



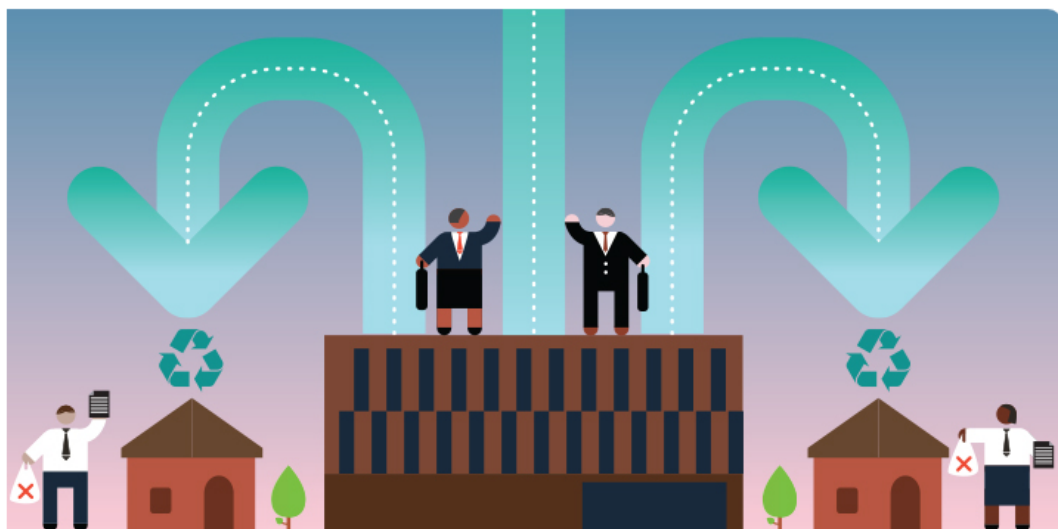
THE ERA OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

# Explorations of Leadership

IMMERSION WEEKS OPEN STUDENTS' EYES TO THE REAL-WORLD IMPLICATIONS OF THE ACTIONS THEY WILL TAKE AS LEADERS.

BY TATIANA RODRIGUEZ LEAL • APRIL 22, 2019

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**WE CAN DO** only so much in the classroom to expose students to the nuances of responsible and innovative leadership. That's why we have instituted weeklong immersion experiences for our executive MBA and MBA students at the Universidad de los Andes (UniAndes) School of Management, located in Colombia's capital city of Bogotá. Held before the program begins, these immersions send students into the field to learn firsthand about their responsibilities as leaders. For many, these experiences are the first time that they have truly considered what it means to be responsible leaders.

Last semester, for example, our MBAs spent the week before classes visiting small businesses in nearby neighborhoods. Students worked with business owners to learn how

their businesses are being affected by the forces of gentrification and modernization, as well as to develop innovations that could improve their operations from a responsible leadership perspective.

For our most recent immersion week, held in January, we took our EMBA cohort of 26 students to Cartagena, a coastal city in northern Colombia. While there, they delved into the challenges of the plastics industry and imagined new ways to mitigate the negative impact of single-use plastics.

Through our immersion weeks, we can combine into one learning experience the three pillars of our school's mission: innovation, sustainability, and leadership.

## RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP

We framed our visit to Cartagena as an open innovation exercise, delivered in partnership with a large plastic manufacturer. Students learned about the life cycle of plastic, as well as the environmental impact of tourism on the region. They formed three- and four-member teams to design innovations that address the problem of trash in the region.

The schedule for the week was packed, with each day starting at 7 in the morning and often not ending until 11 at night. During the day, students made site visits, including those to a large plastic producer, a nonprofit recycling operation, and a luxury hotel striving to adopt sustainable practices. In the evenings, they attended classes, participated in debriefing sessions, and worked on team projects. Four faculty members coordinated the experience—I taught content related to leadership, and the other three professors taught sustainability, innovation, and communication.

For several site visits, students traveled to two islands near Cartagena. On Tierra Bomba, they observed how the island community was coping with an intense trash problem. Every day, the tide washes plastic and rubbish onto the shore, and the community has few formal mechanisms to manage the issue. Students met with a local recycler, who emphasized how proud he was of his job; he told them that he encourages young people in the community to follow in his footsteps rather than pursue fishing, the more prominent occupation on the island. Our students weren't just surprised to hear such sentiment from a man working in recycling. They realized how important it is for them to find such

meaning in their own work.

Next, they traveled to Baru, where they toured the luxury hotel. While they were struck by the stark contrast between the hotel and the less affluent community around it, they were impressed by the hotel's efforts to contribute to the community through its foundation.

Students also heard from a representative of Baru's city council, who told them of his mission to improve the quality of life on the island. One student appreciated how the council member conveyed "an awareness of the fact that he can only achieve his aims when coordinating with other stakeholders." The student believed that awareness was an indication that the council member was "a successful and authentic social leader."

At the end of the week, students presented their ideas for innovation to the plastic manufacturing company. One team imagined a water recollection system made completely out of plastic bottles. Other ideas included a system to track the life cycle of plastic materials and an educational theme park that would teach visitors about plastics and the environment in fun and interactive ways.

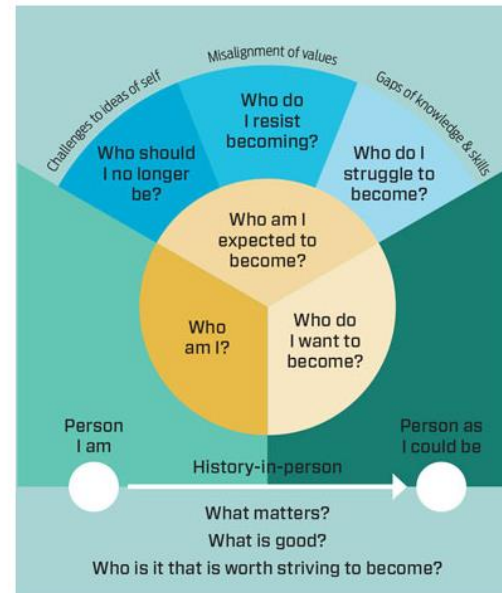
## LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP

Our immersion weeks provide a foundation for students' coursework during the semester. In Cartagena, for example, they learned how others have established their identities as leaders. Then, in my classroom, they explored their own identities, set goals for themselves as leaders, and tracked how they can reach these goals over time.

At UniAndes, we refer to this process as the Leadership Compass. Our Compass emphasizes "five spheres of responsibility": to *self*, to the *team*, to the *organization*, to *industry*, and to the *ecosystem* (society and the environment). At every stage of the program, we encourage students to "lead with a responsible and innovative mindset."

As part of this process, in the first week of my leadership course, I present students with a tool that I have developed called the Identity Formation Cycle (shown below). The tool is designed to help managers identify the barriers they face in their leadership development related to three areas: their self-understanding, their knowledge and skills, and their personal values. It also inspires them to reflect on who they are now and what kind of leaders they want to become, before they explore ways to overcome the barriers that

could prevent them from reaching their goals.



The Identity Formation Cycle Tatiana Rodríguez Leal uses students' experiences during UniAndes' immersion weeks as a basis for their leadership development throughout the semester. The framework shown above, which Leal developed, helps them identify and overcome the barriers they face as leaders, so they can move from who they are today to who they want to become. (© Tatiana Rodríguez Leal)

## EXPERIENCE IN OUR DNA

Our immersion weeks are now recurring parts of our MBA and EMBA programs.

Although they are still relatively new—in place for only two years—we want to make this kind of experiential learning part of the DNA of our entire program. Only by going out into the field can our students leave their comfort zones and gain a deeper understanding of the impact they can have on communities.

As one student put it, the immersion "made me think outside the box, recognize that my work has an impact in a much larger sphere than I had realized, and [understand] that with the courage to take risks you can have an impact in the lives of many."

Designing experiential learning is not easy; my colleagues and I work for two months to prepare each immersion week. I know how difficult it is to let go of the controlled environment of the classroom, where we can have our set assignments. But the comforting stability of the classroom setting is also its biggest limitation. Even when classrooms can be reconfigured for different activities, it's not easy to move students out of their conventional expectations of learning in that environment.

That's why I hope our school will do even more to integrate experiential learning throughout the program. Perhaps we could make our class sessions longer to allow time to take field trips or transition to different activities. Or, we could allow students to earn course credit for their extracurricular work with local nonprofits or on their own startups.

Our immersion weeks have been a great start. We know these experiences better prepare our students to face ambiguity and complexity. In the field, students gain life experiences that provide an ethical and values-driven framework for what it means to be business leaders—and they develop the courage to tackle the wicked problems we face today.

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*This article originally appeared in BizEd's May/June 2019 issue. Please send questions, comments, or letters to the editor to [bized.editors@aacsb.edu](mailto:bized.editors@aacsb.edu).*