

Creating Spaces Where Others Lead: A Journey in Japan

~ Bhavya Diwakar

When my original plans for my summer 2026 LiA changed, I found myself frantically searching for another path. I spent a week cold-emailing organizations across Asia, desperately hoping something would work out.

I didn't have a plan. I just knew I had to find something. Then I found a blog post on the Laidlaw Scholars Network about an Oxford scholar who had interned at Wake Up Japan. Something about the mission resonated. I reached out to the founder, Yoichi Suzuki, on what felt like a long shot. He responded quickly. He said yes.

That moment of desperation turned into one of the best decisions I could have made. Looking back now, that setback was my first real leadership lesson. Leadership isn't a smooth linear climb. It's about adaptability, resilience, and the willingness to completely change course when circumstances demand it. It's about staying committed to what matters even when the original plan falls apart.

My six weeks at Wake Up Japan in Hayama, Kanagawa, taught me that true leadership is about creating spaces where others discover their own power. It's about listening more than speaking. It's about believing that ordinary people have the capacity to transform their worlds. These insights have fundamentally shaped how I understand myself as a leader and the type of change-maker I want to become.

Understanding My Leadership Strengths

My core strengths are listening, intellectual curiosity, and adaptability—all shaped by living across three countries. Listening isn't passive for me. It's sitting with someone, genuinely trying to understand their perspective without rushing to fix or convince them. At WUJ, when I facilitated dialogues about gender inequality, I could have lectured. Instead, I listened. Through that listening, I learned that many young people don't believe they have agency to create change. They see problems but feel powerless to act.

My second strength is intellectual curiosity. I need to understand problems from multiple angles. Having lived in India, the USA, and Japan, I've seen how gender inequality, political disengagement, and systemic injustice show up differently across contexts. This drives me to ask why repeatedly, to dig deeper into the cultural narratives that shape people's beliefs.

Finally, adaptability. The visa rejections and sudden pivot to Japan taught me that leadership requires flexibility and problem-solving. These setbacks weren't interruptions. They were tests showing me that real leadership happens when you work with what you have, not waiting for perfect circumstances.

My Personal Leadership Method

My leadership is shaped by my identity as someone who has lived across cultures. I was born in India, moved to the USA as a young student, and this summer immersed myself in Japan. These transitions taught me that cultural perspective profoundly affects how you understand problems.

As a woman in STEM, I'm driven by questions about justice. I believe leadership isn't about individual heroics. It's about creating conditions where others discover their own power.

At WUJ, Yoichi demonstrated this. He didn't tell young people what to do. He created spaces where they could wrestle with difficult questions and shift their beliefs about their capacity to act. That model aligned with what I value most: leadership is relational, requiring genuine care for people's development and belief in their potential even when they don't yet believe in themselves.

Reflection on My LiA Experience and Leadership Learning

The most important learning from my Critical Moment Dialogue came when I stopped trying to convince students they had power and started listening to why they felt powerless. That shift changed everything. I learned that Japanese society frames social problems as personal responsibility, not systemic issues. This framework shapes how young people understand their own agency. It wasn't about me proving them wrong. It was about creating safety for them to question their own assumptions.

This immersion taught me skills I couldn't have learned in a classroom: deep listening without judgment, creating psychological safety in conversations, helping people see connections between their personal experiences and systemic patterns. These emerged through being in an unfamiliar environment where I couldn't rely on my usual frameworks.

Living in Hayama's close-knit community, embedded with Yoichi and the WUJ team, I learned that understanding a culture requires time, humility, and willingness to be confused repeatedly. I also learned that my own cultural perspectives shape what I see. By recognizing those biases, I

could engage more authentically with the people I met. This is something I'll carry forward into all my leadership work.

Leadership Concepts: Servant Leadership and Dialogue-Based Change

Two concepts emerged as central to my understanding. First, servant leadership—the idea that leaders serve others' growth, not exercise power over them. Yoichi embodied this. He didn't micromanage. He asked questions that helped me figure out what mattered. He created space for authentic contribution. He believed in me even when I was uncertain. That's the kind of leader I want to become.

Second, dialogue-based change. Deep social change happens through sustained dialogue, not quick fixes. When people feel heard and respected, when they see connections between their experiences and systemic patterns, mindsets shift. That's where real change begins.

Case Study: Learning from Yoichi Suzuki

Yoichi Suzuki, founder of Wake Up Japan, represents the leader I aspire to become. He doesn't have all the answers or command attention. But he's built an organization where everyone feels their voice matters. He leads through questions. When I was uncertain, he asked: "What did you notice? What were people not saying?" This forced me to think deeper. He also navigates complexity thoughtfully, engaging directly with cultural tensions around activism in Japan rather than avoiding them. He respects people's capacity to grapple with difficult ideas. That's the model of leadership I want to embody.

Vision of Myself as a Global Change Leader

I see myself working at the intersection of social change, technology, and leadership development. I want to build systems that help people discover their power to create change. The UN SDGs frame my work—particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

My next steps: deepen my work at The Women's Network, moving beyond events to building real pathways for women in tech. I'm exploring product management roles with organizations focused on social impact. I want to understand how products can help people see themselves and possibilities differently.

Long-term, I want to lead organizations doing this work at scale, particularly internationally. But WUJ taught me that scale doesn't always mean bigger. Sometimes it means deeper. Sometimes it means helping one community transform how they see themselves. This work requires patience, genuine relationships, and belief in people's capacity to change. My role is to create conditions for others to lead.

Conclusion

The pivot from Australia to Japan wasn't planned. But it revealed something important about me as a leader: I ask questions, listen deeply, believe that ordinary people have extraordinary power when they work together. I'm shaped by living across cultures, and that shapes how I see problems.

My time at Wake Up Japan crystallized this. Leadership is about creating spaces, not giving answers. It's about helping people discover their own power. It's about believing in change even when it's slow and relational.

I'm carrying these insights forward. I'm committed to listening more than speaking, creating spaces rather than taking center stage, and believing in people's capacity to transform their worlds. That's the leader I want to become.

Bibliography

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