

Zenabe Bakayoko

A New Age of Leadership

In our society, leadership is often associated with a select group of personalities; we tend to view leaders as extroverted, assertive, and risk-taking individuals. Frequently, those in leadership positions are the loudest voices in the room, leading us to believe that only specific personalities can inspire change. However, my journey as a Laidlaw Scholar has transformed my understanding of what it means to be a leader. I possess leadership qualities that differ from the typical traits society values, such as “empathy” and “developer” from the CliftonStrengths assessment. When I first discovered through the CliftonStrengths assessment that these were my leadership styles, I struggled to see how I could influence others and build strong relationships within a team using my strengths. Little did I know that these qualities are essential for a compassionate and effective leader.

For my case study, I chose to interview my former EOP advisor, Steph Cowling-Rich. I admire Steph for her ability to create a comfortable atmosphere as an advisor and for her gentle tone when speaking with others. She has a remarkable talent for fostering an environment where people feel secure enough to express themselves freely and confidently. Throughout our interview, I recognized that many of her leadership qualities resonated with my own. For example, she mentioned that some of the best leaders are those who know how to take space for themselves while also making room for others in a group setting. This insight is valuable because, based on my CliftonStrengths assessment, I learned that my leadership strength of empathy allows me to be perceptive and sense the feelings of others. This is crucial when it comes to recognizing whether I am taking up too much space in a group and need to give an

opportunity to others who may not have a voice. I aspire to be the person who advocates for them to speak. Additionally, Steph mentioned that effective leaders listen to varied perspectives and understand how these viewpoints can connect or build upon one another. They affirm individuals' strengths and create a comfortable space for dialogue, much like Steph has done in our advising meetings. Lastly, these leaders consistently have clear goals and agendas, which makes them dependable, and they express gratitude toward others. Similarly, my CliftonStrengths assessment identified "achiever" as one of my strengths. This indicates that I prioritize communicating with my team about our goals and providing them with clarity to keep them motivated. Additionally, I like to stay in touch with leaders and managers in the organization to ensure everyone is on the same page and to reassess our strategies when needed. From my case study with Steph, I was able to envision my future leadership style, as many of our traits aligned. I left the interview feeling appreciative of my strengths in empathy and achievement.

My Leadership in Action summer experience was both valuable and unique. The knowledge I gained during this time would have been impossible to acquire anywhere else. Before traveling to Ecuador, I struggled to understand how my summer would connect to my passion for public health and improving the well-being of people everywhere. However, I discovered an often-overlooked area of public health: environmental health. During my time in Ecuador, we visited various Native populations and had the opportunity to live with host families. I learned from community members about the impact of environmental issues, such as petroleum spills, on their drinking water, health, and food sources. One of the most powerful moments of my trip was a toxic tour led by Donald Moncayo, the executive coordinator of Unión

de Afectados por Texaco. We explored gas flaring sites and parts of the Amazon where petroleum companies had dumped oil. The water that local families relied on for cooking and showering was darkened by petroleum and had a strong smell of gasoline. Without this experience, I would not have understood the damage that petroleum companies are inflicting on marginalized communities. We learned about the high rates of uterine cancer among local women and the false narratives spread by companies, suggesting that the women were unfaithful to their husbands, which was supposedly the cause of their cancer. This experience made me realize the importance of public health initiatives that listen to and prioritize the needs of the communities themselves, rather than imposing outside solutions. I also came to appreciate the power of storytelling and listening to community experiences. In Mushullkta and Pintag, I felt welcomed by the community and learned about local issues. In both areas, we observed how the government and companies disrespected the Native populations and their environment. In Mushullkta, they were removing rocks from the river to build a road, which would have severe environmental effects on the river ecosystem that the community relies on. In Pintag, mining companies showed no regard for the communities living on the land and contaminated the river, which the locals depended on for water. The Leadership in Action experience was invaluable. It deepened my understanding of the interconnectedness between the environment and the overall well-being of people. At the core of our work, we must prioritize the health of every individual and the environment.

While much of my time in Ecuador was filled with powerful and inspiring lessons, some moments challenged me to confront my own biases and assumptions. One of these occurred during the corn harvest festival, a celebration that honors both the growth of the crops and the

individuals who worked to bring in the harvest. What was meant to be a joyous and communal event initially made me feel uneasy and out of place. At first, I struggled with my own preconceptions and recognized how quickly I was to judge the unfamiliar. To me, it was a sweet tradition rooted in gratitude and community, yet I also realized that I was stepping far outside of my comfort zone. I became aware that, to outsiders unfamiliar with the context, such a festival might be misunderstood or dismissed as a “pagan ritual,” and that thought made me uneasy. However, instead of remaining in judgment, I turned inward and paid close attention to my emotions. I reminded myself that what I was witnessing was not only harmless but meaningful for the community. It was heartwarming to see how people came together to honor their labor, their land, and one another. In that moment, I understood the importance of celebrating the cultures of others without filtering them through my own biases. Choosing to release my discomfort, I discerned the right course of action: to be fully present, to listen, and to appreciate the generosity of the community as they vulnerably shared their culture and traditions with us. Webb, Darling, and Alvey argue that traditional Western models of leadership are not enough for today’s global contexts. They emphasize that leadership development should move beyond teaching people fixed ways to behave and instead focus on people learning within cultural contexts. This involves having people build the capacity for “on-the-spot” cultural adaptations. My experience in Ecuador reflected this idea. By being immersed in the community, I learned in the moment the importance of the corn harvest festival. It taught me not only about their culture but also about the importance of approaching others with appreciation and respect.

Reflecting on my experiences as a leader, I am filled with a deep sense of purpose. My vision as a global leader centers around striving for a world with social justice, where we actively work to dismantle the systemic injustices that affect individuals and communities. I am particularly passionate about addressing disparities in critical areas such as health and education. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) serve as my guiding framework, particularly SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being, SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities, and SDG 13: Climate Action. I am committed to combating the challenges that contribute to these inequities and fostering an environment where everyone has equal opportunities to flourish.

As for the next steps in my journey, I plan to dedicate this summer to gaining hands-on experience and knowledge in Dr. Odom-Young's lab, focusing on food justice and nutrition. I am eager to participate in research that examines how specific policies in the United States contribute to the persistence of disparities in food access. By engaging in this work, I want to learn how policies can be changed and improved to drive meaningful change in our society, and how these can be applied to global initiatives.

Works Cited

Gallup. *CliftonStrengths for Leaders Report*. Gallup, Inc., 2025.

Webb, Laverne, Jeri Darling, and Nanette Alvey. *Multicultural Leadership Development in the 21st Century*. EnCompass LLC, Jan. 2014.