

This summer, I traveled to Mexico City to fulfill my Leadership in Action project, partnering with the recycling company Rennueva to extend its business model from the capital region into Quintana Roo.

That is the TLDR, but truthfully, for such a life-changing trip, that summary would only be a detriment to how enriching this experience was. I arrived in Mexico expecting to contribute my skills, but I left with a fundamentally different understanding of what it means to lead.

Prior to going abroad, a central component of our Laidlaw weekly workshops was examining strengths and talents. While I reject the notion that leaders belong to fixed categories or are ranked by their best attributes, I came to appreciate the individuality of leadership and how integral it is to know your current skills and what you need to develop to become well-rounded. Development is never linear; progress requires humility and an acknowledgment that future capabilities rest on tackling present gaps. At the time, however, I understood this idea more theoretically than practically.

Truthfully, when I was told I would be working with an environmental company, I felt uncertain and somewhat disappointed about how their environmental work would best fit my skills. The prospect seemed distant, as if I lacked control over the outcome. I wondered what I could possibly contribute to a field that initially felt so disconnected from my own interests and experiences.

Fortunately for me, I was proven to be mistaken.

Humility Before Expertise

The first lesson came before I even began working with Rennueva. My focus shifted from personal strengths to the challenge of assisting a community in which I was both an outsider and had novice familiarity with its language. Having limited familiarity with Mexican culture and the daily lives of residents humbled me quickly. Upon entering the country, I knew I was in for a challenging six weeks of broken Spanglish and Google Translate. However, through that difficulty sparked a passion for me to not only make it through, but to thrive.

One thing that helped was realizing I was not the only one facing such a linguistic paradox. Among the eighteen Laidlaw cohort members, only two spoke fluent Spanish. This scarcity forced me to listen more attentively, to step back, and to accept that impact often begins with humility rather than expertise, and that I am not alone in "my" journey.

That realization fundamentally changed how I approached leadership. I had initially thought leadership meant knowing what I could offer. In Mexico, I began to understand that it also meant recognizing what I did not know.

Working under such constraints underscored that leadership cannot be transplanted wholesale from one context to another. Effective leadership is dynamic, requiring continual adaptation to

new environments and the willingness to revise assumptions as circumstances evolve. If I entered Mexico expecting to lead according to what I already knew, I would have missed the opportunity to learn from what I did not.

This became especially clear once I began working with Rennueva.

Trust and Reciprocity

Entering the project without a clear expectation of the language barrier or the specific tasks forced me to approach things with an open mind. Fortunately, this mindset was supported by the Make Sense team and Rennueva's CEO, Hector, who entrusted us with major decisions and business consulting for his company.

Beyond receiving our task, one major thing that helped was the visible trust he had in us. While Hector had every right to use us to do menial tasks, instead he made sure every time we attended their office that the entire team was there to listen, assist, and care for us just as much as they would care for themselves.

That trust I was fortunate enough to receive revealed something I had not fully considered before: perceived barriers are not always as large as they appear. They may resemble walls, yet often they are as small as a door. Without the willingness to navigate around them, adapt, and listen to people's needs, leadership becomes mere ego.

Hector could have viewed us as inexperienced students who were there to complete an assignment. Instead, he treated us as people capable of contributing something meaningful. His trust created a responsibility within me to take the opportunity seriously.

That same reciprocity appeared beyond our work with Rennueva. The Make Sense program which oversaw this entire exchange incorporated volunteers from the local neighborhoods of Mexico City, assigning us an advisory role when working with them. This created a rewarding dynamic: while we prepared a business proposal for Hector and Make Sense, they also expected us to guide them, fostering a reciprocal exchange.

We were not simply teaching, and we were not simply learning. We were doing both simultaneously.

Through this collaboration, we learned to grasp cultural nuances that often elude even fluent speakers. This reinforced another realization: culture must be integral to leadership.

In architecture, the concept of "design thinking" demonstrates this by synthesizing environment, people, culture, and weather orientation into spaces that function within and enhance their context. A building that ignores its surroundings may still stand, but it cannot truly belong. I began to see leadership in the same way. The aim is not to impose a vision on the world, but to align with what the world offers. Applying design thinking with Make Sense revealed that

education about the methodology belongs in every setting, whether abroad or within local communities.

Effective solutions require research into who will receive them and how best to deliver them. Assumptions of correctness must be tested against the needs and preferences of the intended audience. Leadership, like design, cannot begin with the assumption that the creator already knows what is best. From this came a guiding maxim I have formulated: leadership without a greater good reduces to ego.

The Dreams Exercise

While leadership often entails setting goals and mobilizing others, it loses purpose if it does not serve a broader benefit. Hector's approach to business made this especially apparent. His perspective on business and family was striking. Although the staff were unrelated, his leadership transcended a transactional mindset. Employees maintained distinct identities, personal goals, and responsibilities, yet they contributed to a collective purpose that resembled a family rather than a conventional workplace.

At the start of the internship, Hector asked us to write down our dreams. Initially, I was skeptical. The exercise felt like a typical "write your dreams, meditate" directive that can become a hollow ritual. Yet that skepticism prompted a deeper question: if a leader meditates and controls themselves but does nothing for the community, whom are they leading?

Eventually, I understood what Hector was trying to create. His intention was not to provide basic training or busy work, but to create a personal experience that would motivate us to apply our passions, our loves, and the family he had built around us. The goal was to draw out the best work from each intern.

Through this process, I recognized an importance to the self that is inseparable from an importance to the other. Colleagues, whether higher or lower in the "leadership chain," are valuable people pursuing dreams as ambitious as our own. When a leader treats business or personal wants as demands that others must bend to without justification, they are not leading; they are exploiting the value others derive from their positions.

Comfort, Ambition, and Stillness

This distinction forced me to reconsider ambition itself. Leadership experience often reveals how readily we sell ourselves short. We settle into comfortable positions or ideologies, believing that safety guarantees value. Comfort, however, has limits: it can sustain us in moments of vulnerability, yet it also caps our potential when ambition demands risk.

A leader must discern where comfort ends and growth begins, balancing the two with precision. A great anecdote for this is when illness confines us to bed, stillness can be restorative; when the pursuit of a dream is stalled by the urge to stay in bed, that same stillness becomes

corrosive. The same condition can therefore be either healing or harmful, depending on context. The challenge is to identify the point at which stillness shifts from refuge to restraint and to navigate beyond it without discarding its protective benefits.

For me, Mexico became that point of transition. I had to move beyond the comfort of what I already understood: beyond my language, beyond my assumptions about environmental work, and eventually beyond my own doubts about what I was capable of creating.

Capitan Cancun

This became especially apparent when I delivered my final pitch to Rennueva.

I presented a character I had created, "Capitan Cancun." What started out as a throwaway thought turned into one of the highlights of the project. When creating Capitan Cancun, I intended the character to be more than a mascot; I wanted it to embody the past, present, and future.

Having faith in the idea, I proposed that our entire business proposal revolve around this character. Initially, my scholar peers felt apprehension, they were unsure at what point the passion of this creation should stop with the "business" side of the proposal, but after the presentation, the key takeaway was its success. The impact did not stem from the novelty of the concept; it arose from the conviction and passion we projected, which resonated with the Rennueva team guiding us throughout the session.

Their enthusiasm, and subsequently ours, mirrored the heroes we had imagined, revealing how often we fail to stretch our ideas and capabilities to their fullest potential.

Captain Cancun therefore became more than a slide on a business proposal. It became an example of the kind of leader I was learning to become: someone willing to take an idea that initially seems unconventional, listen to others, research its purpose, and then have enough confidence to give it a chance.

During my time in Mexico City, I explored neuroplasticity, which clarified how the brain imposes self-imposed limits on the body. My experience with Rennueva reinforced this insight: doubting the value of an idea can prevent it from gaining traction. Uncalculated doubt never leads to a peak. A climber who stops halfway never reaches the summit; claiming to have climbed a mountain matters far less than achieving, or even attempting, the top.

But the mountain cannot be climbed through confidence alone. This realization underscores that, as leaders, we must listen, research, and understand community needs continuously. Confidence without listening becomes arrogance. Ambition without purpose becomes ego. And authenticity without consideration for others becomes self-indulgence.

Identity and Inclusive Leadership

This is where inclusive leadership became important to me.

Inclusive leadership hinges less on demographic differences than on ethical practice and intentional effort. We often limit ourselves by assuming we do not belong to a particular community or lack fluency in its language. Yet ethics, early diligence, genuine motivation, and the willingness to amplify others' voices constitute the core of effective leadership.

My time in Mexico City sharpened this insight. As an outsider speaking a different language, I observed a culture rooted in a shared identity yet flexible enough to allow individuals to forge new selves in the present. This demonstrates that identity is not a static relic but a dynamic framework that supports both continuity and innovation. It made me realize that there is no monolithic identity for the peoples and cultures of the world. Although certain practices are nationally accepted and cherished within communities, there remains a need to forge new identities and create authenticity. In Mexico City, I encountered individuals with markedly different mindsets, ideologies, and cultural subgroups. This underscored the importance of continually striving, as leaders and as a society, to embrace and join in to such diversity.

Leadership is often portrayed as a cookie-cutter pursuit of advancement and the management of others, or as the realization of personal dreams through persuading others. While these aspects are genuine, another dimension involves being radically authentic, so uniquely oneself that confidence becomes evident in one's leadership. By being transparent and open, a leader inspires others to express their own selves, an often overlooked facet of leadership.

We frequently equate leaders with certain traits, constructing labels and checklists that define an ideal resume for a leader. However, In truth, the manner in which one conducts oneself, demonstrating confidence in an authentic identity, can dismantle barriers that a conventional leader cannot. I began to understand that using one's identity to cultivate confidence can, in turn, inspire confidence in others.

The Leaders Who Weren't at the Front

Yet this confidence does not exist in isolation. Some of the most important leadership I witnessed in Mexico came not from the person standing at the front of the room, but from those making sure everyone else had the opportunity to participate.

Alongside Hector and Rennueva, another case study I found interesting was our program advisors, Kenny and Aide.

Beyond acting as just “program leaders”, in a sense, they served as our guardians. Though they did not share our hotel or meals, they ensured we always had people to talk to throughout the experience. They extended learning beyond the Impact Hub. Whenever we needed food recommendations or general suggestions, they went above and beyond to make us feel comfortable in a new environment.

That realization highlighted a necessary component of leadership: providing every participant with the opportunity to feel comfortable. It is not a suggestion but a necessity for all leaders. Their support boosted group morale by offering both professional guidance and personal connection. It prompts me to consider how I can continue to be that supportive presence for others.

This also changed the way I think about who qualifies as a leader. Often, we think of leaders as great historical figures. While those individuals are important, focusing solely on large-scale impact can produce the opposite effect of what we intend. All celebrated leaders, from Martin Luther King to Mahatma Gandhi, were shaped by the leadership of those around them. This suggests that the emphasis should shift from the singular figure to the local people who, through everyday actions, enable broader change.

Consequently, leaders and their goals must be broken down. Through these breakdowns, we learn to value small wins and incremental improvements, while also noticing the contributions of those around us. This creates a tapestry of collective achievement that extends beyond individual leadership. Throughout my life, I have been fortunate to encounter many great leaders. Though they may not have solved world peace or become presidents, they have taken the core remnants of large-scale leadership and applied them daily, often with compassion and humility.

Caring as the Core Tenet

One core tenet of leadership is caring. If you do not care for others, you do not care for yourself, because every person is a combination of societal factors. Ignoring this reality is dangerous; it reduces leadership to a position rather than a practice.

Leadership is about making the little things count: reaching out to someone having a bad day, offering guidance without direct benefit, or simply saying a quick "hi, how are you?" These actions distinguish active leadership from a mere title. Many choose leadership positions because they look good on a resume, helping them climb a corporate ladder. Yet a ladder is meaningless if it leaves everyone else at the bottom; the structure can be pulled away, leaving the climber stranded.

We must reframe our understanding of leadership in a self-centered society that often neglects everyday people who strive for a better life. If we do not help others improve their circumstances, there will never be a better life for anyone when hardship strikes. We should see ourselves less as insular climbers and more as participants on a shared plateau, determining its height together. Beyond personal ambition, we need to push for a society where the summit of Mount Everest becomes the norm rather than the exception.

A major part of leadership is pushing, stretching, constantly testing your virtues and the values of those around you, and refusing stagnation. Stagnancy is the number-one danger to success; it feels comfortable but limits effort that could affect others' lives. If I do not continuously work to

become a better leader and promote how others can do the same, my existence becomes meaningless, and I do not deserve the title.

Leadership is not divine; leaders are not gods. Thousands of leaders have been treated as deities, yet they are washed away over time. Their legacy is not what sustains humanity. What sustains us are the people who remain willing to care, to listen, to push, to support, and to lift one another. Many question the purpose of life. I see it as endurance, coupled with the ability to run so quickly that when someone else stumbles, you can lift them and push them toward the finish line.

What I Left With

In sum, my Leadership in Action experience reinforced that leadership is humility, kindness, caring, and hard work. These are not merely synonyms; they are direct ties to what leadership truly is. Without the capacity to care for neighbors, even enemies, we are not leaders but narcissists. We cannot continue in a society that perpetuates such dangers. Our potential, whether measured as success or not, inspires those around us simply by existing. When we inspire others by existing, we must exist fully and allow them to do the same, passing the baton onward.

Growing up, I often felt like I occupied large spaces without filling them. Through leadership, care, and the love of the community, I have moved from merely occupying space to reshaping it—twisting, pulling, stretching, and enlarging it for others to fill. That may be the greatest thing Mexico City gave me.

Although I was not a Spanish speaker and knew little of the culture, I listened. By listening, I helped create a better Mexico City, a better Cancún, a better Mexico, and subsequently a better world. These are the wins we must focus on daily: making a better world and a better self, because the world is you and you are the world. They are both fragments and whole at the same time. I am part of what keeps this world functioning, and the world is part of what keeps me functioning. Recognizing this symbiotic relation compels me to push beyond boundaries, labels, and territories, creating new normalities across the globe.

I entered Mexico believing I was going there to make an impact. I left understanding that impact is not something one person brings to a place. It is something created within the place.

The summit is not meant for one person. It is meant for all of us.