

Leading Through Commitment and Learning

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When I arrived in Mexico City, I was prepared to institute changes that would directly improve the lives of U.S. migrant workers. My LiA had guided me to Centro de los Derechos del Migrante (CDM), where I hoped to leverage the U.S. legal system to seek justice for the thousands of migrant workers exploited by their employers in the U.S. Yet I lacked a clear path on how I would make a difference without the formal credentials of a licensed attorney. It's no surprise that my main leadership strengths are "deliberative" and "achiever," reflecting my general approach to leadership as simply completing tasks effectively and moving forward.

My time at CDM involved extensive client-facing casework, which challenged my strengths-based framework of ticking off a checklist. To ethically and meaningfully lead my clients, I had to shift my perspective from a checklist approach to a relational one to sustain my work and provide relief effectively. In a paper published in the Journal of Safety Research, a similar principle was identified: managers' attention to transformational leadership showed employees that the manager was committed to their safety (Levovnik et al.). In correspondence, I found that aligning my visions with the goals and relief-seeking ambitions of workers on our hotlines and building trust and mutual respect mattered more than ticking a checklist of the common approaches to intake management, resembling my commitment and positioning myself as a leader who would make workers feel comfortable and simultaneously strengthen my ability to provide effective legal services.

My Time as a Law Clerk

During my time at CDM, I have had the privilege of working with an amazing team of interns and staff while also learning so much about migrant labor and justice. Specifically, I had the pleasure of conducting a variety of intake interviews with migrant workers across the U.S. This experience has been especially impactful because it allowed me to engage directly with workers and provide materials that can help their cases. Other notable experiences at CDM included observing a mediation and an office potluck/documentary showing with interns from Instituto para las Mujeres en la Migración (IMUMI), both of which allowed me to observe methods of relief that can be offered to migrant workers in specific cases and gave me the freedom to observe the behind-the-scenes of specific cases while communicating with other passionate stakeholders in the migrant justice space.

I am particularly grateful to have assisted with outreach efforts to Maryland crabworkers and to have conducted preliminary research on the growth of temporary U.S. work visas and the transfer of settlement funds to Mexico. These specific opportunities, combined with being able to collaborate with different staff members at the office and at lunch every day, allowed me to gradually gain insight into how much control employers have over workers on temporary visas, essentially creating a privatized recruitment system that leaves workers powerless in a foreign country. This systemic process continues to leave workers exploited regarding their legal rights, essentially creating a forced labor system (Woodmansee). Living in Mexico, I dealt greatly with the struggles of being in a foreign nation and learning to develop comfort and familiarity in my new environment. However, this added layer of exploitation and unsupportiveness was one I could not imagine simultaneously experiencing, and in sum, was a layer I sought to ameliorate and righteously correct through supplying workers with sincere acknowledgment of their

precarious positions and aiding through transparency and integrity through the uninformed nature and vulnerability that workers face as they traverse the US H-2 visa system.

On Leadership Styles

Most importantly, my time at CDM allowed me to learn to engage with vulnerable migrant workers, using virtues of understanding and commitment to build trust and ensure effective communication that brought them the most justice possible. Initially, my main concerns when working on intake lines were whether my Spanish-speaking skills would suffice in such a high-stakes conversation and whether I could accurately recite my intake-question script to gather enough information about their case. In practice, these fears made my conversations robotic and one-sided, reducing my ability to extract deeper, emotionally charged information that could bolster our ability to stake claims about violations of these workers' rights.

To be an ethical leader and move beyond a simplistic conversation, I needed to return to the conversation's roots and connect with the worker on the other side with compassion and commitment to their specific cause. Being present within each conversation was instrumental to developing that deeper relation of integrity, which would allow me to deviate from my intake script and ask the *right* questions, those which were customized to each worker's individual experience. Thereby, overcoming these initial fears of being "perfect" and simply executing these intake conversations and future correspondence with an achiever mindset allowed me to personally connect with each worker on an individual level and help them feel the commitment and personalization I hoped to provide. Moreover, this resulted in an adapted leadership style based on the principle of overcoming irrational fears of perfection and flexibility to one that was

founded on the principle of commitment, being flexible to the shifting needs of each individual you aim to help, and retaining an unwavering presence and interest in their case to guide them through their adversity. Ultimately, this leadership shift allowed me to address each worker's needs with utmost care and awareness, leveraging my supervising attorneys' advice to provide legal and institutional relief that responded to both the judicial and personal needs of each worker.

Additionally, my LiA allowed me to engage in several critical moments where I used critical thinking and reflective principles to discern the specialized right course of action (Schaetti et al.). For instance, an aspect that persisted throughout my LiA was learning to lead in an environment with more experienced colleagues. Following my CMD experience, I really came to terms with being comfortable accepting advice and learning from others' experiences in what felt like an intimidating setting. Specifically, being surrounded by people with years of experience in my organization's field initially made it feel impossible to provide leadership and make a personal impact. However, learning to stay present and willingly seek advice allowed me to gradually build my knowledge, provide meaningful feedback, and take action when working with my team. Moreover, this reflection helped me recognize my current boundaries and discern how I could work past them to effect meaningful change.

Furthermore, I learned that leadership is not necessarily being in the front of the room and influencing everyone else; sometimes it's simply taking in the experiences of others to develop. This commitment to growth reflects a leader's adherence to the cause they wish to improve; it requires setting aside pride and practicing active listening, which can push a leader past the limitations of inexperience to build team collaboration and make better decisions within the group. These effects are what I vowed to reciprocate by soliciting advice from my colleagues

to navigate my role as a leader, improve the team's internal communications, and generate ideas that would better the lives of the workers we persistently sought to protect. This leadership perspective shift of the importance of listening and engaging even when feelings of leadership felt less salient therefore reinforced my principle of commitment. It reflected my absorption and respect for my colleagues. This framework fostered mutual respect and helped me gradually build my ability to lead conversations directly and influence the faces of new leaders as I go on.

Moving Forward

On my first day managing the hotline, a lead organizer at CDM had told my group of interns and me not to be afraid to ask as many follow-up questions to the workers as possible. To her, building trust and putting care into each intake was what allowed her to advocate for workers' rights more broadly and mobilize a movement. This heartfelt interest and integrity was particularly emblematic to me and transcended my time at CDM, shaping my identity as a leader positioned to tackle guestworker programs with each worker's voice, rather than a pluralistic approach. Situating my vision in the lives of each worker I interact with and learn more about will allow me to use this commitment to effect change more broadly.

Ultimately, I hope to utilize my career to provide relief to marginalized individuals, such as migrant workers, and provide transparency in immigration legal debates that have skewed justice away from protecting these individuals. In practice, using these leadership principles of commitment and connection will allow me to address the uninformed nature and vulnerability that workers face as they traverse the U.S. immigration system, closely aligned with UN CDG 4 (Quality Education), UN CDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and UN CDG 10

(Reducing Inequality). Moreover, continuing this ideal of committed leadership and everlasting growth as an individual can allow me to leverage workers eager to stake their claims to use my leadership strengths of “achiever” and “deliberative” to conduct effective research and data analysis to increase the accessibility of civic knowledge and use legal vessels to support the needs of these largely unprotected individuals.

As I work toward this vision, I will hold myself accountable to keep learning to better understand the complexities of immigration services and to continuously develop my core skills in client relations and worker organizing that lay the foundation for strengthening migrant worker justice. As a result, I can advocate for and lead solutions based on the exact principles stakeholders see as problems, and provide transparency on pressing issues, many of which involve human rights abuses. Furthermore, I will continue to put myself in rooms where I may not be the most experienced to better ensure I am educating myself on the changing legal landscapes behind immigration and the experiences of others, particularly aiming to document these experiences at as many meetings or seminars as possible as I continue honing in on my leadership skills. Moreover, I aim to deviate from a simple script to better understand workers’ lives and continue building my capacity to lead on the basis of true, human connections and commitment.

Works Cited

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