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The Loom of Leadership: Ecuador as a Classroom

Sat cross-legged on my Nano's charpai in Pakpattan, I watched the rhythmic pattern of her fingers weaving, her dupatta shielding us from the dry sun as red yarn pooled at our feet. Years later, under the dense humidity of the Ecuadorian Amazon, I followed my host grandmother, Ines, as she wound cabuya fiber into a Kichwa shigra bag. We communicated through gestures and laughter, bridging a language I didn't speak—yet her patience, humor, and warmth felt deeply familiar. In that moment, I realized how the small rituals of care that bind families in Pakistan echo across continents. This recognition of the universality of the human condition shapes how I lead: by finding shared humanity first, then building systems that honor people's lived strengths. Like the knots and loops I learned to tie, my leadership has taken shape through the threads of connection I've built with others, each one teaching me how empathy, listening, and shared purpose can hold a team together.

From these cross-cultural moments grew the framework of my leadership: beginning with empathy, turning it into practice, and creating spaces where others' strengths take center stage. Three capacities define that practice: empathic listening, role-shaping, and convening across differences. Empathic listening developed most deeply during my Leadership-in-Action project

with the Pachaysana Foundation in Pintag and Mushullakta, Ecuador, where I worked through the *Rehearsing Change* and *Humans for Abundance* programs. Pachaysana's model of "decolonial education" reframes learning as a co-created, community-led process rooted in reciprocity and place. In Pintag, we co-designed workshops with the Pintag Amaru Movement on ecological restoration, community-based tourism, and permaculture—projects that taught sustainability by living it, not lecturing it. In Mushullakta, I saw what rebuilding a relationship with the land truly means. At the *Children of the Living Forest School*, I helped integrate Kichwa ecological knowledge, storytelling, and reforestation into lesson plans. Working alongside the local elders, I learned to read meaning in gesture, silence, and shared work—lessons in humility and relational leadership no classroom could replicate. These experiences grounded my leadership in Pachaysana's philosophy of education as co-creation, where empowerment is measured by sustained participation and mutual growth.

My leadership philosophy draws upon servant leadership, emphasizing empathy, stewardship, and the growth of others. In each of my roles, I lead not by directing, but by empowering those around me to act on their own expertise. This approach aligns with *Making a World of Difference*, which highlights that authentic leadership requires awareness of how one's cultural upbringing and social position shape interactions with others. Growing up in a Pakistani Muslim household, I learned that humility and care often carry more authority than command. I have found that this approach builds sustainable trust, particularly across cultural or linguistic boundaries.

This philosophy was tested in Cuyabeno, where I lay on a hammock one humid evening beside my group's facilitator, Ella, confiding in her about rumors circulating among some of my peers. The words had stung; I wanted to confront them and "set things right." Ella listened, then

said gently, “Making amends isn’t always necessary.” Her calmness unsettled me at first because I equated confrontation with closure. Yet as she spoke, I began to understand her meaning: not every conflict deserves my energy. Sometimes protecting my peace is more powerful than demanding validation. That conversation shifted my understanding of leadership. I realized that empathy is not only about extending understanding to others but also about extending it to myself—knowing when to step back rather than react. I carried that restraint through the remainder of the trip, noticing how it allowed me to conserve focus for collaboration rather than conflict. Leadership, I learned, also means discerning when silence safeguards the integrity of a group more than confrontation ever could.

Prior to this, our group hiked the steep, windswept slopes of Antisana. I love the outdoors, but my body soon protested—the mud slick beneath my boots, the altitude sharp in my lungs. As my peers pulled ahead, shame crept in. I pushed harder, convinced that slowing down meant failure, until my gut insisted I stop. Standing halfway up, I finally turned back. Alone on the descent, I realized that if I were hiking by myself, I wouldn’t feel ashamed. I would simply listen to my body. That insight changed everything: being a leader is about understanding your own limitations, not about keeping up with others. I developed empathy for others’ invisible boundaries after realizing my own physical bounds. Knowing that I am them and they are me, bound by the same human need for grace, I realized that self-compassion is integrity rather than indulgence.

One of the most enduring lessons I took from the program was the value of cultivating stillness amid constant motion. Surrounded by my cohort 24/7, I quickly realized that leadership also requires intentional pause. I remember standing on the hotel balcony in Lago Agrio, watching the city stir beneath the morning sun, reflecting on the toxic tour we had taken earlier

that day. The experience was jarring, yet I felt immense gratitude for the opportunity to hear from community leaders and to be immersed in the Amazon itself. In these quiet moments, I learned that reflection is a form of leadership: it allows us to process experiences fully, align our actions with our values, and extend empathy not only to others but to ourselves.

Alongside stillness, I learned to embrace ambiguity, a lesson crystallized during my conversation with Ella in Cuyabeno. When confronted with a situation where I expected a definitive answer, I discovered that resolution was not always possible, nor necessary. Ella's insight—that protecting my own peace can sometimes matter more than seeking closure—taught me that leadership often involves confronting uncertainty with patience and discernment. These lessons underscored a central principle of *Making a World of Difference*: effective leadership is as much about self-awareness and restraint as it is about guiding others.

During my LiA experience, one conversation deeply influenced how I view leadership's intersection with sustainability. José Narváez, a Kichwa community leader in Mushullakta, embodied a vision of leadership rooted in humility, accountability, and intergenerational responsibility. Each morning, he led our group in the Guayusa tea ceremony, interpreting dreams and sharing stories that carried centuries of Kichwa knowledge. His concern for future generations forgetting vital folklore inspired my group to transform one of his stories into a children's book for the local school, ensuring that his knowledge would endure. The project not only preserved cultural memory but also became a sustainable, replicable model for integrating local narratives into educational curricula—demonstrating that community-led storytelling can be a tool for both cultural and environmental resilience.



José performing a cleansing ritual on me in front of a sacred tree in Mushullakta.

What struck me most was how José modeled leadership through transparency and courage. On forest walks, he translated stories from Kichwa to Spanish to English with patience, exemplifying clarity and accessibility. He also confronted failure openly: he pointed to a tree that had survived a failed monoculture experiment, then to one planted using permaculture

techniques. “Future generations must realize we were wrong, but we weren’t ashamed to admit it,” he told us. José taught me that integrity, accountability, and the capacity to change while empowering others are what constitute leadership, not control or perfection. His example helped me better grasp that the obligation of leaders is to provide deliberate guidance, own up to mistakes, and create environments that foster lasting and group learning.

These experiences have shaped my vision as a global change leader, committed to empathy, integrity, and meaningful impact. I aspire to join the Peace Corps after graduation, drawn to the sense of humility I experienced in Ecuador, where authentic engagement fostered trust and collaboration. Beyond this, I aim to become a U.S. Foreign Service Officer specializing in labor and political affairs, supporting grassroots movements and advocating for policies that advance equity, sustainability, and human dignity.

My vision aligns closely with several UN Sustainable Development Goals:

- SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, reflecting my commitment to supporting fair labor practices and empowering workers through policy advocacy.
- SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities, tied to my dedication to uplifting marginalized communities and addressing systemic barriers to opportunity.
- SDG 4: Quality Education, embodied in initiatives like preserving Kichwa folklore through children’s books, ensuring cultural knowledge is everlasting.
- SDG 13: Climate Action, aligning with my commitment to sustainable practices and responsible engagement with communities facing environmental challenges.

To advance these goals, I have begun integrating what I learned in Ecuador into the community that raised me. Inspired by Pachaysana’s decolonial ecopedagogy—its belief that

education should emerge from place, identity, and reciprocity—I now serve as a tutor and peer mentor for youth refugees with the International Rescue Committee in Baltimore. In this role, I adapt participatory teaching methods I practiced in Mushullakta: grounding lessons in shared storytelling, environmental awareness, and lived experience. Working with students from Syria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Afghanistan, I see how creating space for cultural exchange transforms education into collaboration, just as it did in Ecuador. These experiences remind me that global leadership begins locally, both by nurturing belonging and co-creating knowledge within the communities that first shaped my voice.

Watching my Nano’s fingers weave red yarn into patterns that held our family together, and later seeing Ines twist cabuya into a shigra bag, I have come to see leadership as a deliberate act of care: patient, attentive, and shaped to hold others safely. In Cuyabeno, I learned that stepping back can be as powerful as stepping forward; on Antisana, that listening to my own limits allows me to better understand the limits of others; with José Narváez, that courage and honesty create space for growth. These threads now guide the work I hope to do in communities around the world, reminding me that while our lives may look different, the human need for empathy, connection, and care is universal—and that even small, intentional acts can bridge those differences and hold people together.

Works Cited

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