



March 2010 [\(pdf - available within 24 hours of this email\)](#)

By Donna Zajonc



## Experiencing Leadership in Ecuador

I just returned from Cuenca, Ecuador where I had the privilege of facilitating a workshop for Ecuadorian women leaders and, with my husband, co-facilitated a second program for both men and women. **I have become a walking billboard extolling the virtues of Ecuador after spending only ten days in the country.** Here's how the story began that sent us on an adventurous journey to beautiful South America.

Five years ago I met Nena Siguenza, who had just won a scholarship to attend the University of Washington and was working toward her Masters in Public Administration. We stayed in touch after she graduated and I learned more about the foundation ([www.fundacionwaaponi.org](http://www.fundacionwaaponi.org)) she was launching in her home town of Cuenca.

**Nena is passionate about bringing the inner dimension of leadership to public leaders in Ecuador, especially to local government leaders.** She believes that transformational leadership begins with a high level of personal consciousness, integrity and self awareness. Her timing couldn't be better.

Ecuador is a country in transition, attempting to move away from political leadership that has siphoned their oil-rich revenues exclusively for the elite-class rather than for the ten million citizens. Eighteen months ago 80% of Ecuador citizens voted to approve their new Constitution. The first Article states, "Ecuador is a constitutional state of laws and justice that is social, democratic, sovereign, independent, singular, intercultural, plurinational and secular. It is organized as a republic and governed in a decentralized manner. Sovereignty lies with the people, whose will is the basis of authority."

We learned that all citizens are required to vote so naturally there is a very high voter turn out. A strong incentive to vote has been built into their system of government. Once a citizen votes they receive a voter's card that must be displayed when receiving permits, marriage licenses, students loans and the like. Coming from the US where a 65% turn out is considered very good, we were interested in this reverse psychology of providing strong incentives to vote if you want government permits, loans or other services. It seems to be working. People we talked with exclaimed, "of course we vote!"

**With this new Constitution and growing citizen involvement, Nena feels the time is right for a radical transformation of their leadership mindset with a special emphasis for women leaders to take a more powerful place in the Ecuadorian culture.** With Nena's help, I designed a two day program entitled, "Women as Powerful Political Partners" and 35 women

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### Images from Ecuador



Donna being interviewed by a reporter from the Cuenca business magazine.



Nena Siguenza on the left, Donna on far right.



Women's Group

attended the program. Women leaders attended from indigenous communities, agricultural, rural and ecological programs, NGO's, elected office, parish communities and municipal government agencies.

Once I arrived in Cuenca, I quickly discovered that the Spanish translation for the word "power" was translated to mean "strength" rather than the "empowerment" concept that I had in mind. (I do not speak Spanish and all handouts and my Powerpoint had to be translated. During the sessions we had simultaneous translation.) Given the long history of the Spanish conquest of Ecuador in the 15th Century, the genocide of the indigenous people and strong patriarchal society, it is no surprise that the word "power" is viewed in a limited and negative way by most Ecuadorian women.

It was a privilege for me to be part of two magical days as Ecuadorian women from all walks of life began the journey toward their own personal transformation. **The cultural gap between men and women is wide and I am not foolish enough to believe that a brief two day event will erase centuries of inequities.** Progress is being made from within their own country as women such as Nena manifest their vision of change. Seeds were planted and conversations are beginning. I am blessed to be part of this work.

As the days flew by, I felt at home in Ecuador's third largest city, Cuenca. Recently rated by one magazine as the #1 place for North Americans to retire, Cuenca's comfortable temperature, delicious food, beautiful scenery, generous people and low home values are a draw for many Gringos. The familiar hand shake and greeting of a gentle kiss to the right cheek became a natural ritual that I miss now that I am back in the US.

Following the two day women's seminar, my husband, David Emerald, and I facilitated a two day seminar for both men and women entitled "Becoming a Collaborative Public Leader." Many of those attending were from Cuenca's city administration, including planners, engineers, architects, public health officials, educators, a priest and parent leaders as well as many leaders of NGOs who work with city government. It was clear that attending this type of program is uncommon. Nena's inspiring vision and persistence has won the support of the Mayor of Cuenca so their staff was encouraged to attend.

**Given the history of Ecuador it was not surprising that a few participants were challenged by the idea that empowering and collaborative leadership is available to them.** Some voiced their perspective that historically, institutions in Ecuador have kept citizens disempowered. The idea that local government leaders and citizens could feel empowered and work together is a new and developing concept.

I am grateful to Nena and her staff at Waaponi for their extraordinary vision and persistence. Each day they take another baby step toward manifesting their dream of conscious, aware and trustworthy public leaders who will lead Ecuador into a new era of peace and equanimity for their citizens. David and I hope to return and continue to support their extraordinary work.



Donna and David



Co-Ed Group



Women working in small group



Donna with Luz Haro of Ecuador's Rural Women's Association



Donna with women

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## Testimonials

*"Working with Donna Zajonc has been a wonderful experience for both our City Staff and our elected officials. Her presentation*

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### Quote of the Month

*"The place God calls you*

*and clarification of Staff/Board roles was extremely helpful. I feel that hiring Donna Zajonc was an excellent investment for our community and I enthusiastically recommend her for other municipalities."*

Linda Goldstein  
Mayor  
City of Clayton, MO

*to is the place where your  
deep gladness and the  
world's deep hunger  
meet."*

Frederich Buechner  
20th Century American Novelist

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## Individual Coaching

If you would like to experience the power of coaching to transform your leadership and personal life, contact me so we can schedule a complimentary call: 206-780-9300 or [Donna@BainbridgeLeadership.com](mailto:Donna@BainbridgeLeadership.com)

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