

Self Development Prior to Pursuing Dream

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My Leadership Action project went through three versions. The first involved working with an organization funded by Cornell shelter vets. My job was to deliver medical equipment between the Cornell Vet School and various shelters in Ithaca. In addition, I planned to interview shelter managers, veterinary professors, students, and volunteers about animal welfare. By the end of the summer, I intended to submit a research paper comparing animal welfare and shelter medicine development in Suzhou, China, and New York, United States. This plan fell through due to an upsetting reality: I did not have a car and therefore could not make the deliveries.

I quickly moved on to my second LiA project: traveling through China to explore effective ways of communicating animal welfare messages to residents in different provinces. After visiting two cities, I realized I had underestimated the complexity of the task. In large cities, most young and middle-aged people are non-natives, and their primary concern is finding better job opportunities—let alone in smaller, developing cities. To raise awareness, I could not think of better methods than making videos or blogs, which were already oversaturated on social media.

So, three days before the original LiA start date, I found myself needing to change the entire plan again. Looking back, the first two projects were ambitious, broad, and idealistic—to the point of being unrealistic. I was too eager to create change when my abilities and knowledge were not yet sufficient to support that goal. Thus, my third LiA was simple: interning at an animal hospital.

The recruitment process was remarkably fast and straightforward. I spent only a few minutes deciding that Ada's was my target, as it was the only animal hospital that prominently advertised its high standards of animal welfare. Within hours of

submitting my resume, I received an interview invitation for the next day. After a ten-minute fairly intense conversation with the boss, I got the job. Thanks to my four years of volunteer experience, I was able to persuade her that cleaning animal feces was one of my strengths since she doubted that my intention of working was only out of curiosity.

As I write this essay, I have been interning at Ada's for nearly three months. Although the workload is often overwhelming, I can confidently say this has been one of the most meaningful experiences of my life. I have constantly practiced self-awareness and critical thinking, and is able to understand necessary practices that balance dreams and reality—ideal animal welfare and business demands. More than anything, I gained the courage to let go of idealism and accept reality. In this third LiA project, I set no broad goals like those in the previous two. My only objective was to broaden my understanding of how high animal welfare can coexist with high-quality medical service. I accept that I lack experience and knowledge, but I am still only twenty years old: I have time, but I need to be patient and humble.

The most important self-awareness I developed was understanding my complex reaction to criticism. Working in a medical center, every decision and action must be made carefully to avoid accidents, especially when patients are often considered equivalent to property by their owners. Almost every day, the head veterinary technician points out mistakes and names specific vet techs in the group chat. During the first month, my name appeared frequently. I remember my mood on the way to work shifting from excitement and curiosity to anxiety. I even thought about quitting the career after nearly making a serious mistake—especially since my boss had warned me during the interview that if I kept repeating errors, no amount of hard work would make a medical career the right path for me.

One day, after weeks of sleep deprivation and frayed nerves, and before my morning coffee, I misinterpreted a vet's advice as criticism and received it with contempt rather than gratitude or respect. I regretted it almost immediately, because that was not who I am. That was when I realized I took criticism too personally. For example, the vet's advice was simply not to put my hands in my pockets in front of pet owners. Such a logical and kind reminder felt to me like an accusation of being disrespectful and rude. Over time, my confidence developed a defensive mechanism that drove me to confront authority over what I perceived as an attack on my character. Looking back, the guidance and criticisms were necessary for an intern. However, in an unfamiliar environment, the stress from social and professional aspects intimidated me, causing me to misinterpret them as personal insults. Now, my name still appears in the group chat, but instead of defend, I can genuinely accept them.

Throughout this LiA journey, although I did not frequently practice leadership, I learned a great deal from the head veterinary technician. She embodies the best practices of animal welfare among the boss and other vet techs. When a highly stressed animal arrives, she is often the only technician the vet will call to assist, because she has many ways to calm the animal down. I was most impressed by her during an emergency rescue when an animal showed no vital signs. While the vets and other techs were shouting and running around, she remained calm yet moved quickly to do everything necessary. Additionally, she loves her work to a workaholic extent; she typically works twenty hours of overtime per month, not including the messages she sends in the group chat hours before her shift. She is also the only technician who can identify tumor cells and perform cross-matching blood tests for transfusions. Given these strengths, one would expect her to be a well-respected leader, yet all the vet techs—and even some vets—have more or less complained

about her. After 2 months of direct contact, I identified certain traits that reflect negative leadership. The most significant is her tendency to ask the boss to defend her whenever she has a verbal argument with others. The underlying issues remain unresolved, and the boss may use expulsion to suppress complaints. Her way of pointing out mistakes is also inconsiderate, which was a major reason I felt anxious going to work in the first month. She often used rhetorical questions like, “Is it that hard to put the collar on correctly?” or “Why hasn’t anyone noticed that this animal’s water bowl is empty?” These phrases carried a tone of accusation rather than an invitation to solve the problem. Observing her, I came to understand that even highly competent individuals can undermine their own leadership through poor communication and a lack of emotional awareness.

Finally, I want to discuss animal welfare—a phrase I have already mentioned many times. At Ada’s, we are forbidden to describe an animal as aggressive or offensive, or “凶” in Chinese. Instead, we are taught to understand that all attacking behaviors stem from fear, a view I fully agree with. Therefore, we should be extra patient and gentle rather than immediately using collars or other restraints. While talking to my linguistic friend, she mentioned Wittgenstein’s thesis that language shapes cognition. As Proudfoot (2009) states, Wittgenstein offers a “subtle version of the thesis that language determines thought,” suggesting that the content of a thought is not independent of its linguistic expression but is constituted through it. Although debates continue about which influences the other—language or thought—I do believe that language does. When my coworker describes a dog as “凶,” my natural response is defensive. I unconsciously send intimidating and anxious signals to that dog, which can worsen the situation. However, when the description changes to “nervous,” a sense of compassion arises. My actions become more careful, and my

tone softer. This difference is real. I believe that “凶” conveys a message that the animal is asking for trouble—that hurting me means success and pleasure to it. This is anthropocentric because I automatically prioritize my own well-being and health. On the other hand, a nervous animal’s aggressive behavior feels innate and innocent. Instead of avoiding it, I, as a more intelligent creature, should use my knowledge and experience to ease its feelings. This approach reflects an understanding of animal emotions and enhances their well-being.

Avoiding labeling an animal as "dangerous" or "aggressive" requires conscious effort, as such language is deeply ingrained. At Ada's, we actively avoid using the term "凶" (fierce/aggressive) to uphold our high welfare standards—and this commitment is precisely why I value this place. The central message I had attempted to promote is that respecting animal lives is intrinsically linked to advancing humanitarian development. This may have seemed counterintuitive, yet it is a connection increasingly substantiated by global policy and research. The United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been critiqued for a critical oversight: the systematic neglect of animal welfare, a gap that experts warn "undermines progress on human health, environmental protection and social equity" (EurekAlert, 2025). As I have witnessed firsthand, the language we choose to describe animals not only shapes our own perceptions but also influences our actions, ultimately affecting their well-being. A culture of compassion toward animals, therefore, does not exist in isolation; it reflects and reinforces our capacity for empathy across species, and is a cornerstone of a truly progressive, healthy, and humane society.

Reference

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