

Leadership as Connection: Towards a Human Centered Approach

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Over the past summer, I had the unique opportunity to spend six weeks in Ecuador with a non-profit organization called Pachaysana. Focusing on decolonial education and environmental justice in indigenous communities, Pachaysana seeks to more than just uplift individuals. Rather, the collective aims to reimagine our world entirely within an intentionally cross-cultural framework and to help its participants learn how to challenge the power relations that underline contemporary systems of oppression. Following in line with these values, working with Pachaysana this past summer has felt like a blessing: as an international student coming to the U.S. alone for the first time, I felt incredibly uprooted from my community at home and thrown into a culture and a society that felt foreign to me. Having the chance to conduct my Leadership in Action experience in Ecuador this summer thus represented a unique opportunity for me to seek out new perspectives and to learn about interculturality from a setting that was incredibly different to what I had been used to. In this essay, I aim to share some of the lessons that my trip this summer to Ecuador has reawakened me to, hopefully contributing meaningfully, in the process, to the discourse around ethical leadership, particularly in intercultural settings.

When I took the Clifton Strengths test in February, I was not surprised to see my top strengths as being a “learner” and a “relator.” Indeed, as I have engaged with different extracurricular and research projects in my life, these two qualities and values have continued to guide me both in my personal life and in my work. In the model presented under Clifton Strengths, being a “learner” is classified as a “strategic thinking” skill,

allowing the individual to “absorb and analyze information that informs better decisions.” As for the “relator,” it is classified under “relationship building,” a skill that can help “build strong relationships that hold a team together.” For me however, both of these strengths are, in many ways, one and the same. I aspire to learn about the world and the people around me because I seek to understand them better, because I want to figure out how and why certain events have unfolded in a certain way or to understand the motives that have compelled certain individuals or communities forward. In the same way, I have found that many of my best projects have flourished when I had developed meaningful connections to my peers that were rooted in shared experiences or meaningful conversations. Learning about each other meant creating connections between one another, and as humans, it is only natural that these connections can help us better relate to one another and produce results that were more inclusive and better informed.

By working with Pachaysana this past summer, I thus had the opportunity to see these values formally integrated into an organizational structure, reinforcing my view that ethical leadership can only begin with the sense of genuine care, interpersonal connectedness, and humble curiosity that must be fostered intentionally in community settings. Indeed, Pachaysana’s leadership structure actively brought together mentors and educators from a variety of indigenous communities across Ecuador, each with a different perspective and experience to contribute. Communities frequently interacted with one another, exchanging knowledge and advice on the issues they were facing and providing each other with support for their projects. The most unique part for me was seeing how intertwined Pachaysana’s work was with the personal lives of its members as well as with

the partnering communities. Daniel Bryan, one of the founding directors of Pachaysana for example, would frequently be invited to stay over at my host family's house in Mushullakta, one of the organization's partnering communities. During my stay there, we would often have breakfasts and dinners together, cook and clean together, and, alongside my host mom, talk about both our personal lives and our work projects in the same conversations. This continuity derived naturally from Pachaysana's projects, which included initiatives like the Forest School in Mushullakta or the construction of a new community kitchen for Pintag-Amaru. Indeed, they were projects that directly, and even quite visibly, related to the personal lives of the different community members that it felt like there was no point maintaining such a rigid separation between personal and work life as I was used to. This merging thus contributed to the clear understanding that each person's work within Pachaysana had a direct impact on someone's life – indeed, oftentimes, someone that each of us personally knew and cared about.

This interpersonal aspect also appeared in the lessons that were imparted on us from the Kichwa traditions of our host communities: that the beliefs that we hold and the decisions that we make must take into account not only ourselves, but the people that surround us and the environment that nurtures us. Importantly, for our host communities, this consideration did not come from some abstract moral imperative – rather, it emerged from a sense of personal connection: connection to one's community and ancestors, as well as to the land and to the realms of the universe that were not yet accessible to us. One of the most symbolic moments that highlighted this aspect for me during our trip was learning about the Kichwa tradition of asking for permission before entering a new space.

Millaghe, who was one of our mentors while we stayed with the Pintag-Amaru collective, was the one to walk us through the process. This involved asking for permission to enter a new space from all four cardinal directions, addressing the mountains and rivers, creatures and peoples who were living there, as well as asking for permission from the two Pachas (realms or worlds, a concept connected to both space and time): Hanan Pacha, the upper world or the cosmological realm, and Uku Pacha, the inner world, associated with spirits and ancestors. After finishing this request for permission, one would typically present an offering of flowers and fruit to the land, representing both a request for protection and an expression of gratitude. Personally, I found these practices especially meaningful in reshaping how we often think about the world around us and our position within it as humans: indeed, they represented a unique sense of connection to the world, rooted in deep spiritual convictions and nurtured by an embodied sense of interconnectedness. As highlighted in Webb et al.'s article "Multicultural Leadership Development in the 21st Century," it is precisely these values and lessons that we must start incorporating into contemporary models of leadership (2). Indeed, communities like Pintag-Amaru will thus have a lot to teach us about the significance of relationship building and humility in the practice of leadership, not least for the fact that we are, in the end, all interconnected, that our own presence and wellbeing will always depend on those around us.

My interview with María José Iturralde, who was one of the cofounders of Pachaysana and whom we all called "Chochi," was similarly insightful for my reflections on leadership. In his article "Wise Ways: Leadership as Relationship," Chatterjee describes leadership as the "distributing of leadership throughout the organization" (154). Chochi,

however, goes one step beyond this in her aspiration for a leadership model: for her, leadership is not just about the individual who attempts to manage and distribute these power relations in a more ethical way. Rather, it is about fostering a holistically safe space such that all community members can feel confident and empowered enough to find their own voice and thus express their own personal leadership. Chochi described her conviction as being rooted in emergence theory, the idea that complex systems can emerge from the coming together of otherwise simple parts. In this context, emergence theory for her represented the creation of a sense of collective leadership that was not due to anyone's orders or directions, but that owed itself to each individual's personal aspirations and goals for a particular project, anchored in their personal beliefs, values, and experiences. For Chochi, it is precisely such a model that can help foster the genuine kind of shared responsibility required to uplift and sustain organizations and structures of Pachaysana's kind – a model where the values of community building, curiosity, and interconnectedness are crucial for the effective functioning of the collective.

Carrying these lessons with me into the future, my experience in Ecuador stands today as a crucial reminder of what aligning with vision, as outlined in Schaetti et al.'s "Personal Leadership: Making a World of Difference," truly means and can look like. As someone who deeply values meaningful personal connections and change that is rooted in community-based values and practices, I was immensely inspired by each of Mushullakta, Pintag-Amaru, and Pachaysana's structures of governance. Indeed, leadership for all went beyond bureaucratic protocols and formal rigid structures – instead, it embraced the personal and relational, and respected both intellectualism and emotion, professionalism

and spirituality. Looking into the future, I hope to remain committed to the practice of human connection, not only to the people around me, but also to the environment and to the world that exists beyond myself. In doing so, I hope to consistently center the kind of change that I want to make, change that centers those stories that never get told and that empowers individuals and communities marginalized by intersecting systems of oppression. Concretely, I hope to apply these human-centered approaches to my work in the development field, particularly contributing to UN SDG 10: Reducing Inequalities. On the African continent, this work has all too often focused on short-term and aid initiatives that decentered the fundamental problems of extractivism and inequality and placed the spotlight on deficiencies framed to be unfortunate results of current circumstances. Centering my strengths as a “learner” and a “relator” thus, I hope to always seek out those perspectives that are marginalized in the process of maintaining the international status-quo – namely, those of individuals and communities upon whose suffering our economic system currently depends. Additionally, incorporating lessons from the communities that have hosted me this summer as well as from Chochi’s approach to ethical leadership, I hope to continue seeking out ways to foster safe spaces that allow the people around me to empower themselves within work settings and to express the kind of personal leadership best suited to support their endeavors. Lastly, learning from all the members in Pachaysana, I hope to always remind myself of the possibility of a different world, of the powerful nature of hope, and of the idea that all meaningful change will arise from a place of love, interconnectedness, and community.

Works Cited

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