

Two islands, many lessons

Description

Fourteen years ago, I was in my final semester of graduate school at the University of Puerto Rico—Mayagüez, completing my research project. I chose to conduct a self-study. Maybe it was a bit unconventional, but then again, I'm not typically "conventional" and, it proved to be very transformative for me. I wasn't seeking to be self-promoting or indulgent; I wanted to better understand myself and my identities in relation to the world around me. And it was a way to process the amazing adventures I'd just lived.

A few years prior, I had been living and working in Mauritius, a tropical island in the Indian Ocean, as an American Accent and Culture Trainer in a customer service call center. It was the height of the outsourcing boom, and my role was to conduct training, listen to calls, note mispronunciations, and offer 1:1 feedback. Around the office, my American passport made me a novelty. U.S. pop culture and accents were admired, and my presence was met with curiosity and I felt welcomed- I quickly gained my Mauritian "family".

Puerto Rico was different. I quickly became aware of how complicated my presence was on the island, particularly as someone from the mainland U.S. At times, I was reminded, (sometimes bluntly), that my being there carried a history and weight I hadn't fully understood before. (Admittedly, I hadn't understood at all.) It was difficult, but it forced me to reflect deeply on what I represented, and **how context and history shape perceptions**. Along the way, I gained a profound respect for Puerto Rico's history and the deep pride its people hold in their culture and identity. And Puerto Rico still holds a very special place in my heart.

In between these two experiences, I traveled solo through parts of Africa and the Middle East, journeys that stretched my independence and deepened my awareness of how I showed up in unfamiliar spaces.

The contrasts between these lived experiences pushed me to reflect on my own identity as a U.S. American. What did I represent? How was I thinking critically about the ways I showed up in different contexts, or how others might perceive me?

For my final project, I studied the blog I'd kept while living in Mauritius. Early entries were filled with observations about "weird" differences; months later, those same things had become part of everyday life. The differences of my new culture became my new normal; those things I thought "weird" had become wonderful. And in the end, repatriating back to the U.S. felt foreign, because *I had changed*. Living abroad opened my mind, and gave me the rare opportunity to see my country, and myself, from the outside! a whole new perspective!

Those experiences, paired with the hours I invested in my graduate research, gave me my first tools in what I now recognize as Cultural Intelligence (CQ). CQ is a leadership competency that allows us not only to approach differences with open-mindedness, understanding, and compassion, but also to adapt our behaviors, bridge perspectives, and remain resilient in ambiguity. It also allows us to understand

and consider how context and history shape different perceptions- even between folks from the same country. At its best, CQ helps leaders transform cultural differences into opportunities for deeper trust, stronger collaboration, and greater innovation. And with all that, comes greater results.

My time in Mauritius, Puerto Rico, and beyond gave me more than memories; it gave me a foundation for how I show up as a leader and coach today.

Category

1. Cultivating Trust
2. Cultural Intelligence
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Tags

1. CQ
2. curiosity
3. empathy
4. leadership
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6. respect

Date Created

2025/08/26

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