn't the solution to many of our issues such as climate change, what is?

After my trip to Ecuador, I have quickly come to realize that the solution to issues like climate change is a leader who steps back to listen to the needs of their community, is openminded, and functions with a future in mind. The first thing I noticed when my group went to Pintag is that it was hard to even tell who the leader of this community was. Everyone worked together to reach their goals, rather than one person telling everyone else what to do. I noticed that all the families worked together in order to come to decisions on what would be best for the community, rather than just one person in charge. In this community, I had to completely change my perspective on what leading was.

Before coming to Ecuador, I took the Clinton Strengths leadership skills assessment, and one of my top three was futuristic. I function with having a future in mind, and I'm moved by what the next day has to bring. In Pintag, I experienced one of the top forms of futuristic leadership. The community members would have days where they work together on a project that is beneficial for their community as a whole, called "minga," and one of these continuous minga projects was the re-forestation of the Andes. Due to many deforestation projects, there aren't many trees left in the Andes which has led to a huge decrease in biodiversity. Nonetheless, the community members are motivated to replant their home, in order to leave a thriving, more healthy environment for their future generations. I had the pleasure of contributing to this amazing project, in order to make our earth and their home a better place for future generations. To me, this was the greatest form of futuristic leadership. Many of these community members

won't live to see the full effects of their efforts to replant their land. But this doesn't discourage them in the slightest from rebuilding a better future for the people who will come after them. The community members understand that climate change isn't just an issue they can leave to future generations to fix. It's an issue that they can start to fix currently so future generations can continue their work.

One of my critical dialogue moments was in Otavalo, when we went to a community ceremony and we had an open conversation with the men and women leading it afterwards. While talking to them, we discussed how so many people function everyday separating themselves from the earth. The reason why so many people are not environmentally focused is because they don't believe they're one with the earth, but rather believe they're something greater than the earth. The first step to environmental leadership is by defining yourself with the earth. One community leader claimed that "most people define themselves by saying they're a doctor or student, but we can define ourselves by saying we're water, wind, fire." This completely shifted my perspective on my priorities in life. While furthering my education and personal career/success is important, it's also very important to take a step back and think about where I came from, why I'm here today, and this could be a very important step in being an environmental leader.

Before arriving in Ecuador, I had read about leadership in the *Making a World of Difference: Personal Leadership* book for months. The main thing that stuck with me was that sometimes, leaders have to be placed in situations that are out of their comfort zone, maybe even areas that make them feel uncomfortable. This resonated with me, but I didn't fully understand the extent to this until I got to Mushulakta. I'll admit, the first night in Mushulakta was probably the most out of my comfort zone I've ever been in my life. I kept my light on when it was dark,

and there were the most bugs I've ever seen in my life flying into my room. I opened my drawer, and a bug the size of a baseball was sitting in there staring back at me. For the first few days, I was always complaining and just overall uncomfortable. But I realized that this is what leadership truly is. One isn't going to grow and develop as a leader if they're always in the same, comfortable environment. They need to experience an environment that is so different from what they're used to, in order to become an overall well rounded leader. Even though Muschulatka was something so different that I've ever experienced, I will forever be grateful for that leadership experience. I feel that being placed into an uncomfortable environment grounds you, it changes your perception on what is really important in life. And from Mushulakta, I've learned that being community based instead of an individual is so much more important in leadership.

Another one of my Clifton Strengths is empathy, and seeing the immense amount of empathy and care in Muskulata was one of the most amazing experiences of my life. The biggest form of empathy I saw was empathy for the land. I was introduced to the term "Finca" in Mushulakta. This is an all natural farm that the community owns in the middle of the rainforest. In these Fincas, the community members didn't use an extreme amount of pesticides, GMOs, and things that are toxic and unnatural for their environment. Rather, they listened to what their earth actually needs, not just what they think it needs. This is the biggest difference between the individualistic perspective on leadership vs. the community perspective on leadership. In my opinion, the community perspective is much more efficient, and helps to solve real issues we have in our world today much faster than the individualistic perspective. Not only did the community members in Mushulackta have empathy for their environment, but they had empathy for each other. They always worked keeping in mind what would be beneficial to the community and each other, not just what would be beneficial for the individual.

Furthering this idea of empathy and community in leadership, shortly after returning from Ecuador I had the opportunity to observe my step father at work as a family and marriage lawyer, and interview him afterwards. In this interview, I asked about his personal work ethic, how it compares to other lawyers' work ethics he knows, and how this intertwines with his leadership style. My step father explained how he knows many materialistic lawyers, and sees them in court everyday. He talked about how he does just as much work as them, if not more. He could make twice as much money as he does now doing the same amount of work by charging people much more, but he intentionally chooses to charge less for his work, in order to truly serve the community. My stepfather didn't become a lawyer for the money, he chose this profession to help people in need through their issues, and to be a community advocate. On top of his paid profession, my stepfather is also an activist in our community. Every week, he leads an event called "feed the people" where he gives out food to families that can't afford to put food on the table. He intentionally does these things out of the kindness of his heart. My stepfather repeatedly said in his interview that "it takes a village." It takes a village to support each other. It takes a village to combat environmental issues. It takes a village to support each other through the darkest issues to reach greatness as a community. And this is what a true leader believes in.

To conclude, leadership isn't just able someone who takes immediate action, someone who functions off of what they *think* is right for their community. Ecuador taught me that leadership is someone that has empathy, that listens to their land and to their people. Leadership is about working to further your community, not just to further your individual interests. Leadership is about functioning with a future in mind, with the generations to come next in mind. The greatest form of leadership is simply taking a step back, to listen to what people actually need. To always keep in mind that "it takes a village," not an individual. Due to this, my goals as

a leader is to write out specific things that I would like to do in my life in order to make the world a better place for future generations. I would like to write this list after I graduate from undergrad, and expand on it during my PhD program. After I graduate from my PhD, I will begin to execute the actions I've written in my career, so that I can leave the world more beautiful and perfect than I found it. After Ecuador, I fully believe that shifting America to a more community based mindset rather than individualism is the answer to solving many dire issues such as climate change, and to creating a more perfect community than we found.

Works Cited

Baptist, Najja K., and Kenneth A. Clark. “*Unmasking the Authoritarian Mob Boss: A Critical Analysis of Donald Trump’s Political Leadership.*” *Social Sciences*, vol. 13, no. 8, 2024, art. 397, MDPI, doi:10.3390/socsci13080397

Gustavsson, Gina. “*The Problem of Individualism: Examining the Relations between Self-Reliance, Autonomy and Civic Virtues.*” Dissertation plan presented at SWEPSA 2007, Uppsala University, 2007. Uppsala University DiVA, <https://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2%3A54566/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

Wike, Richard, et al. “Views of Trump’s Characteristics.” *Pew Research Center*, 11 June 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2025/06/11/views-of-trumps-characteristics/>.