



**“JUST A STONE’S
THROW FROM
FAILURE”**

JEDI • Opener

Justice • Equity • Diversity • Inclusion

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**PROTECTING CALIFORNIA’S MOST
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Member Story



While in Haiti, I was working with an overqualified team of engineers and aid workers to construct several composting and pit latrines. The project's goal was to provide a safe and sanitary place for people in the village to defecate, which would help get a handle on the cholera epidemic. It was all very professional, as we had money from big multinational donors and CAD sketches of our latrine designs.

At the time, everyone on the team knew it was a best practice to have the community pitch in, so they felt a sense of ownership of the assets that we were constructing. Among other things, we bluntly announced to the community leaders that they would need to purchase the toilet paper to stock the latrines we were building.

Later, my translator sheepishly came to me and said, "you have to supply the toilet paper." I was sort of irritated and almost started to explain to him the importance of having the village participate in this way. Instead, I took a moment then simply asked him why we had to supply the toilet paper.

"Because otherwise, your carefully designed latrines will be full of rocks and useless within a month," he replied.

Jon Liberzon, VP at Tomorrow Water

“Just a stone’s throw away from failure”

“Full of rocks?” I asked. “Help me understand why.”
That’s when he explained.

“The people in this village do not spend money on toilet paper,” the translator said. “They are accustomed to defecating in the fields and wiping with rocks. If you don’t provide toilet paper in your latrines, people will simply do what they’re used to doing, and your latrines will be filled with rocks in no time.”

As it turns out, my “un-educated” translator was the best engineer on the whole project. That’s because he identified a fundamental design flaw that could have rendered our entire capital outlay useless. All he needed was a cultural connection which I didn’t have.

Because of his input, the project was a success.

TAKEAWAYS:

- Have you ever assumed that only highly-qualified people or senior leaders can provide valuable feedback?
- Do you seek out or consider perspectives different from your own?
- How can we leverage diverse cultural knowledge to improve outcomes?





Jon Liberzon
Tomorrow Water
Chair, JEDI Opener
Work Group



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Thank you Jon for sharing your story!
To share a story or for resources, visit dei.cwea.org

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