

NEWAGE Xtra

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Training to become leaders

Turaj Ahmad goes to see the 'Bangladesh Youth Leadership Centre', an innovative programme that provides hands-on training on how

For Mohammad Nayim Uddin, a second year Alim student at Subhania Alia Madrassa, a desire to implement a positive change in society has been ever-present. Hoping to follow in the footsteps of two of his role models, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and Kazi Nazrul Islam, he went about doing just that as he prepared to speak out for the well-being of his local mosque. However, even with the positive intent at heart, which in essence defines a true leader, the young man - without a tangible chair of authority - fell short of the mark as a result of the seemingly overawing presence of more influential figures that he was pitted against.



Artwork by NAASAH

'This is one of my biggest regrets in life so far,' says Nayim, citing the particular chain events.

By common consensus, a leader is generally a figure holding a position of prominence and authority. And while acquiring a level of authority over some form of proceedings can to an extent be classified as a tangible representation of leadership, it by no means portrays the true essence of the term.

In many regards, Bangladesh can boast of producing a diverse array of 'leaders', both past and to an extent present, however, it is the current crop of the young generation that both safeguard as well as hold the key to the future prosperity of the nation.

'Leadership is a product of patience and being practical at analysing the environment,' says Nayim. 'It is not about holding an influential position but about reaching out of one's comfort zone and having the courage to speak out against the wrongs in society for instance,' he adds.

The emergence of a good leader would tend to depend on several factors, and one of them would definitely be nurturing the talent and willingness for change that exists in young men and women such as Nayim Uddin.

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The kind education received being indisputably one of the more significant ones. Bangladesh fosters three different educational systems - the state system — popularly known as the Bengali medium— where courses are taught in Bengali; the English system, that follows the British curriculum and caters to the upper and upper middle class; and the madrassah system that stresses on Islamic religious education.

With the diversity resulting from the different schools of thoughts, a gap is inevitably formed among the youths with each group bearing different perceptions of the other ensuing from little or no interaction between these students. It would seem vital therefore that the future leaders of our country garner an understanding of where his/her compatriots are coming from.

‘The most effective way to make youths of such varied backgrounds trust one another is to steer clear of potentially divisive issues and unite them through a common interest,’ believes Ejaj Ahmad, founder of the Bangladesh Youth Leadership Centre (BYLC), an organisation set up with the vision of creating a poverty-free Bangladesh driven by the next generation of home-grown leaders.

The idea of a leadership centre in Bangladesh was first inspired in 2005, when Ejaj Ahmad, a St. Andrews trained economist and founder of an international trading company, visited a secondary school in Narandi.

‘Judging by what I saw in some of these kids, the talent and desire in them to inflict a positive change in society was definitely there but all they needed was a bit of inspiration and an opportunity to realise their potentials,’ says Ejaj.

Having grown up playing cricket in a middle-class neighbourhood in Dhaka with his family’s grassroots connection, Ejaj’s realisation of his commitments to public service and desire to be an agent of change for the youth of Bangladesh meant that he went in pursuit of a new direction in life – that to create leaders for the future.

His personal leadership sojourn includes academic and professional exposures in four continents along with more than seven years of community campaign organising and public speaking experience. He holds a masters in public policy from Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, where he received two years of formal instruction in leadership and communication.

The concept of BYLC’s pilot program, a one month summer course that recently came to a close in Chittagong, called ‘Building Bridges through Leadership Training’ was developed and drafted by Ejaj Ahmad and Shammi Quddus, a biology student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The proposal for its pilot program, Building Bridges through Leadership Training, was nominated by MIT and it won the 2008 Davis Peace Prize in March 2008. In April 2008, BYLC received technical and financial support from MIT Public Service Center to

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implement its first project in Bangladesh. BYLC was selected by Global Knowledge Partnership in Malaysia as a finalist in the 2008 YSEI Social Entrepreneurship Competition, and its business plan was developed in Kuala Lumpur in May 2008.

Identifying the necessity to integrate the different chain of thoughts present among the students of the different schooling systems, the Building Bridges through Leadership programme brought together 30 Bangladeshi high school students of different educational backgrounds — English, Bengali and Islamic seminary — for a leadership workshop.

‘The aim of the program was to bridge gaps in society by uniting youth from diverse backgrounds, equipping them with leadership, problem solving and teamwork skills, and engaging them in community service and active citizenship,’ says Ejaj.

After selecting the 30 students for BYLC’s inaugural program, on 16 July at three o’clock in the afternoon, the first leadership training session went under way at the Chittagong Eye Infirmary, with its lush greenery and spotless cleanliness providing an ideal setting.

In the classroom, each participant was asked to introduce the person who sat next to him/her. The first girl came forward with her notepad and looking down at her page, reads off the facts about her new friend before returning to her seat.

A moment of silence was followed by the instructor asking the student, ‘How many people in this room listened to you?’

‘Not a lot. I am not sure,’ was the student’s response.

‘Did you notice that two girls in the back were talking to each other and not listening to you?’ was the instructor’s reply, which led to the first lesson of the day – paying attention to your audience, observing who is with you and who is not and using pauses and body language to make your presence felt, recalls Ejaj.

‘The nature of the course was very interactive as we wanted our participants to learn more from one another than our instructors,’ says Ejaj.

‘Whatever happened in the classroom is what would happen in the real world and we tried using the dynamics in the class as data points to illustrate concepts of leadership,’ he adds.

The large group of thirty was then split into five small groups. The groups decided on their own names: Change, Iron Butterfly, NAASAH, Sanctity and Youth Power. Each group consisted of six participants and a facilitator. There were two students from each type of educational medium – Bengali, Madrassah and English. The small group is the heart of the programme. The first use of the small group was in analysing personal leadership failures. The lectures at the start discussed how to go about this diagnosis in

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the small group.

‘The first week was quite intensive. We touched on many important aspects of leadership – how to get attention, how to work in a team, how to learn from failure but most importantly we reached a consensus about what we mean by leadership,’ recalls Ejaj.

‘Leadership is an activity that improves the human condition,’ believes Ejaj.

‘A good leader is somewhat like a good doctor in that, just as the doctor must diagnose the patient accurately to ensure effectiveness of the prescribed drug, the leader must also be able to diagnose problems, voices and values, and come up with effective solutions,’ he adds.

The week ended with an exercise of creativity. All groups were asked to do an art project that symbolically depicted their understanding of leadership. It was fun time for both the participants and the facilitators.

Capturing the attention of an audience is an important part of leadership. No leader can work alone and to bring people on your side, it is important to be able to convey your message clearly. This is not synonymous with being loud and fiery – a misconception a lot of us have.

There are many ways to having a strong presence when one is speaking and the public speaking workshop was designed with this in mind. Each participant was asked to deliver a short speech on any topic that s/he felt passionately about. Both the range of topics and styles of delivery were truly impressive, informs Ejaj.

‘For many of the participants this was the first time delivering any kind of speech in front of an audience. For some this was no different from the countless debating competitions they had been to. Both types had a lot to learn,’ says Ejaj.

‘At the core of BYLC, the things you need to have to be a good leader are to be a good speaker, good listener, good team player, empathy/compassion, flexibility – willing to go out of your comfort zone, courage, character and vision. The last three characteristics have to be developed over the years,’ says Ejaj.

The final two weeks of the program was dedicated to community service, wherein, each of the five groups of students had to develop project proposals to be implemented for the benefits of the inhabitants of the Kusumbag slum, in Dampara.

‘By the end of the program, the participants completed more than 670 hours of community service, implementing five community service projects through which we aimed to arouse compassion in our young leaders for those in need of help while it also allowed them to creatively think about solutions to social problems,’ affirms Ejaj.

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After surveying the Kusumbag area, each of the groups then set about implementing their respective sustainable community service projects organising funds for them, individually. The projects were also subject to a mixed bag of reactions from the locals with some getting immediate assistance from the locals while others were met with a bit of hostility. The end result however was the implementation of five laudable projects which included the plantation of trees in the area thought to be susceptible to mudslides and hill erosion by the group Youth Power; a medical awareness campaign by the group Change; distribution of free books and writing utensils among the illiterate children by the group NAASAH; provision of garbage bins and cover for bathing areas by the group Sanctity and a volunteer school for children, set up by the group Iron Butterfly.

'I am not sure if these kids will go back to these slums – where they are working on various projects now,' says Ejaj. 'It took one experience in a train for a posh lawyer like Mahatma Gandhi which changed his life,' he adds.

'However, our graduates have tangible experience, we hope they will be successful in life - good jobs, economic empowerment with thick check book. But I what I want them to understand is that the cheque book of life has one page to sign on - the story their lives portray. People will remember them for what they have done for humanity not for themselves. They will hopefully use this experience to help their country in the future.'

'Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center's program is clearly a highly imaginative initiative and one that could be, if rightly implemented, an important and effective attempt to change things in a very positive direction,' Amartya Sen, 1998 Nobel Laureate in Economics and professor at Harvard University wrote on BYCL's initiative.

'Building Bridges through Leadership Training' program is a pilot programme for the more long-term Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center, which they would like to model after the City Year program in the United States. They will collect and analyse data after the completion of the summer programme, to understand how much social impact the programme is having. They plan to run another youth leadership program in Bangladesh in December, according to Ejaj.

URL:

http://www.newagebd.com/2008/aug/29/aug29/xtra_inner3.html