

Leadership in Action Reflection: Lessons from Caritas Athens

Before beginning my Leadership in Action project in Athens, Greece, I understood leadership primarily as the ability to take initiative, guide others, and make a meaningful contribution to a group or community. While I still believe these qualities are important, my experience with Caritas Athens significantly broadened my understanding of what it means to lead. I came to realize that leadership does not always require being the person in charge, having all the answers, or occupying a position of authority. Instead, meaningful leadership can emerge through the willingness to listen, learn, adapt, and recognize when the most valuable contribution one can make is simply to be present and willing to serve.

During my time with Caritas Athens, I assisted with daily meal distribution, clothing and essential-needs distribution, adult English lessons, and connecting individuals with accommodation and other resources available throughout the Athens community. I initially approached the experience with the mindset that I was traveling to Athens to help others. As the experience unfolded, however, I began to understand that service is inherently reciprocal. While I contributed my time, energy, and skills to the community, the community gave me something equally meaningful in return. Through my interactions and experiences, I developed a deeper understanding of myself, leadership, empathy, service, and the importance of human connection. What I initially viewed as an opportunity to make an impact on others ultimately became an experience that profoundly impacted me as well.

Understanding My Leadership Strengths

My experience at Caritas Athens challenged me personally because I was entering an environment in which almost everything was unfamiliar. Although I had volunteered with similar

organizations before, serving in another country introduced an entirely different language, culture, community, and approach to service. Caritas Athens was founded in 1978 with the aim of combating poverty and injustice, with a mission centered on providing “continuous and unselfish help succor, solidarity, support, and offering to every human being in need, Greek or foreign, regardless of religion, nationality, gender, race, language, or age,” while addressing material, psychological, and spiritual needs (Caritas Athens). Working within this mission allowed me to support individuals from a wide range of backgrounds while also encouraging me to examine my own assumptions about what service and leadership should look like.

One of the most important aspects of my leadership development was gaining a greater awareness of my own strengths. The principles of Strengths-Based Leadership helped me recognize that effective leadership does not necessarily require transforming myself into an entirely different kind of leader. Rather, it requires understanding the qualities I naturally bring to relationships and situations and intentionally developing them further. This perspective encouraged me to focus less on characteristics I believed I lacked and more on how I could use my existing strengths with greater intention and authenticity. One of my strongest qualities is my ability to connect with and understand other people. I genuinely value relationships in which people feel comfortable, respected, and supported, and this strength became particularly important at Caritas Athens. I interacted with individuals whose backgrounds, experiences, languages, and circumstances were often very different from my own. I quickly realized that I could not approach every person or situation in exactly the same way. Building genuine connections required me to pay attention to individual needs and recognize that communication extends far beyond spoken language.

Another strength that became more apparent throughout my LiA experience was my willingness to serve others. I found genuine fulfillment in the everyday responsibilities at Caritas Athens, even when the tasks themselves seemed small or routine. Distributing meals, organizing clothing donations, assisting with English lessons, or connecting individuals with community resources may not resemble traditional examples of leadership. Yet these responsibilities demonstrated that leadership is not defined by the visibility or prestige of an action. It can be expressed through consistency, compassion, reliability, and a willingness to contribute wherever one is needed. I learned that service is not separate from leadership; in many circumstances, it is one of its most authentic forms.

Learning to Advocate for Myself

Although I entered the experience wanting to help others, one of my greatest challenges was learning how to advocate for myself and take initiative within an unfamiliar environment. At the beginning, I often questioned whether I was doing enough. I was hesitant to move beyond the responsibilities assigned to me because I did not want to interfere with the organization's work, overstep my role, or make a mistake. While this hesitation came from a desire to be respectful, I eventually recognized that it was also limiting my ability to become fully engaged. Over time, I learned that being an effective volunteer (and leader) does not mean waiting for someone to tell me exactly what to do. It means being attentive enough to recognize opportunities and confident enough to communicate my willingness to contribute. I began asking more questions and offering my assistance in areas where I saw a need. This seemingly small shift had a significant impact on my experience. It encouraged me to become more involved, interact with more members of the community, and develop a deeper understanding of the organization's work. Athens taught me that confidence can develop through action. By taking initiative despite

uncertainty, I learned that I could ask questions, learn from mistakes, adapt to new circumstances, and continue moving forward. This lesson extends beyond my experience at Caritas Athens. In future leadership roles, I know there will be situations in which I do not feel completely prepared or certain about the correct course of action. Rather than allowing uncertainty to prevent me from contributing, I want to approach those moments with curiosity and a willingness to learn. I do not need to have every answer before taking the first step.

Leadership Through an Unfamiliar Cultural Environment

One of the most meaningful aspects of my LiA experience was being immersed in a community that was unfamiliar to me. Living and working in Athens required me to become more conscious of my own cultural perspective and the assumptions that shape the way I understand the world. I realized that I often interpreted situations according to what felt normal, familiar, or intuitive to me. Being in another country made those assumptions more visible and encouraged me to examine them more critically. This experience taught me the importance of humility when entering an unfamiliar community. I cannot assume that my way of thinking, communicating, or solving problems is automatically the most appropriate or effective. Working within a different cultural environment requires observation, openness, and a willingness to learn from experiences that challenge one's expectations.

I interacted with people whose experiences were significantly different from my own. While I cannot claim to fully understand circumstances that I have not personally lived in, listening to others and developing genuine relationships helped me recognize the importance of approaching each individual as a person rather than defining them by their circumstances. Someone receiving assistance is not simply a “person in need”; they are an individual with their

own history, identity, goals, challenges, and strengths. This realization has influenced how I think about global leadership. Being a global leader requires more than traveling to another country or participating in an international service experience. It requires recognizing the limitations of one's own perspective and approaching unfamiliar communities with respect, curiosity, and humility. My time in Athens encouraged me to distinguish between entering a community with the intention of helping and entering one with the intention of understanding, collaborating, and contributing responsibly.

Servant Leadership

Robert K. Greenleaf's concept of servant leadership emphasizes that leaders should prioritize serving others and helping them grow rather than focusing primarily on power or authority. Reflecting on my LiA experience, I found this philosophy closely aligned with what I experienced at Caritas Athens. To serve effectively, I first had to understand what people actually needed and wanted rather than assuming I knew what was best for them. Providing a meal can address an immediate and essential need, while helping someone access housing, education, language skills, or other community resources can create opportunities for greater independence and long-term stability. My involvement with English lessons and community resources helped me see how leadership can address immediate circumstances while also supporting broader goals. As a result, my understanding of the word "help" changed. I no longer view helping simply as giving something to someone. Meaningful service should enable people to feel supported, respected, capable, and empowered. It should not diminish someone's independence or agency; instead, it should recognize and strengthen it. I also learned that servant leadership is fundamentally relational. Genuine service depends on trust and mutual respect, and the

relationship between the person serving and the person being served does not have to be defined by hierarchy.

Sustaining the Impact

I believe the greatest long-term impact of my LiA experience is the way it changed how I approach leadership and community engagement. Although my time in Athens was temporary, the lessons I gained from the experience do not have to be. I intend to sustain its impact by continuing to volunteer and engage with organizations that address poverty, inequality, education, and access to resources. Meaningful and lasting progress is built through relationships, collaboration, consistency, and a genuine commitment to understanding the communities we hope to serve. In future opportunities, I want to ask not only what I can accomplish, but also what the people and communities around me need and how I can contribute responsibly. I also hope to carry forward the humility Athens taught me. I will continue to encounter situations in which I do not have all the answers, but rather than viewing that uncertainty as a weakness, I now see it as an opportunity to learn. My goal is to remain receptive to perspectives that challenge my own and to recognize that leadership is an ongoing process of growth rather than a destination.

Conclusion

My Leadership in Action experience with Caritas Athens fundamentally changed the way I understand leadership. The challenges I encountered in Athens pushed me beyond my comfort zone and became some of my greatest opportunities for personal and professional growth. I developed greater confidence, adaptability, patience, empathy, and an appreciation for the importance of listening. Most significantly, I entered Athens believing that my role was to make

an impact on the community. I left understanding that meaningful service is reciprocal. I contributed to the Athens community through my work at Caritas Athens, but the community also left a lasting impact on me. One of the most meaningful aspects of the experience is knowing that I now have a sense of community and connection in Athens. The relationships I developed remind me that service does not necessarily end when a project concludes. The connections formed through service can continue long after formal responsibilities have ended, and those relationships have become an important part of how I understand community.

As I move forward, I want to become a leader who leads with empathy, serves with humility, and acts with purpose. I want to continue entering unfamiliar environments with curiosity and an open mind rather than allowing uncertainty to create hesitation. Whether I am working with a nonprofit organization, pursuing my future career, or contributing to my community, I want to carry the lessons Athens has taught me. I no longer believe that becoming a leader requires having all the answers. Instead, I believe leadership requires the willingness to listen, learn, adapt, and act. Being a global change leader means recognizing that meaningful change begins with people and that effective leadership begins with the willingness to stand alongside them. My experience at Caritas Athens showed me that leadership is not always about standing at the front of a group. Sometimes, it is about standing beside others, recognizing their strengths, understanding their experiences, and finding meaningful ways to contribute. That is the kind of leader I hope to become.