

Being Adaptable and Adaptive in Malaysia: Atlas Corps

Chapter 2.0

[huffingtonpost.com/entry/atlas-corps-chapter-2-being-adaptable-and-adaptive_us_5a1d784ee4b05df68936d065](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/atlas-corps-chapter-2-being-adaptable-and-adaptive_us_5a1d784ee4b05df68936d065)

Dr. Joshua W. Walker , Contributor Global bridge building scholar, practitioner and strategic communicator

11/28/2017

Contribution from Selma Bardacki



Selma Bardacki

With President Bill Clinton

11 years ago in India, Scott Beale was inspired by the region's talent to found Atlas Corps, an international network for social change makers. Today, as the first Atlas Corps Fellow serving in Asia, I'm beginning to understand why. Asia is an inspiring and a dynamic region in all its differences, strong identities, powerful countries and economies, ancient cultures and amazing people. Since I moved to Malaysia, I have been tuned into new technological trends, the rise of smart cities, new startups, methods of sustainable economic growth, and forms of clean energy.

I can't help but compare these exciting and inspiring developments to the impractical and polarized political discourse in the U.S. and Turkey. Indeed, after a month in Malaysia, I'm learning how my past experiences are instrumental in coloring how I view and adjust to life here. It was cool taking a selfie with President Bill Clinton or talking about social justice and refugee aid work with Justice Sotomayor. Yet only now am I starting to understand

how pivotal my experience in DC was for developing my personal and professional skills and introducing me to a powerful global network of like-minded individuals.

After serving as an Atlas Corps Fellow once, I have the confidence to view myself as part of that network, as a social change leader who can adapt and humbly help on local and international levels. Working with my fellow Fellows from all over Asia on social issues and best practices gave me a preview of the innovation, passion, and hardworking people I have found here. My Atlas Corps chapter 1 is what enables me to write my chapter 2, in a new country, a new region, and a new role.

Atlas Corps and my host organization, The Center for Asia Leadership (CALI), share a common vision of improving the world through leadership development, empowerment, and exchange. CALI is building Asia's future by empowering tomorrow's leaders, and helping them to develop their personal and professional skills to meet global, regional, and local challenges. It is currently working in over 20 countries, providing a unique platform and emerging as an important resource center.

Why Is Leadership Important?

Most recently, I was lucky to benefit from one of CALI's programs, a three-day leadership workshop facilitated by Professor Dean Williams from the Harvard Kennedy School. In addition to teaching, Professor Williams has spent his career consulting and guiding political and corporate leaders around the world. Samuel Kim, the Founder and President of CALI, facilitated alongside Professor Williams, and the two leaders brought globally conscious perspectives as we learned about adaptive challenges and leadership.

In this new, globalized environment, this framework on adaptive leadership is an important tool for us to deal with complex challenges that humanity faces today. An adaptive challenge is a complicated problem with often-unclear components, and our interconnectedness can spark, catalyze, or compound these problems. After all, as Thomas Friedman mentions in *The World is Flat*, globalization has its positive and negative attributes.

Peaceful environments are not immune to global conflicts and injustices, and we need new forms of leadership to mobilize people to overcome our common challenges. For example, global social media has become a new tool for terrorist organizations in recruiting sympathizers around the world. The U.S. State Department initiated some programs to counter these extremist narratives on social media. Meanwhile, the same social media and new technologies have mobilized people who are living under oppressive regimes to share their struggles and seek support globally.

Whether you're looking at a challenge in your own community, dealing with intolerant political environments, or trying to collaborate between nation states, we need adaptive leaders that inspire people to explore root causes, collaborate, and find innovative solutions. We need more leaders or change agents to think like an artist, as Professor Williams described, to push boundaries, see differently, be creative, and change people's perspective of the world.

My Real-Life Adaptive Leaders

Learning about adaptive leadership made me realize how Atlas Corps Fellows embody its principles. Professor Williams mentioned that leadership is a process that needs to be developed by individuals. These individuals must be ready to step out their comfort zone and look for opportunities to expand their perspective, share with others, and enjoy more diversity. For me, Atlas Corps Fellows *are* the ones sailing in uncharted waters with courage, knowledge, and most importantly, open hearts and minds. They welcome unknowns as an opportunity to find the best solutions.

Subscribe to The Morning Email.

Wake up to the day's most important news.

Another crucial leadership pillar from the workshop, which Atlas Corps Fellows possess, is the ability to zoom in and out when we are dealing with problems. Local voices are able to see internal dynamics, sides, or players of an issue. When they meet with other global change makers and seize international opportunities, they have the ability to adopt a global perspective and follow recent, pertinent trends. They have a chance to analyze what is going on in the background, what might be some larger factors influencing their local problem.

A third important principle of adaptive leadership is developing a network of internal change agents and cultivating a global mindset. Atlas Corps Fellows garner strength and perspective from this globally diverse network of social change leaders. This network and mindset allows them to easily adapt to new challenges while remaining aware and sensitive to complexities. They know the importance of engaging people from different sides, crossing boundaries, and building bridges through understanding. They help one another, exchange resources, and promote one another's issues. They understand and respect difference while cultivating a global mindset.

Meeting Real-Life Adaptive Challenges

And according to Professor Williams, a new mindset is exactly what we need in this “crazy and fractured world.” The professor's framework has helped me think about the challenges I've worked on in a new way. For example, Professor Williams mentioned the importance of starting a movement if gatekeepers block your playground. During my Atlas Corps Fellowship in DC, I helped my supervisor Steve Wozencraft with his vision for a movement of national awareness and advocacy around criminal justice reform.

I understand even better now why Steve worked hard to build coalitions and bring together diverse groups around this issue—as an adaptive challenge, criminal justice requires a broad perspective that addresses its varying factors, including criminalized poverty, poor mental health treatment, low income, and racism. Confronting mass incarceration in the U.S. requires bi-partisan leadership and multi-layered solutions. I witnessed such leadership listening to various state governors, ones who are looking at the root causes of crimes rather than strengthening punitive laws, and trying to influence community behavior rather than imposing harsh regulations.

The mass influx of refugees is another adaptive challenge I've worked on. Turkey has been working to bring this issue to the world stage via the United Nations and European Union. Integration of these refugees into their host countries is a challenge for governments; we need to meet this challenge instead of waiting for an uncertain peace to arrive in their country. Collaborative and innovative integration programs can build trust between communities and avoid potential tension between refugees and locals, especially given the rise in xenophobia and scapegoating that immigrants and refugees face in difficult times. Adaptive leadership around this issue includes building regional coalitions, exchanging best practices, and empowering local efforts to improve life for refugees.

Other adaptive challenges include the rise of extremism; an increasing number of terrorist attacks; polarization within and between countries; and a rise of populism and intolerance. Sometimes, our decisions are shaped not by our experiences, but rather, our assumptions or beliefs. Leaders who have capacity to bring people together and find common ground can meet these challenges, and Professor Williams emphasized that the fusion of diverse groups leads to the most creative solutions.

Adaptive challenges are large and uncertain, but Professor Williams has advised us to “keep the fire burning.” I would add to this advice by saying, “keep the fire burning with the people who help you keep your fire burning.” These are the people who will support you, challenge you to think positively, encourage you to step out of your comfort zone, and leverage their privileges to help others. This is how I keep going every day; I am grateful to be among these inspiring individuals as an Atlas Corps Fellow.



Selma Bardacki

With Professor Dean Williams