

## Introduction

From 15 – 25 August 2014 I was a participant in the International Leadership Forum organized by the Science and Technology Leadership Association (STeLA). Since 2007 this International Leadership Forum is organized at different universities around the world. I participated together with 11 Chinese, 9 Japanese, 8 Dutch, 3 Norwegians, 2 Indonesians, 2 French, 2 Indians, 2 Pakistani, 2 Americans, 1 Canadian, 1 Filipino, 1 Nigerian, 1 Guatemalan, 1 Thai and 1 Austrian – all studying some subject in Science and Technology at MIT, Harvard, Stanford, University of Tokyo, Beijing University of Technology, University of Amsterdam or Delft University of Technology.

## Forum Structure and Content

The sessions in the STeLA leadership Forum build upon a leadership model developed by Professor Deborah Ancona at the MIT Sloan School of Management; the *distributed leadership* model. According to this model, a leader aids the transformation from the *current reality* to the *desired future*; the space in between, which we call the *creative tension*. In order to fulfill this transformation, the capabilities a good leader should have are divided into four: **sensemaking, relating, visioning** and **inventing**. But, expecting a leader to master all four is highly unrealistic. We do not expect a single leader to master all these four, but a leader should be extraordinarily good at at least one of these four, and has to know how to surround him or herself by people who master the other capabilities to make up for his or her flaws. This model of leadership is also described in the book *The Fifth Discipline*, by Peter M. Senge (the “STeLA Bible”).

The first four days of the forum were centered around leadership sessions to get to know these four capabilities. All four capabilities were explained in theoretical sessions, complemented by playing a game that completely clarified the importance of the capability. At the end of each day a reflection session of 2

hours took place, in order to reflect on to what extent we already practiced the capabilities.

## **Personal experience**

My experience with the STeLA Leadership Forum was very positive. It was great to meet so many people from all over the world and to get the chance to become so close to them in such a short period of time. The cultural differences, the contrasting opinions and the different learning goals each individual had for this forum made the group of forum participants extremely diverse. But at the same time, the likemindedness and the full determination seen in all participants to each contribute their part to society was striking. This made the group of STeLA participants a very interesting and unique group. Although the programme was intense, we started at 8AM every morning with a schedule lasting until 10PM, I found myself every evening wanting to stay in the common areas to talk and share as many thoughts with as many people there. This feature made STeLA a very special experience in itself!

I also took several lessons from the leadership courses. From the sessions on **relating** I took the lesson that the situation we can see with the bare eye is not the situation that we are most likely to make changes in. We need to dive deeper into someone's mind and find the mental model that underlies it. Also the 4 player model opened my eyes about possible roles people have in teams. After learning this model, I could inspect my own team performance in a more structured way. Very useful! The part on **sense making** is something that appealed to me as a Logic student. The insight that we can abstract away from details in a social situation and identify key factors and how they influence each other, resembles the vision that correlations that can be displayed in Logic and this also in a sense in Game Theory (in this case maybe even more abstracted versions of reality). The tool of system maps, though, apparently often used in Dynamic systems studies, was very fun to learn and practice on many different real life situations! The visioning part was also a lot of fun. Not because the theory was very complicated or completely new or unknown, but because this session forced me to think about my life vision and talk about this with others. I

started off with as my personal vision that I want to positively influence society (mainly the sectors of education, healthcare and innovation), but be a very happy, loving, caring and sunny person at the same time. I was touched to find out that there were many others in the room with a similar vision, and that I ended up in a group of 8 people with as our shared vision: 'Make the world a better place – but don't forget to smile!!'. Just amazing! Finally, the session on inventing was especially fun because I would not have described myself as a creative person. But, once the blockage of judgment and deterrance of possibly 'bad' ideas was taken away, we could all let our creativity flow and for myself, I found out that I can be creative after all. This was a lot of fun (although the prototyping involving tinkering and handicraft are still not completely my cup of tea!).

Next to four days of these leadership sessions, we also had a site visit to GENENTECH (the first biotechnology company) in San Francisco and a group project that involved the design of a serious game to raise awareness in society for the future of Personal Genomics and healthcare. The site visit was a great way to see the production of medicinal products on such a large scale, and with such a revolutionary technique as DNA-technology. Also, the senior director of technical development of Genentech (Tina Larson) gave a talk to our group. This was great and inspiring! She was a very inspiring person and she also told us many interesting things about her company.

The group project, to me, was one of the highlights. We audited many interesting lectures by Stanford professors on Educational Gaming and we could put our analytical, creative and leadership skills into practice in the development and design of the educational game. A very valuable experience!

All in all, I think I can say this experience has provided me insights, skills and experiences that will definitely be very useful in my future, in my career and in my studies.