

## Leadership Journeys

by Karen Ayas

Annual journeys took the regional executives of a multinational food business, ranging from top country officials to marketers, supply chain managers, staff, and young leaders, to various locales in the region. They traveled to Sarawak, Malaysia to see devastated teak rainforests and meet the displaced Penan people; to Guilin, China, to meet villagers and understand their everyday needs; throughout India to study communal life and leadership; and to Sri Lanka to engage in service learning and provide tsunami relief.

In India they spent two to three days in ashrams, spiritual centers, micro-enterprises, and charities learning about community life. There they tended to the needy, offered what help they could, and marveled that the swamis, dabawhallas, spiritual leaders, and community entrepreneurs could accomplish so much with so few resources. In a desert campsite, for three days thereafter, they shared and digested their experiences, and pondered the meaning and implications for their own leadership, their leadership group, and their business.

One intent was to open executives' eyes to economic, social, and environmental conditions in the region and to thereby inform their company's business strategies and social investments. A second was to expose them to new ways of being and working together to look afresh at their own organization and culture. A third was to stimulate their development as leaders.

We recorded countless references to consciousness-raising and personal transformation during these journeys. Many leaders, for example, talked of moments of self-discovery and of encountering their "true selves." They spoke of deeply connecting with the people they met and with one another. There was also talk of gaining insight into and being moved by the economic, social, and environmental conditions that they encountered. Finally, many leaders reported sensing a new mission on the journeys and concluded that they individually and collectively needed to find a "higher purpose" in their business lives. "Truly, this is a soul searching journey," said one leader upon reflection, "it is a journey of self-connecting, connecting with others, and connecting with the universe."

### Design of Journeys

The journeys were tribal experiences: leaders typically woke at dawn, dressed in local garb, exercised or meditated together, hiked from place to place, ate communally, swapped stories by the campfire, and slept alongside one another in tents. Daily experiences included meeting monks or a martial arts master, talking with local children or village elders, or simply reveling in the sounds and sights of nature. Considerable time was spent along the way in personal and collective reflection. The journeys had multi-sensory activities and experiences that engaged the head, body, heart, and spirit. They were designed to include multi-level experiences with solo, small group, and communal moments. In addition, there were elements of discovery, contemplation, and serendipity

along the way. The travel was to places of historical, cultural or mystical significance with the explicit intent of seeing the world with fresh eyes, seeing the self afresh, and sharing the experience of being together with fellow travelers—not unlike a pilgrimage.

### **Organizing Principles:**

- Multi-layered experiences engaging the head, heart, body, and spirit
- Meaningful encounters with nature and indigenous people
- Learning through community service
- Continuous reflection on these experiences

**Multi-layered Experiences.** The Asian journeys were multi-layered, multi-sensory experiences that engaged the head, heart, body, and spirit. It is crucial to give leaders the time, space, and resources to integrate these manifold experiences over the course of a journey.

**Nature as Teacher.** The journeys took the leaders to different landscapes and natural environments. It helps to spend some deep and meaningful time in nature because, as countless sages and poets remind us, nature is a rich milieu for connecting deeply to the self and the cosmos. On these journeys, the experience of connecting to nature produced, for many, a feeling of “deep ecology,” founded on the notion that all life’s systems are interrelated.

**Service Learning.** All of the journeys involved community service of some sort. The aim of visiting the people of Asia was not simply to benchmark or merely open eyes to life in the region: it was also to cultivate a deep feeling and profound respect. Community service teaches people about the world around them and about helping relationships. The leaders were prepped to be mindful of assumptions, to be open to what they might experience, and to thoughtfully reflect on the lessons for themselves and the business.

**Continuous Reflection.** Personal journaling and reflection, along with individual and collective sense-making, help on this front. Group reflections add breadth to individual insights and can spark new thoughts. Listening to and being a part of collective sharing helps people to better interpret their own thoughts and feelings and give voice to their understanding of leadership. These journeys are not a “retreat” from business life. On the contrary, they help leaders to see how their business can connect better to the larger world.