

LIA Experience - Leena Jalees

Leadership, in its most potent form, is not a title one holds but a practice one lives. It is the daily, conscious act of turning personal values into collective action. My journey to understand this practice has been shaped by introspection, guided by the framework of Strengths-Based Leadership, tested in the unfamiliar land of Ecuador, and refined through the wisdom of faith and the urgency of global challenges. This essay articulates my emerging leadership identity—one rooted in the power of relational strengths, tempered by the discomfort of cultural immersion and personal limitation, and directed toward a vision of global health equity and environmental stewardship. This essay is inspired by a specific moment of realization that we are, fundamentally, of the earth.

My CliftonStrengths assessment provides an interesting and informative backbone for my natural leadership inclinations. I noticed that my top five themes—Woo, Positivity, Developer, Communication, and Empathy—are overwhelmingly concentrated in the Relationship Building and Influencing domains (Gallup, “CliftonStrengths Top 5” 1). This paints a clear picture: I am energized by people, driven to connect, and skilled at fostering growth and understanding within a community.

Woo (Winning Others Over) and Communication are the twin engines of my outreach. I thrive on the challenge of breaking down social barriers, finding common ground, and articulating ideas in a way that captivates and inspires. As Gallup notes, this combination makes my interactions effective because I speak with “clarity and a pleasant charm” (“CliftonStrengths Top 5” 4). This is not mere sociability; it is a strategic tool for building the “relational structure” essential for team success (Gallup, “CliftonStrengths for Leaders” 3). However, I am also aware of the shadow side: the risk of being perceived as inauthentic or spreading my attention too thinly across a wide network, leaving some to wonder about the depth of my commitment (Gallup, “CliftonStrengths for Leaders” 3).

It is my other three strengths that provide that crucial depth. Empathy allows me to move beyond surface-level interactions, sensing unspoken feelings and creating a space of psychological safety. “Developer” compels me to invest in the potential I see in others, deriving deep satisfaction from their incremental progress. This is synergistically supported by Positivity, which I use not to ignore difficulty, but to “help others see the humor and positive side of life” and maintain hope during challenges (Gallup, “CliftonStrengths for Leaders” 1). Together, these strengths form a powerful cycle: I connect with people (Woo), understand their emotional state (Empathy), believe in and nurture their growth (Developer), and encourage them through the process (Positivity), all while clearly communicating the shared vision (Communication). This “Personal Leadership Model,” as explored in *Making a World of Difference*, is fundamentally servant-leadership oriented; my authority is derived from my ability to empower and elevate those around me.

My Leadership-in-Action (LiA) experience in Ecuador was the necessary stepping stone that tested this theoretical blueprint against the hard realities of an unfamiliar context. Our project involved working with a Qichua indigenous tribe, Mushullakta, on sustainable

agricultural and educational initiatives. The official goal was to support food security/reforestation and bring diverse educational perspectives to the children of the community, but the personal journey was one of profound disorientation and reorientation, a series of "Something's Up" moments that demanded deep reflection.

The most immediate challenge was one I had not fully anticipated: the near-total neutralization of my greatest strengths. My Woo, which thrives on verbal connection, was rendered almost useless by my limited Spanish and nonexistent Quichua. My Communication, my gift for articulating thoughts and building rapport through stories, became a source of frustration rather than influence. I was stripped of my primary tools for engagement, forced into a position of observation and silence. This was my first critical moment: a feeling of profound ineffectiveness and isolation. Attending to the Judgment, I felt negatively towards myself for being unprepared and made the assumption that the community would see me as an incompetent outsider. Attending to Emotion, I felt frustration, anxiety, and a deep sense of inadequacy.

This linguistic barrier compounded other, more visceral challenges. Adhering to my Islamic dietary laws in a remote area meant I could not eat the locally sourced meat. For weeks, my diet was monotonous, and I lost a significant amount of weight. The Physical Sensation was a constant, gnawing hunger and a feeling of bodily depletion. As my only source of protein became fish, repeatedly, and tasting nothing like home, I found myself becoming irritated. In my discomfort, I was starkly reminded of the story of the Israelites in the Quran, who, despite their freedom, complained to Prophet Moses about the lack of variety in their sustenance: "O Moses! We cannot endure the same meal 'every day'. So 'just' call upon your Lord on our behalf, He will bring forth for us some of what the earth produces of herbs, cucumbers, garlic, lentils, and onions..." (Quran, 2:61). This connection was humbling, a lesson in privilege and gratitude that began to shift my perspective from my own discomfort to the community's reality.

The most profound test, however, came from being repeatedly thrust into cultural and spiritual situations that stood in direct opposition to my Islamic faith and values. These were not abstract debates; they were unexpected rituals and conversations I had no time to process, no capacity to gracefully decline without fearing I would cause offense, and no prior knowledge to consult. I felt a constant, low-grade anxiety, a tightness in my chest—a clear Physical Sensation of my internal conflict. I was forced to hide my discomfort, smiling politely while my internal world was in turmoil. Attending to Judgment again, I judged myself for being inflexible and judged the situation for lacking the cultural sensitivity I had expected. The core question of my CMD became: *How can I remain true to my faith while being fully present and respectful in this environment?*

It was in this state of spiritual dissonance and physical depletion that a Critical Moment Dialogue with a community elder provided a seismic shift. He was explaining their worldview of life and death, describing how we all return to the earth, our bodies becoming part of the soil, essentially "sand." He spoke of a cyclical, reciprocal relationship with the planet. In that

moment, I consciously engaged in the CMD practice of Cultivating Stillness. I took a deep breath, quieting the noise of my discomfort. As I did, an insight emerged not from habit, but from a place of deep, creative connection: his words resonated perfectly with the Quranic verse describing the creation of humanity from clay: “We created man from an extract of clay” (Quran 23:12)

The theological connection was electrifying. We ARE earth. Engaging the Ambiguity, I realized I didn't need to have all the answers or resolve the differences between our practices. Instead, I could align with my vision of a leader who builds bridges and finds common ground. This moment of connection, found not through my strength of Woo but through silent, receptive stillness, was more powerful than any conversation I could have orchestrated. It transformed my entire LiA experience. The experience of immersing myself into Ecuadorian culture and engaging with its tribal peoples was no longer just a “project”; it was an act of stewardship, a fulfillment of my role as a khalifah (custodian) on Earth. This “ethno-relative view” solidified an environmental ethic at the very core of my leadership values. The LiA taught me that leadership is not just about exercising one's strengths, but about the resilience to lead when those strengths are unavailable, and the wisdom to find universal truth in the silence between words

My experience has led me to synthesize a personal leadership style I call the “Connective Leader.” This style is built upon my innate Strengths and is informed by the concept of Servant Leadership, as defined by Robert Greenleaf. The servant-leader's primary motivation is to serve others, ensuring their highest priority needs are being met. This aligns perfectly with my Developer and Empathy strengths, which drive me to recognize and cultivate potential and to feel the needs of my team as my own.

Furthermore, I incorporate the principle of Cultural Humility, which goes beyond cultural competence. According to Dr. Tervalone, MD, MPH, of Oakland Children's Hospital, “it incorporates a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and critique, to redressing power imbalances, and to developing mutually beneficial partnerships.” My struggles in Ecuador were a masterclass in Cultural Humility. I learned that I could not simply arrive with my strengths and my solutions; as part of a host-family, I had to listen, to be vulnerable about my own limitations, and to approach the community not as a savior but as a student and a partner. This directly addresses the potential pitfalls of my Woo and Positivity, ensuring that my influence is grounded in genuine, equitable relationship-building rather than a performative charm. Cultural humility is extremely important for a career in medicine, and

My case study is not a famous CEO or a historical figure, but the community elder who spoke of earth and sand, and how we all come from the earth so we must take care of it. He demonstrated a form of leadership rooted in deep, spiritual conviction and a long-term vision that transcends individual lifespans. His leadership was not about charisma or authority, but about wisdom and perspective.

From him, I learned that a true leader is a custodian of values that are greater than any single person or project. He stood firm in his worldview, not aggressively, but with a quiet,

unshakable certainty that invited others in, and preached it without fear of whether anyone else present at the fire agreed. He taught me that part of leadership is the ability to connect daily actions—like planting a seed or cleaning a water source—to a grand, cosmic narrative. In my future career as an MD/PhD, I will carry his lesson: to always root my work in a deeper, value-driven purpose and to communicate that purpose in a way that resonates with the shared human experience.

My vision for myself as a global change leader is intrinsically linked to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 15 (Life on Land). The epiphany in Ecuador—that human health and planetary health are indivisible—is the cornerstone of this vision.

My career goal is to work at the intersection of biomedical science and global public health, focusing on infectious diseases impacting low-income and marginalized communities, and health systems strengthening these vulnerable groups. I will use my Communication strength to translate complex scientific data into compelling narratives for the public to further healthcare education initiatives. I will use my Woo to build diverse, cross-sectoral coalitions—connecting scientists, local community leaders, NGOs, and governments. My Developer and Empathy will be crucial in mentoring young scientists from underrepresented backgrounds and ensuring that global health initiatives are co-designed with communities, respecting their knowledge and prioritizing their expressed needs, not external assumptions. After Ecuador, I understand that this work must be conducted with Cultural Humility, acknowledging that my expertise is one piece of a larger puzzle.

The LiA in Ecuador was a beginning, not an end. The “impact” was the forging of a lifelong commitment, and it will be “sustained” through my academic choices, my career path, and my personal advocacy. I will continually check my progress against the goals of reducing health disparities and promoting environmental conservation, using the SDGs as my accountability framework. The CMD process has become a permanent part of my toolkit, a way to Discern Right Action when faced with future challenges.

In conclusion, my leadership is a story of being shaped and of shaping. It was shaped by the innate talents of connection and care identified by my Strengths, and it was tested and tempered in the demanding, beautiful landscape of Ecuador, where those very strengths were silenced so I could learn to lead from a deeper place. From pushing myself beyond my limits to climb Antisana to presenting a skit about the harmful effects of communism to inform the Pintag community, I have been pushed to grow in many ways. To acknowledge we are formed from clay, and to the earth we are connected—in body, in spirit, and in responsibility—is a powerful epiphany that will guide my life aspirations. By embracing my role as a Connective Leader, grounded in service and cultural humility, I will strive to build a world where the health of people and the planet are recognized as one and the same, and where leadership is an act of faithful, courageous, and compassionate stewardship.

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