

# Do You Want More Out Of Your International Development or Humanitarian Assistance Career?

## Finding Fulfilment in Aid: Obstacles and Opportunities for Personal Growth

By David Miller and Douglas Keh

### *Finding Your Life Purpose: The Case of Emily*

Emily was a student in the sixth grade at the United Nations International School in New York. Because of her mother's job, she had spent much of her life in places like Zambia and Nepal before arriving in the Big Apple. One day, when going to class, she saw a quote on the wall attributed to Mahatma Gandhi: "Be the change you want to see in the world." The quote touched a chord within; inspired, Emily decided then and there to devote her life to improving the lives of others. She knew that somehow, in some way, her life purpose had always been to help others to lift themselves from the poverty she had witnessed in Africa and Asia.

Emily went to Brown University where she majored in economics. After earning her master's degree in international development, she began a 15-year career with a prestigious international non-governmental organization. At a certain point in her mid-thirties, however, Emily began to question whether she had chosen the right profession. She had this creeping doubt that maybe she didn't have much in common with her colleagues after all, that maybe, she was misguided in thinking that making the world a better place was her true calling. After all, whenever she went to the field, she was left unsure as to whether she was making a difference in the lives of anyone but herself.

With each disappointment, each less than stellar development project, each promotion gone to someone else and not her, the questions in her mind grew louder. As life grew more



demanding – increasingly complicated with marriage and then children – her doubts segued into a sense that life had passed her by. She had forgotten the inspired moment that led her to recognize her career path in the first place; all she felt, as she looked back at the trajectory of her life, was emptiness and a sense of lost opportunity.

### ***The Inevitable Moment of Doubt***

Emily’s story is not unusual. Over time, anyone who has chosen development or humanitarian assistance as his or her career path understands that foreign aid is not exactly what it appeared to be at the beginning. We discover that, at the international level, aid is usually provided based on political and strategic considerations, and rarely if ever because of genuine goodwill.<sup>i</sup> We often hear criticism that development aid merely creates dependency,<sup>ii</sup> that the results of development projects rarely endure after the lifeline of donor funding runs out.<sup>iii</sup> We are told that much of aid money goes to waste or into the pockets of corrupt host governments or merely as salaries to overpaid expatriate staff.<sup>iv</sup> For Emily and many others who have chosen a career in international aid, there comes the inevitable moment

### ***Fulfillment Obstacle No. 2***

#### *Failure to connect*

We must stop conforming, complying, and controlling and learn how to create from within, from others, and from whatever the world gives us. Leadership begins with our inward resources, such as our awareness and consciousness, which is our foundation for impacting the world. When we distance ourselves from others, don’t accept or acknowledge them, or speak our truths to them, we will never be our best because we cannot change the world alone. When we separate ourselves from the world and do not listen to the wonderful things it is telling us, we are confined by our egos unable to tap into what we might become.

### ***Fulfillment Obstacle No. 1***

#### *Not knowing why we’re doing what we do*

Many of us choose development or assistance careers because we are drawn to tangible opportunities to improve the world. Almost always, there are hidden motivations closely tied to our values, of which we are not even aware. What do I really want? What impact do I want to have in the world? What is holding me back? How do I overcome my fears? How do I grow beyond my technical knowledge to make a bigger contribution? Exploring answers to these questions is essential for living a fulfilled life - but we rarely, if ever, take the time to think about them. Once we are living life with intention, things such as recognition, compensation, and office politics – things beyond our control – feel far less important.

of doubt. Sometimes the feeling lasts just a few days; sometimes it lasts for years until we know it’s time for a change.

In most cases, the emptiness is attributable not to the career choice itself but to an inability to look within and understand our values and true-life purpose in the world. Research has shown that a majority of professionals in the fields of development and humanitarian aid are satisfied with their choice of career. Nonetheless, all it takes is a look around the office to know that it could be so much better. Many of the careerists in aid meander along a well-chosen path that is impeded at every turn by bureaucracy, inefficiency, and the absence of connection with the very people we are meant to help. Why aren’t more of us fulfilled by the admirable cause to which we have devoted our lives?

The pressures we face in development and humanitarian assistance come from all directions, at a fast pace that can challenge our skills, judgment, and humanity. Many of us sense that we have become a cog in a system that controls us more than we control ourselves. The systems in which we work should, ideally, empower us to achieve more than what we could accomplish on our own. However, organizational structures and bureaucratic cultures often beat us down, making us feel weak, demoralized, and confused.

### *Join Us*

Maybe you feel a lot like Emily did for most of her career, aware that you want to make a difference in the world, but not sure how to apply yourself in doing so. Or maybe you're like "Neo," the main character in the movie "The Matrix": you just know there is something more out there, you just can't put your finger on it: you're still looking for your Morpheus.

This is why we've organized *Bettering the World and Yourself: Growing Your Leadership Potential in International Aid*, a workshop for development and humanitarian aid professionals, on November 9, 2019 in Potomac, Maryland. The objective of the workshop, primarily aimed towards professionals at an early stage in their career (i.e. up to a twelve years of experience), is to help you acquire the insights and skills for exercising greater leadership both within and vis-à-vis the world beyond.

### ***Fulfillment Obstacle No. 3***

*Not curious or open to change and growth*

When we stop being curious, we stop learning and growing. We must always keep our minds and hearts open to new information, new ideas, new people, and new ways of doing things. Once we find ourselves over-judging, over-criticizing, over-isolating, and knowing it all, our minds and hearts have likely become too closed and it is time to recalibrate. We are at our best when we are fully present, driven by child-like inquiry, fully committed to learning and growing, and open for experimentation and discovery.

### ***Fulfillment Obstacle No. 4***

*Choosing easy path rather than taking risks*

We all have different needs in life. Some of us have more imminent material, security, and social needs than others. Growth requires risk-taking, stepping out of comfort, and subjecting ourselves to potential embarrassment, failure, and loss. Change is not easy but necessary to expand and progress. If we find ourselves making too many life decisions out of convenience or obligation, we are likely blocking our full potential.

The past decade has seen extraordinary growth in the demand for new approaches to leadership, a result of the growing sense of alienation and discontent in many pockets of modern society. Thought leaders like Daniel Goleman (on emotional intelligence<sup>v</sup>) and Brené Brown (on connection with others<sup>vi</sup>) have helped us to understand that leadership is not only about managing teams and inspiring others. Publications such as "Radical Wholeness"<sup>vii</sup> by Philip Shepherd and "Leadership from the Inside Out"<sup>viii</sup> by Kevin Cashman have broken through, allowing their authors' decades of experience to resonate throughout a curious and increasingly needful public.

Similarly, leadership in development and humanitarian aid is changing because it needs to; old models are becoming less and less compelling to all those involved. The ongoing change is based on a fundamental principle that people - staff, counterparts, and beneficiaries, no matter their socioeconomic status or circumstance - are creative, resourceful, and whole and have the capacity to learn, grow, change, and contribute to the world.<sup>ix</sup>

This new leadership mindset provides aid professionals with new opportunities for career and personal growth.

The world has a dire shortage of these new leaders to navigate us through an increasingly VUCA-world filled with volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.<sup>x</sup> It needs more such

leaders to bring out the most and best of our educated, technologically advanced, and informed workforces. In development and humanitarian assistance, we also need leaders who can collaboratively work as equals with counterparts, beneficiaries, and communities to apply knowledge, improve systems and policies, and create sustainable and scalable results through short-term initiatives. We need less leadership based on privilege, authority, control, and brainpower and more based on higher levels of consciousness that emphasize creation, connection and relationships, and a deep sense of responsibility to serving the world.

Fortunately, this new approach to leadership is neither a birthright nor innate gift, but instead developed through a long-term commitment towards inward learning, personal growth, and self-awareness - and an open and well-intended heart.

New Leadership Concepts Emphasize	
In	Out
Freedom	Control
Relational Connection	Transactional Relationships
Awareness and Agility	Authority
Service	Problem-Solving
Contribution	Performance
Creation	Reaction
Everyone is a Leader	One Leader in Front

## Epilogue

Almost giving up on her development career, Emily was asked by a colleague to attend a youth empowerment conference because he was unable to attend. Elated to be absent from the office for a few days, she gladly accepted. Emily surprisingly discovered that she loved the conference as she met many exciting people and organizations helping youth throughout the world. Driving home from the conference on its final day, Emily had another “aha” moment that changed her life. No longer interested in high-level policy work, she wanted to contribute to the world by helping young people change it. Without concern for recognition or advancement, she chose to work with young people, engage with local communities, prepare the world’s future leaders, and provide youth with opportunities to learn and grow. After accessing every



book and podcast on the subject and further connecting with people who she met at the conference, Emily eventually mustered the courage to ask her supervisor for permission to apply for youth development funds, a new technical area, from a major donor. Convinced by her determination and vision, she was given a small budget to prepare the grant request. As Emily anxiously awaits the donor's response, she feels proud that she has overcome her fears and acted on her newfound purpose. She is grateful for the opportunity to learn and grow, the connections that she has developed, and the big leap that she has made towards her leadership quest. Win or lose, Emily knows that the grant application is just the first step for her new calling, and although she doesn't have all the answers planned out, she is open to the possibilities the world will provide to serve.

### *About the Authors*



**David Miller** was an implementer of large donor-funded international development programs for Abt Associates and The Urban Institute for twenty-four years specializing in new and conflict countries with expertise in agriculture development and program management. He extensively worked in Central Asia shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union and South Sudan during its independence and civil conflict. David has experience leading practices and programs from the home office and the field with long-term postings in Kazakhstan and Egypt. He has a Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration from

Gettysburg College, MBA from James Madison University, Master's in International Management from Thunderbird Graduate School of Global Management, and an Executive Certificate in Organizational Consulting and Change Leadership from Georgetown University. David is an executive coach and completed the Co-Active Training Institute's 10-month leadership program. David founded OrgForce Consulting which provides Executive Coaching, Leadership Training, and Organizational Development to individuals and organizations who want to increase their impact in the world. David was an All-American distance runner and competed in the US Olympic Marathon Trials and is currently a board member of EveryMind, a non-profit organization supporting the mental wellness needs of Montgomery County, MD.



**Douglas Keh** has worked in the United Nations system for 27 years. From 2015-2017, Doug was the Country Director of the UN Development Programme's (UNDP) Country Office in Afghanistan, UNDP's largest in the world, where he oversaw the successful delivery of nearly \$1 billion despite continued deterioration in the security situation. Doug also served as Country Director for UNDP in Sri Lanka from 2007-2012, during the culmination of the country's decades-long civil war, as well as Deputy Chief of Staff at UNDP headquarters from 2005-2007. Prior to joining UNDP, Doug had a diverse UN career, having started as an intern with UNICEF in Sierra Leone in 1989, with subsequent assignments



with the UN International Drug Control Programme, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the World Bank, the International Finance Corporation, and the UN Secretariat. Doug has a B.A. from Cornell University and a M.A. in International Relations from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). Doug has completed the Co-Active Training Institute's 10-month leadership program, as well as its full coaching curriculum.

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<sup>i</sup> Alesina, Alberto and Dollar, David, *Journal of Economic Growth* 5: 33-63 (March 2000), Kluwer Academic Publishers.

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<sup>ii</sup> Simmons, Ann, "U.S. Foreign Aid: A Waste of Money or a Boost to World Stability?" *L.A. Times*, May 10, 2017. <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-global-aid-true-false-20170501-htmlstory.html>

<sup>iii</sup> Moyo, Dambisa, *Dead Aid: Why Aid is Not Working and How There is Better Way for Africa*, 2009: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.

<sup>iv</sup> Easterly, William, *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*, 2009: Oxford University Press.

<sup>v</sup> Goleman, Daniel, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, Bantam: 2005.

<sup>vi</sup> Brown, Brené, *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts*, 2013: Random House.

<sup>vii</sup> Shepherd, Philip, 2017: North Atlantic Books.

<sup>viii</sup> Cashman, Kevin, 1998: Berret-Koehler.

<sup>ix</sup> Kimsey-House, Henry, Kimsey-House, Karen, Sandahl, Phillip, and Whitworth, Laura, Co-Active Coaching, 2018: Nicholas Brealey Publishing

<sup>x</sup> Anderson, Robert and Adams, William, Mastering Leadership, 2016: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

**"This article reflects the personal views of Douglas Keh and David Miller are not necessarily those of the United Nations or any other organization."**