I must admit that when I heard about the GEE project and that we as University of Otago students were expected to take on the leadership role, I balked at the idea completely. The thought of taking charge in developing a business plan terrified me. I was not sure if I could take on that burden. Despite my trepidation, when the email from Deb arrived I replied “Yes, I would be honored to have the role”. I don’t know what made me do that, but then in the weeks before the project I had already began to subconsciously plan the timelines and meetings, ideas to promote engagement and creativity as well as try to prepare for any problems. I also invited a friend to be my co-leader. Ruth and I met (virtually) to discuss how we could lead together, what ground-rules do we need, what are we comfortable to lead in? How would we resolve conflict, if any?

Then the 29th of April, Ruth and I timed our responses to send out our welcome emails together. We were one of the luckier teams where everyone responded within the first 12 hours of the teams being named. We started facilitating the rapport and build the relationship between the team members over our preferred chat platforms (WhatsApp for everyone else and WeChat for our Chinese team mates) and held our 1st team meeting over ZOOM on the 1st of May.

Due to the time zone difference, Ruth and I agreed that us being the only ones completely off with everyone else, we would sacrifice for the late nights, after all it was only for 3 weeks. Looking back at it we should not have stretched ourselves that thin we were both stretched very thin by the end of it. Our Dutch teammate Justus was the one who noticed it and called for some of our meetings to be held in the early hours of the morning for him and our Nigerian teammate Churchill that meant a lot to Ruth and I.

The GEE project consumed my life for the course of the next 3 weeks. Unwittingly I was also leading 2 other course projects at University and I admit that the moment the GEE business plan was submitted I was completely drained and exhausted. When Ruth and I talked about it we realized that we should have kept some time for ourselves and this was definitely a lesson learned.

I must say encouraging creativity and participation was not the challenge with this group of people but rather keeping up with them. Once we were able to tease them out of their shells the ideas kept coming. This was also another reason why Ruth and I decided that instead of throwing more ideas into the pot, we would help them realize theirs.

The 2nd challenge was to keep a group of random strangers connected in a virtual world and across 2 different chat platforms. This is where the role of the leader had the biggest impact. It became my responsibility to keep the conversations going across the various platforms and share what was said between both so some of our teammates would not be left out. It worked well and we were all exchanging pictures of our hometowns, our pets and our favorite foods with each other.

The final challenge was to pick a project for the business plan. I was dreading this moment. The team had been so wonderful and passionate about their ideas that the thought of picking just one and not the other sounded dreadful. That was when I booked a coaching session with Anelda and explained my fears. She was very helpful in making me realized that this was not a decision that I would have to make alone and to trust the team to make the best choice. I trusted her advice and trusted the team too and we voted to tackle the problem of plastic and poverty in Nepal.

Then came the crazy week till business plan was submitted. We had a little late start as well due to failed internet connectivity in Nigeria due to a flash flood. However taking the time to build trust was well worth it as the team functioned like one well oiled machine. We all kept a very open mind and kept encouraging each other to reach for more facts and more information. Some of teammates even took the initiative to contact biodegradable plastic companies to inquire about the machinery they used and how the biodegradable plastics were manufactured in Indonesia, China and Nepal.

We were fortunate that I could speak 3 different languages and therefore I could help our Chinese teammates when they were stuck with translations. They also privately apologized to me for
their lack of business/management skills as they actually language majors. I assured them that what they can’t contribute in management terms, their views as an informed consumer will be very valuable as the rest of us are so focused on the business aspect of it. This gave them comfort and I will have to say we designed our market analysis and marketing strategy from their valuable feedback.

Our Indonesian teammate, Fariz was very shy and Muslim so he was fasting during the time of the project, but he loved to do research and gathering information that he was key in helping the project to have the information it did. He would text me at 5ma his time to let me know he found something interesting. Churchill is our overeager Nigerian teammate with a lot of drive and had a beautiful way with the written word. Throughout this project he worked with a spotty Internet connection, a flash flood and no laptop. All of his contributions were done through his phone where he would send it to either myself or Ruth to be added to our business plan. He had big plans for the project and pushed us to think beyond our comfort zones. Justus was participating on the project with a tight schedule as he was also working and studying at the same time. But he was always cheerful even early in the morning and will make the effort to greet everyone during our Zoom meets, especially to our Chinese teammates who were isolated in a separate chat platform on normal days. He made a video pitch of his idea and included very catchy background music, which delighted everyone! He also put his technical and artistic skills to work designing the team logo and the flowchart of our business. Sumy was from Nepal and her passion for the project was what convinced the team to pick her idea. She came extremely prepared for what she had in mind and presented the team with a lot of background research, including already being in touch with key companies who have implemented the same model in other countries. All we had to do was build upon that research she had into a viable business plan.

Finally I must give a lot of credit to Ruth who was a true partner in this venture. Her organizational skills was godsend and she planned every aspect of how the business plan should flow and guided each member (including myself) on what information we needed.

Overall this was an amazing experience and even though I was named a co-leader, I was more intent in supporting everyone to be the best of themselves. I hesitate to say that I had contributed very much to this because my teammates were inspiring in their own right. All I needed to do was give them the push and confidence they needed to voice it.

What the experience thought me? I was hesitant to be a leader because I was not confident in having all the answers (which reminiscent of my Asian high context culture). However this experience showed me that a leader could lead in different ways, as long as they listen to their team and build their ideas, learn to utilize each member's strengths. And I will also learn to set more boundaries to protect my own well being.