

Ayrina Lopez

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### **Collaboration and Preservation in Ecuador**

During my group Leadership in Action project in Ecuador, I had the opportunity to engage deeply with leadership styles in different cultures. I was profoundly changed both intellectually and emotionally. Through this experience, I was able to improve skills essential for cross-cultural collaboration through improvements in my language skills and ability to connect. This experience also shifted my personal leadership framework from one rooted in servant leadership to one focused on mission-centered collaboration. Most prominently, my time in Ecuador prompted me to analyze leadership styles in the U.S., which is commonly characterized as an individualistic culture, to explore opportunities for collaborative organizations within the U.S, particularly within the realm of safety-net clinics.

Our group Leadership in Action project was primarily focused on raising awareness on the projects tackling the issues surrounding Andean and Amazonian communities in collaboration with Pachaysana..My cohort and I had the privilege of spending time within the communities of Pintag and Mushullakta, where we had the opportunity to immerse ourselves in the cultures of Ecuador. We also had the opportunity to work alongside local leaders working on reforestation and natural wastewater treatment. On an individual level, I believe that the trip was largely geared toward raising of key environmental and cultural conservation issues to a larger audience. I worked together with a smaller group within my cohort to help transmit traditional stories from leaders to a young audience with tactile projects, including handmade dolls and coloring books.

My experience in Ecuador, particularly in the village of Mushullacta, improved my communication skills as a leader. Living with a host family in a tight-knit community, I was surrounded by new people to engage with and learn from, which appeals to my two main Clifton strengths as a woer and learner. However, Mushullacta presented a linguistic barrier that challenged me. I am a native English speaker, but have an intermediate grasp on Spanish. However, in Mushullacta, the primary languages spoken were Spanish and Kichwa, an indigenous language, which pushed me outside of my comfort zone. I had such little knowledge or context to my surroundings that I grew to become more comfortable asking questions from others and communicating through a language barrier.

I also gained a better understanding of my personal limits. In Mushullacta, of those around me, I was one of the better Spanish speakers, and was often asked to translate questions and conversations. While I enjoyed being able to connect my English-speaking friends to Spanish-speaking community members, I struggled the most with translating requests. On one occasion, I experienced a surprisingly sudden reaction to one of my friend's translation requests. Later after some meditation and thought, I came to the conclusion that the act of translation had pushed me far beyond my comfort zone, as I am usually reluctant to ask for help. This moment of tension helped me to confront my misgivings and developed my communication skills as I was able to then set some boundaries for myself for the rest of the trip.

This experience was incredibly valuable to me as I aspire to work in highly multicultural environments with people of varying English ability. As much as I would love to speak as many languages as possible as perfectly as possible, it is inevitable that I will work with people over a

language barrier. This trip has helped me to develop my abilities to work through these barriers, even when I make grammatical mistakes in my verbal communication.

This Leadership in Action project also prompted me to analyze the role of collaborative organization in the United States. A particular theme that was frequently repeated was the contrast between the communal, tight-knit dynamics of Mushullacta and the avaricious, individualistic culture of the United States. Conversations with long-time international members of Pachaysana from the U. S. brought up this difference regularly, which was often cited as a major source of reverse culture shock. I myself noted the highly community oriented nature of the projects. In Mushullacta and Pintag, the concept of communal work, or minga, was used to raise buildings and reforest acres of rainforest. In general, neighbors felt a strong connection to one another and less division between leaders and followers.

The more collectivist culture of Ecuador was also visible in the collaboration between independent organizations. While our learning experience was facilitated by the non-profit Pachaysana, we had the most direct contact with independent organizations that were tightly collaborated with Pachaysana and themselves. This was particularly notable within the community of Mushullacta, where the community organization Puma Wasi worked with Pachaysana's flagship program Humans For Abundance as well as a wider network of villages throughout the Sumaco National Forest. Puma Wasi is dedicated to the reforestation and cultural preservation of Kichwa history within the village of Mushullacta. Representatives also meet with 17 different chapters in villages throughout the region.

Of particular importance to me was the easy changes in power between the local Puma Wasi president and the community members from three year terms. I spoke with former president Walter Narvaez, who spoke of his appreciation for this fluid power dynamic that kept ideas fresh

and prevented power entrenchment. This was deeply impactful to me as I had previously been trained to value stable leadership and personal independence, to focus on making an impact through singular, resource intensive projects. As a result, it was a major change in mindset to practice leadership within an interconnected network of committees and organizations.

However, despite these clear differences in culture, one particularly powerful moment made me more skeptical in the narrative that the problems of Ecuador were wholly distinct from those of the United States. As part of a dialogue with la Union de los Afectados y Afectadas por las Operaciones Petroleras de Texaco, or UDAPT, I had the opportunity to observe a mechero, or natural gas flare. These mecheros burn excess natural gas in order to create a false scarcity for natural gas and cause extensive damage to natural environments. This moment filled me with two dual emotions: rage and fury against the companies and people that had chosen to destroy such a rich, beautiful place for greed. Yet at the same time, I also felt a connection to my own community that I had not noticed until this moment.

I realized that I was feeling anger and recognition. In the back of my mind, I realized that the burning tower of natural gas in front of me resembled a symbol I had often seen at home in my own community. During long drives through the deserts of West Texas had taken me through blazingly hot days and quiet nights dotted with burning natural gas fires. They were a ubiquitous sight in the Western half of the state, where fossil fuel extraction remained the dominant pillar of the economy. While I understood that Texaco's years of pollution in Ecuador had caused orders of magnitude greater amounts of damage to the environment than any amount of mecheros and fracking in the plains (indeed my long road trips had also been punctuated by wind farms), this realization opened a direct connection between the two countries that I had not explored prior to this moment.

Following my revelation at the mechero, I did not believe that there was no room for community-centered action in the United States. I specifically recalled the communal labor that was done to help families move and feed recently post-partum mothers in my neighborhood. When I returned to the U.S., I felt motivated to examine low resource organizations to evaluate the role of collaboration in their operations.

I am interested in health care equity and chose to examine the nonprofit Los Barrios Unidos Community Clinic in my hometown of Dallas, Texas. Los Barrios Unidos is a collection of community clinics aimed toward uninsured and low-income populations within the DFW Metroplex. Originally founded by members of several diverse West Dallas neighborhoods in response to local demand for accessible, affordable healthcare, Los Barrios Unidos is currently under the leadership of Chief Executive Officer Leonor Marquez, who currently oversees the difficult task of providing largely uncompensated healthcare services with the very real operating costs of a large clinic.

Within the industry of “safety net clinics” that primarily cover low-income, uninsured populations, collaboration between providers is an essential feature due to consistent financial pressures. Federal funding can be available, but is often difficult to access and limited, constraining the resources available to these organizations.<sup>1</sup> As a result, these clinics commonly face difficulties in constructing a healthcare network due to lower, less reliable pay for healthcare providers. Due to these concerns, safety-net clinics rely on strong, collaborative connections with other community centered organizations with similar missions, as seen in multiple case studies.

At LBUCC, bills are charged on a sliding scale based on patient income, with many being treated for free. While this model is beneficial for the health of the community, it presents challenges that require creativity, connection and community dialogue to overcome. As a

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<sup>1</sup> (Krisberg and Leffler)

federally qualified health center, over half of LBUCC's board of directors are themselves patients with first hand experience of the needs of the community. LBUCC, like many other community clinics rely on "an informal network of specialty providers that are willing to see someone," as described by Jana Eubank, another community clinic director, in a 2023 interview with KERANews.<sup>2</sup> Case studies with clinics in rural Northern Virginia also reflect the utility of collaboration with diverse organizations operating under a similar mission, as these clinics were able to survive financially for longer than less connected clinics.<sup>3</sup> In this way, connection with the community are essential for the mission of these organizations.

Personally, these explorations have changed the way I lead. In my past, I have practiced servant leadership, a leadership style that aims to foster the development and growth of those on my team. Servant leadership has a heavy emphasis on mentorship between leaders and team members, and requires an environment based on trust.<sup>4</sup> In my experience, this has succeeded in environments with a high amount of engagement and trust in the leadership team, especially on smaller teams. In my earlier experience with leadership, I have heavily relied on principles of servant leadership in an attempt to foster my team's growth and development. However, as my circumstances have changed and I have had more leadership experiences, I have had issues with overloading my own capacity and the limited resources available. Now I try and incorporate principles of collaboration with both other people and organizations to manage limited resources.

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<sup>3</sup> (Goldberg and Mohan)

<sup>4</sup> (Lynn)

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