

Leadership in Action: Thinking Beyond the Self

Red, yellow, and blue are the colors I most associate with Ecuador. At times, the vibrancy of the culture felt overwhelming, unfamiliar, and deeply engaging all at once. For the second time in my life, I found myself in a place that felt entirely foreign. This unfamiliarity became the foundation for my leadership growth. Being immersed in Ecuador required me to confront discomfort, navigate cultural differences, and observe leadership not as a title or position, but as a practice rooted in responsibility and care.

Before arriving in Quito, I created a list of personal goals for the experience. I hoped to reflect more intentionally, become more comfortable in unfamiliar environments, and better understand my leadership strengths. At the time, I understood leadership primarily as individual improvement. However, as the experience unfolded, particularly through time spent with indigenous communities in Pintag and Mushullakta, my understanding began to shift. Leadership could not remain centered on personal growth alone. It required a move away from individual focus and toward collective responsibility.

This shift became evident through moments of cultural curiosity, both theirs and my own. Early in my stay, my host mother jokingly referred to me as “chinita.” I was initially surprised, especially because I had experienced racism in other contexts that felt overtly hostile, such as discriminatory remarks from strangers on the street. In this case, however, the curiosity felt different. It was not rooted in intent to harm, but in unfamiliarity. Her exposure to East Asian cultures was limited, and distinctions between national or ethnic identities did not exist in the same way they did for me.

This experience prompted me to reflect on my own tendencies. I realized how easily curiosity can turn into othering. Just as I was being labeled as different, I had also caught myself viewing aspects of Ecuadorian culture as “exotic.” This included unfamiliar foods, traditional clothing, and rural ways of living. At one point, I even questioned whether it would be appropriate to ask to touch someone’s hair. That moment of self-awareness was uncomfortable, but important. Leadership, I learned, requires recognizing these instincts and taking responsibility for how we engage with difference rather than acting on impulse.

These lessons became even more pronounced in Mushullakta, where cultural differences were most striking. Living in a rural environment without many of the comforts I was accustomed to tested my adaptability. There were moments when I longed to retreat into familiarity rather than engage more deeply with my surroundings. Looking back, I regret not pushing myself further to connect with my host family. This experience taught me that leadership is not simply about enduring discomfort. It is about remaining present and engaged, even when withdrawal feels easier.

One moment that challenged me significantly occurred when I learned that women who were menstruating were not permitted to participate in reforestation efforts. My initial reaction was frustration, as the practice conflicted with my beliefs about gender equity. Rather than responding immediately, I chose to listen. Community members explained that menstruation was viewed as a time for rest and protection, particularly in spiritually significant environments. While I still disagreed with the gendered implications of this belief, the experience taught me an important leadership lesson. Leadership in unfamiliar contexts requires humility. At times, it involves listening and finding alternative ways to contribute rather than imposing one’s own values.

Some of the most influential leadership lessons came from observing community leaders, particularly Maxi from Mushullakta. Despite language barriers, his actions communicated a clear commitment to environmental stewardship. Maxi began planting native trees after witnessing the damage caused by monoculture farming. He did not establish an organization or lead a formal movement. He simply acted. Over time, his finca became a living response to environmental degradation.

From Maxi, I learned that leadership does not require authority or recognition. It requires responsibility and consistency. His approach aligns with concepts of servant leadership, which emphasize prioritizing the well-being of the community over personal gain (Komives et al.). Maxi's leadership challenged the image of leadership I had internalized, which often emphasized visibility, charisma, and scale. Instead, he demonstrated that leadership can exist quietly and still produce meaningful change.

This understanding was reinforced by the principle of *minga*, which guided both Pintag and Mushullakta. In these communities, leadership was collective rather than individual. Community members worked together to build homes, preserve land, and sustain education. Responsibility was shared, and success was measured by communal well-being rather than individual achievement. This contrasted sharply with the individualistic leadership models common in Western contexts, where issues such as climate change, public health, and inequality are often treated as optional concerns rather than shared obligations.

Reflecting on my leadership strengths helped me articulate this shift more clearly. According to the CliftonStrengths assessment I took earlier this year, my strongest trait is Futuristic. Before Ecuador, this strength manifested primarily as anxiety about my personal future, including academic decisions, career paths, and long-term stability. I spent little time

considering the future of others or the kind of world I wanted to help create. Ecuador expanded my understanding of what it means to be future-oriented. As Rath and Conchie argue, leadership strengths are most effective when they are applied in service of others rather than focused inward (Rath and Conchie). Vision without responsibility, I learned, is incomplete.

My LiA project focused on engaging with indigenous communities to better understand sustainable development, cultural preservation, and community-led leadership. Rather than introducing external solutions, our role was to listen, observe, and support initiatives already led by community members, including reforestation efforts and educational programming. The impact of this project was not immediate or easily quantifiable. Instead, it reshaped how I understand meaningful impact. Sustainable change emerges from respecting local leadership and knowledge rather than imposing short-term interventions.

Through this experience, I began to redefine the kind of leader I want to be. I am no longer drawn to leadership defined by visibility or authority. Instead, I aspire to be a compassionate leader who listens carefully, reflects critically, and acts with intention. This perspective has shaped how I think about my future, particularly at the intersection of environmental sustainability and public health.

Looking ahead, I see myself working toward improving public health in ways that account for environmental and social factors. My goals align closely with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 3, Good Health and Well-Being, Goal 10, Reduced Inequalities, and Goal 13, Climate Action (United Nations). My time in Ecuador demonstrated that environmental health and public health are deeply interconnected. Leadership

in these areas requires long-term thinking, cultural humility, and a commitment to collective well-being.

Leadership, I learned, is not something one assumes all at once. It is something practiced over time through daily choices. Ecuador stripped leadership of its glamour and left me with a clearer understanding. Leadership is responsibility. This lesson will continue to guide me forward, reminding me that meaningful change begins with care, awareness, and action.

Works Cited

Komives, Susan R., et al. *Exploring Leadership: For College Students Who Want to Make a Difference*. 3rd ed., Jossey-Bass, 2013.

Maxi. Personal interview. Mushullakta, Ecuador. June 2025.

Rath, Tom, and Barry Conchie. *Strengths-Based Leadership: Great Leaders, Teams, and Why People Follow*. Gallup Press, 2008.

United Nations. *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. United Nations, 2015, sdgs.un.org/goals.