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Sustainable Authentic Leadership Lessons from the Amazon

by
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In 1987, the United Nations' Brundtland Commission [defined sustainable leadership](#) as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

This past February, I traveled deep into the Ecuadorian Amazon with the [Pachamama Alliance](#) to immerse with members of the [Sápara Nation](#)—once comprised of 200,000 people, today fewer than 600 Sápara are left. We spoke about the imminent threats they face due to deforestation, mining and oil and gas development in the region, and climate change as well as the urgent need for sustainable leadership and what the Sápara stand for and believe in.

In this article, I would like to share two Sápara beliefs. I hope they enrich your life, stimulate reflection and provide an eye-opening perspective to sustainable leadership.

Everything is connected.

Nature has always been a source of revitalization for me. I came back from my travels feeling deeply connected to myself and to Mother Nature. But for Manari Ushigua, the community's political and spiritual leader, nature is not a place we go to. Rather, nature is part of who we are; it is inextricably linked to the experience of being human.

As we sit in a circle, with the sounds of the jungle punctuating each moment of silence that comes when he pauses between thoughts, Ushigua explains how the Western world is in a trance. He believes the West has lost its relationship with nature and with life itself, a disconnect he sees as the root of our problems. Contrary to our anthropocentric view of the world in which humans are deemed more important than other living beings, the Sápara see themselves as part of nature. For them, humans and natural environments are one and the same. This interconnectedness with nature shapes every decision the Sápara take. Ushigua explained how for every action the Sápara take, they think about the impact it will have on following generations—the next seven generations to be exact. This thinking by far exceeds the scope of the 1987 definition by the United Nation's Brundtland Commission. Imagine what a sustainable world would look like if leaders were thinking in this way.

Beyond human generations though, the Sápara also consider how the consequences of their actions will affect their natural environment. In the West, we have a tendency to think in the short run, basing our decisions on what the future will look like for us as individuals or for our direct communities. There is a lack of projection, reflection and consideration for how our decisions will impact generations to come and our natural environment. Focusing on individual gain disconnects us from our larger surroundings and ourselves, clouding our capacity to see the bigger picture. If we don't take into account the consequences of our actions and our choices, if we fail to embrace the Sápara's philosophy of interconnectedness, we risk being blinded by short-term, material results. We end up in the "trance" Ushigua described.

As an executive coach, I work with leaders on their authentic leadership through my process of integrating the [seven dimensions of leadership intelligence](#). In other words, I help leaders reconnect with parts of themselves that they had consciously or unconsciously disconnected from. I have observed how leaders who are disconnected from (parts of) themselves tend to see the world in the same way: fragmented and void of interconnected networks. This is what Ushigua calls “the trance.” On the other hand, a leader who is integrated and truly connected to their inner self tends to see an interconnected world where their choices, behaviors and actions have lasting effects.

If a leader’s authenticity is directly related to the way they view the world, then sustainable leadership needs authentic and integrated leaders who are able to see a world in which everything is connected—leaders who are willing to do the inner work.

Everything has a spirit.

If everything is interconnected, the Sápara say that everything also has a spirit. Under the thick canopy of trees, bathed in the sounds of birds and branches swaying, it was easy to feel. Ushigua explained that the spirit of trees, rivers, stones, animals and plants are equal to that of humans. The Sápara do not see themselves as more than or better than; they see themselves as equal to other living beings. It is what Ushigua called the “network of spirits” that englobes the interconnectedness of the world.

And if everything has a spirit, so do the things we create, according to the Sápara. A business, a company or an idea brought to fruition has a spirit because we are also creators of spirit. Following this logic allowed me to see how powerful we truly are and made me even more aware of the responsibility we have when creating. If we are the creators of spirits, we have the responsibility to take care of them as living beings. In this realization, I believe that leaders (myself included) can become even more conscious and more intentional.

Of course, you may be thinking, *Sure, I would also feel connected and inspired if I spent time deep in the Amazon with the Sápara.* But as I mentioned in a [previous article](#), many leaders work themselves close to burnout and take time off to disconnect, only to jump back into their old habits upon return. Taking time off is not "disconnecting;" it is a reconnection with ourselves. The state of bliss, sense of inner peace and deep learning I experienced in the Ecuadorian Amazon is something I will carry with me—a new set of strings to my bow. And this integration is key because connectedness is an integrated experience, not a break.