

## Leadership-in-Action Reflection: Laying the Groundwork for JA Worldwide's Launch in Bangladesh - Youth Empowerment at Scale

### **Introduction**

My Leadership-in-Action experience involved supporting JA Worldwide's delegation in their inaugural visit to Dhaka, Bangladesh, with the crucial goal of launching Junior Achievement's impactful programs in the country. My role was multifaceted, encompassing proactive organization of the trip, managing logistics, and facilitating key stakeholder engagements. This initiative was profoundly significant as it aimed to empower Bangladeshi youth through entrepreneurship, financial literacy, and work readiness programs, aligning with Nobel Laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus's galvanizing vision of "three zeroes": zero poverty, zero unemployment, and zero net carbon emissions. This report will explore the challenges faced, the leadership skills applied and developed, ethical considerations, and insights gained regarding collaboration and team dynamics.

### **• Challenge(s) Faced:**

During the delegation's visit, several interconnected challenges emerged, highlighting the complexity of establishing a global NGO in a new context.

- **Navigating the Local NGO Operational and Legal Landscape:** A primary challenge was understanding the intricate "dynamics of launching and operating an NGO in Bangladesh at a deeper level". The delegation learned that administrative processes can be "very burdensome", and there are complexities around legal entity options (e.g., Limited Company, Trust, INGO, or a Society under a local NGO), each with specific requirements for foreign participation,

governance, and tax implications. Notably, the Advanced Income Tax (AIT) dynamic, where banks automatically deduct tax upon receipt of foreign funds, presented a unique financial consideration.

- **Impact hoped for:** The aim was to establish a sustainable operational model that would allow JA to effectively serve Bangladeshi youth without undue legal or financial hurdles.

- **Approach & Learning:** The approach involved extensive consultations with legal experts like Anita Ghazi Rahman and Azima Chowdhury, who provided invaluable insights into the various entity options and their implications. We also met with existing NGOs like Phulki and BYLC to learn from their operational models. This taught me the critical importance of thorough legal and operational due diligence and the necessity of tailoring global strategies to specific local regulatory environments.

- **Addressing the Youth Skills Gap and Unemployment:** Meetings revealed a significant national issue: an "oversupply of university graduates who are unfit for local workforce" due to a "mismatch between graduates' skills and what industry needs". While overall unemployment isn't high, youth unemployment is a major concern. There's also a cultural "fixation in Bangladesh higher education around credentials, at the expense of skills training". Furthermore, despite girls being "statistically well-educated," there's a "huge drop-off when it comes to workforce employment" due to various cultural and other reasons.

- **Impact hoped for:** JA's proven programs in entrepreneurship, financial literacy, and work readiness are a "natural fit" to directly address this skills gap and empower youth for employment and innovation. The goal was to provide practical tools and experiences to make young people more employable and entrepreneurial.

▪ **Approach & Learning:** The delegation engaged with educational institutions (BRAC University, IUB, Sunbeams, Sir John Wilson School) and industry leaders (BDJobs, BRAC Bank, Standard Chartered) to confirm these needs and explore potential collaborations for program implementation and co-branded credentials. This experience underscored that understanding the root causes ("Why?") of societal challenges, beyond surface-level statistics, is crucial for designing impactful interventions.

• **Leadership Skills Applied and Developed:**

This experience provided a rich environment for applying and developing various leadership skills:

◦ **Communication:** My role involved coordinating communications with various stakeholders, from scheduling meetings to drafting follow-up emails. I honed my ability to articulate JA's mission and value proposition effectively across diverse audiences, ensuring clarity and cultural appropriateness.

◦ **Problem-Solving:** Over the duration of six weeks, I was continuously engaged in proactive problem-solving. This developed my capacity for anticipating logistical challenges and finding practical solutions under time constraints.

◦ **Teamwork:** I worked closely with JA Worldwide CEO Asheesh Advani, CFO Adnan Bokhari and the JA Asia Pacific COO Kirk Kenny, ensuring all aspects of the visit ran smoothly. This reinforced the importance of clear task allocation and mutual support within a high-stakes team environment.

◦ **Cultural Humility:**

**1. Recognizing and challenging cultural biases:** The delegation consciously sought to "understand the dynamics" rather than impose. We listened to insights about the "aspirational" nature of university degrees in Bangladesh and the cultural factors affecting women's workforce participation. This encouraged me to reflect on my own assumptions about educational and career pathways, recognizing that what works in one cultural context may not directly translate to another.

**2. Engaging with diverse perspectives and cultures:** We engaged with an incredibly diverse group of leaders – from corporate executives to educators, entrepreneurs, and legal experts – each offering unique insights into the Bangladeshi context. This involved active listening to their concerns (e.g., Sunbeams' concerns about hidden costs and time commitment) and specific suggestions (e.g., Daffodil's ecosystem for reaching different groups). I observed the delegation's openness to exploring multiple "pathways" for entry into Bangladesh, demonstrating a flexible and respectful approach.

**3. Demonstrating empathy, active listening, and self-awareness in cross-cultural interactions:** The "Thank You Draft" emphasized learning about "the incredible work you are doing" and gaining a "deeper level" of understanding, reflecting empathy and active listening. My role in coordinating and documenting these interactions required me to be acutely aware of cultural nuances in communication and protocol, ensuring respect was conveyed in every interaction. For instance, understanding the local preference for in-person meetings while accommodating virtual follow-ups for those unable to meet, demonstrated flexibility and cultural sensitivity.

• **Ethical Considerations:**

The project raised several important ethical considerations, primarily centered on responsible NGO establishment and partnership:

- **Ethical Dilemmas:**

- **Compliance and Financial Transparency:** The issue of "Advanced Income Tax (AIT)" deducted from foreign funds posed a practical challenge for financial planning and transparency. Ensuring that JA's operations would be fully compliant with Bangladeshi laws while maximizing resources for youth programs was paramount.

- **Partnership vs. Independent Entity:** The decision of whether to license the JA brand to an existing local NGO or establish a new independent entity involved weighing the benefits of local integration against maintaining JA's global brand integrity and operational control. Ethical considerations included ensuring fair terms of collaboration and shared vision with potential partners.

- **Ensuring Program Quality and Impact:** One potential partner & donor emphasized "end-use monitoring (evaluation framework) a must-have for any collaboration". This highlighted the ethical responsibility to ensure programs deliver measurable and genuine impact to beneficiaries, avoiding "program washing."

- **Addressing Them:** The delegation addressed these by seeking comprehensive legal advice on the optimal entity structure. They explored various partnership models, including collaboration with BRAC University and potential brand licensing. The emphasis on impact measurement was incorporated into discussions with potential funders.

- **Lessons on Ethical Leadership:** This taught me that ethical leadership in global development requires rigorous due diligence, transparency in financial dealings, and a commitment to genuine impact over expediency. It means proactively addressing potential

conflicts of interest and ensuring that all operational choices are aligned with the organization's mission and the well-being of the community served.

• **Collaboration and Team Dynamics:**

My interactions with both internal team members and external stakeholders were central to the success of the trip.

◦ **Internal Dynamics:** Within the JA delegation, there was a strong sense of shared purpose and clear roles, with Mr. Asheesh Advani leading the vision and strategy, with valuable inputs from other delegation members, and myself supporting logistical execution and information gathering. This efficient internal dynamic allowed the delegation to maximize their time and engagements.

◦ **External Interactions:** We engaged with an extensive network of Bangladeshi leaders, including Surayya Haque of Phulki, Osman Dhali of YY Ventures, K.M. Hasan Ripon of Daffodil, Munize Manzur of Sunbeams School, Tania Noor of Envolead, Anita Ghazi Rahman of Legal Circle, Professor M. Tamim of IUB, Jakirul Islam of Brac Bank, Professor Samia Huq of BRAC University, Fahim Mashroor of BDJobs, Bitopi Chowdhury of Standard Chartered, Ejaj Ahmed of BYLC and more. These interactions were characterized by mutual respect and a shared desire to equip young people.

◦ **Lessons Learned:** I learned that effective collaboration hinges on clearly articulated goals and a deep appreciation for local expertise. Leveraging local contacts (like my own, and those shared by others such as Saif Kamal) was indispensable for securing high-level meetings and gaining nuanced perspectives. These experiences reinforced that building strong relationships, characterized by trust and a common vision, is the bedrock of successful initiatives. The unified

theme of Dr. Yunus's "three zeroes" greatly facilitated these collaborations, providing a shared language and aspiration.

## **Conclusion**

This Leadership-in-Action experience in Bangladesh was immensely insightful, revealing both the immense entrepreneurial spirit and youth potential within the country and the significant structural challenges in education, employment, and NGO operations. Key lessons learned include the absolute necessity of cultural humility and adaptive strategies when entering new markets, the criticality of robust legal and ethical frameworks, and the power of diverse, collaborative partnerships to drive sustainable impact.

This experience will profoundly influence my future leadership practice by instilling an even greater emphasis on active listening, empathetic engagement, and the co-creation of solutions with local communities. It underscores that true leadership is not about imposing solutions but about facilitating empowerment by understanding context, building trust, and fostering shared ownership of transformative visions like Dr. Yunus's "three zeroes." I am energized by the journey to bring JA to Bangladesh, knowing that we are "just getting started".