

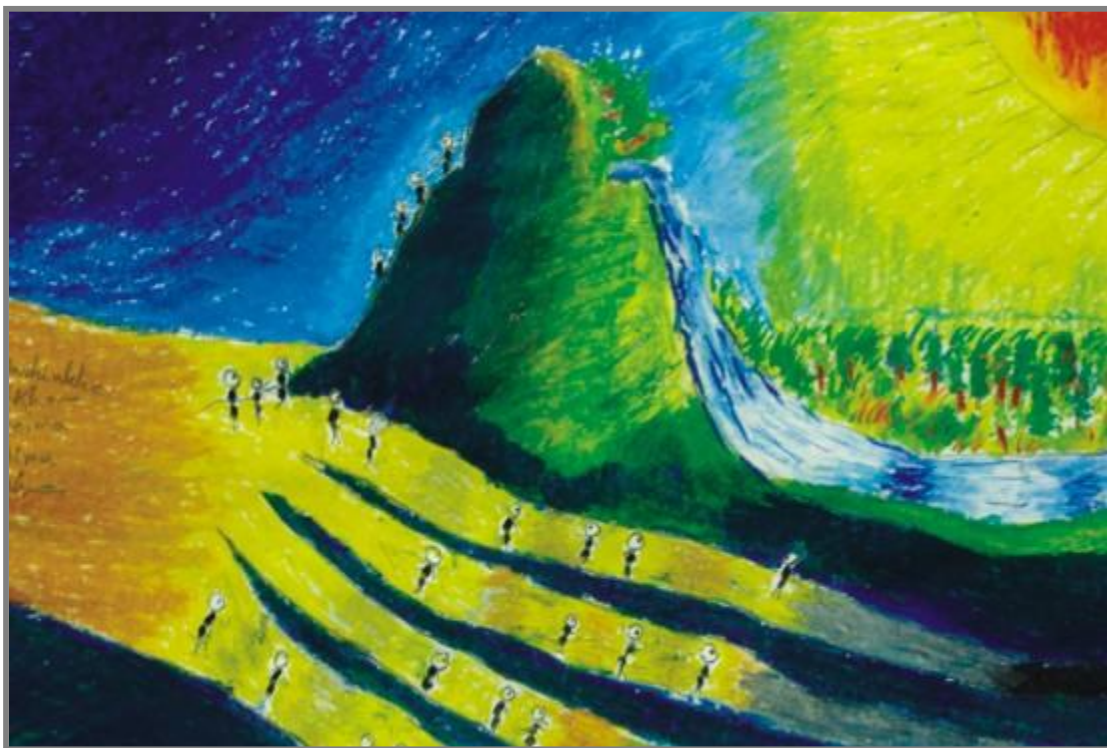


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Bridging the Divides

Tonima Tasnim Ananna & Ryan Nabil

"We live in an exciting time where globalization is creating a melting pot of ideas, ideals and ideologies. This can lead to either innovation or insecurity in today's youth. BBLT is an attempt for Bangladesh's youth to understand diversity and harness its power for social entrepreneurship and positive change."



Bangladesh Youth Leadership Centre, or BYLC, started as a concept at Harvard University's John F Kennedy school of Government in January 2008. The proposal for a month-long leadership project, Building Bridges through Leadership Training (BBLT), was jointly developed by Ejaj Ahmad, then a graduate student of Harvard, and Shammi S. Quddus, an undergraduate student of MIT. The proposal won the 2008 Kathryn Davis Projects for Peace Prize in March, and Ejaj Ahmad and Shammi S Quddus launched the first pilot programme for BBLT in summer 2008 in Chittagong. This June, the BYLC administration skimmed through applications from over 90 schools of all three education mediums of Bangladesh and picked 30 applicants for the second month long training program in Dhaka. The second BBLT program was sponsored by the American Embassy in Dhaka.

Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center (BYLC)

4th Floor Treasure Island, 42-43 Siddeshwari Circular Road, Dhaka 1217, Bangladesh
 Phone: +880-2-8333853, Fax: +880-2-8333854, E-mail: info@bylc.org



The BBLT project has three core components. The first of them is building bridges which require active participation of 10 students of each of the three education mediums of Bangladesh: English, Bangla and Madrassa. The BBLT students were divided into 5 small groups each with 6 members two from each of the 3 mediums. This initiative was taken to bridge the ideological differences and misconceptions between the three mediums by bringing them under the same umbrella, by making the students of each medium work as one team. The biggest divide and least interaction is perhaps between the English Medium and Madrassa medium students a divide almost unwitting if one considers that our country holds one of the most homogenous population around the world, as noted by Dr Gowher Rizvi, Honorable Advisor to the Prime Minister, in the BBLT's graduation ceremony.

The second core component is leadership training which took up about two-and-a-half weeks of the month-long program, demanded the students to reconsider their role in the world and develop effective skills and concepts needed to practice leadership. The leadership training consisted of lectures, silent authority classes, small group sessions, and a few workshops. The lectures were designed based on the syllabus of leadership courses taught at Harvard's John F Kennedy School of Government, and saw the young participants through the two biggest ideological shifts: one demanding them to understand that leadership is not focused on a person rather it's a process - of leading oneself, of leading others towards a positive change. It may be something small like getting rid of a bad habit like littering your own town to taking steps to stop environmental deterioration. The other ideological shift directed the participants to accept that one doesn't necessarily need to be in a position of authority to practice leadership as long as we care deeply about an issue and have the skills to present it in front of people, we can bring about positive change.

The silent authority classes of BYLC are perhaps unique in Bangladesh because no student from any of the three mediums has faced anything like this before. The teacher, or authority figure, wrote "Let's start the work" in the whiteboard and stood silently looking at the students without any further instructions. The students were reduced to a quivering mass of confusion as each looked to the other wondering what "work" meant. One brave soul after another stood up and tried to introduce a topic worth discussing and their arguments and counter-arguments spiraled the group of 30 into utter chaos. The only time the authority intervened was to point out a flaw in a speaker's style or the effectiveness of his or her intervention. The usual questions posed to a speaker by the authority were "How effective was your intervention? Were you observing the audience while speaking? Who was listening? Was the topic or idea you introduced taken forward by anyone or was it dropped silently? Were you trying to address the whole class or was your target audience limited to your medium, your friends? Does your manner of speaking or presentation limit your audience or isolate a group or even one student?"

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And these questions were not asked looking for friendly answers they were designed to make each participant evaluate their approach and mentality in front of the whole class right then a diverse classroom representing almost all the groups of Bangladesh. The purpose of these classes was very practical it not only offered the students an opportunity to practice the tools essential for leadership such as observation and successful intervention but imparted an important lesson to not always depend on the authority.

The workshops started from the second week and included a poetry and presence session where one student was made to recite a poem very close to his heart.

Then he was told to condense the poem within the two most important lines and recite it again. After each recitation of the crucial two lines, the audience gave feedback on whether the sentiment of the speaker seemed genuine or not. As the speaker struggled again and again to “be his message”, the class perceived the importance of brevity and the impact of being able to communicate through body language how much we care about an issue. The programme also had a creative workshop on demonstrating leadership through art, where each team produced a picture of what they understand by leadership creatively through art. This was followed by a three-day public speaking course requiring each trainee to present two speeches one informative and one persuasive in front of the entire class where everyone was required to give marks and feedback for each speaker on a especially designed questionnaire.

The small group session took place in the last hour of each of the three-hour classes in the first two weeks. In each session, one member of the group presented a case of leadership failure from their own lives, and the rest of the group analyzed (among whom one member was the designated authority for one particular case) the problem in depth according to the leadership concepts taught in class and discussed the motivations and reasons for resistances which caused the failure, and losses of the leader and the system due to the failure. The group then came up with recommendations of future actions for that case. The small group session also required the team members to submit a questionnaire consisting of 8 questions as homework which were mostly concerned with each member's understanding of that day's group dynamics.

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The third core component is the community service project, the aim of which is the application of the leadership skills learned in class. The students visited two slums in Mirpur: beguntilla and T-block slums, and decided to start working in the more underdeveloped of the two: the T-block slum, located over a heavily polluted water body, supported on a foundation of bamboo. The problems of these people are endless the health care

situation within the slum is pitiful and far too expensive for its inhabitants' income level, and their sanitary system is decrepit. Due to lack of legal holding number, they don't get legal electricity and water supply, and have to depend upon illegal sources to get these commodities. Every time the legal authorities raid these slums, they confiscate all the electrical appliances. Even though a lot of these problems such as electricity supply were beyond the participants' reach, the teams still started off with a lot of energy and inspiration. They ran in-depth, comprehensive surveys to spot the major problems, and carefully planned out a project that would address the core issue within the limited budget and time.

After six days into the Mirpur project, the class prepared for a new community service camp in Narandi Alauddin Noorani Girls' High School in Monohordi, Narshingdi. Even though some projects went on in Mirpur, such as a training course prepared for 14 women by one group, and a sanitation project of another, new projects were hatched by the groups within 48 hours to fit the social and environmental needs of Monohordi, Norshingdi. Some of the groups adapted their Mirpur plan to Monohordi by some major and minor re-structuring, and others worked out new plans from scratch.

The projects in Monohordi were as follows: a tree-planting campaign, and a puppet show to raise awareness about women's issues in the girls' school, a health awareness campaign, an interactive hygiene awareness campaign through puppet show, a first aid, personal hygiene and food safety campaign and introduction of an innovative and cheap domestic water filtration technique. In total, BBLT 2009 participants completed more than 725 hours of community service. Even after the community projects, the students were busy with poster presentation and report writing, and analyzing the leadership problems faced in Mirpur.



Throughout the month, the course hammered on one important point again and again: the need for “adaptive” leadership. The BBLT 2009 graduates know that a lot of unforeseen problems will occur in their efforts of practicing leadership in the practical sphere. To tackle these problems, a leader has to come up with a set of responses and adapt to the changing situation in real-time. The need for a leadership that deals with

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people's mentalities, perspectives, values and priorities and brings about sustainable change, and does not go about providing temporary technical solutions.

(The writers are BBLT 2009 Graduates)

Behind the Scenes of BBLT 2009

Ejaj Ahmad shares his views with Star Campus

Ridwan Karim

ON the event of the stirring conclusion of the graduation ceremony of the second month-long Building Bridges through Leadership Training (BBLT) programme organized by the Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center (BYLC), Star Campus interviewed Ejaj Ahmad, the founder and president of the organization dedicated to bring about real change in the society by fostering leadership skills among the young generation.

Ejaj Ahmad reflected on the vision that has inspired the Davis Peace Prize winning concept of inculcating the passion of leadership through bridging the artificial divisions impeding the progress of society. He feels that there is a need to dispense with the pre-conceived and archaic notions of leadership, and mobilize a new generation of compassionate leaders who understand the value of community service. The traditional top-down leadership approach has to be replaced with a leadership model that can create change in society by positively impacting the lives of others.

One of the ground-breaking features of this programme was that the participating students were selected equally from English-medium schools, Bengali-medium schools and Madrassas through a rigorous and competitive procedure. The society of Bangladesh is sharply divided along several dimensions. That is why BYLC has taken up the cause of creating a more inclusive and tolerant society, and building bridges to fill in the socio-economic and educational gaps scarring the communities we live in. Ejaj Ahmad firmly believes that tangible change can only be brought about by learning to communicate across different societal strata. That is why a narrative of addition, not a narrative of division, is the clarion call of the hour.

One of the core components of the BBLT project was the community service project, whereby students were able to make use of their newly-acquired leadership skills. At the same time, Ejaj Ahmad underscored that BYLC is primarily a leadership center, not a social service club, whose strength lies in their innovative leadership curriculum. The central objective of BYLC is to create catalysts of change by nurturing the leadership qualities that lie within the youth themselves. Therefore, the decision to carry forward the experiences and lessons learnt by the participants of the programme during the last one month lies with them. Ejaj Ahmad believes that any active follow-up activities carried out by BYLC will only accentuate the mentality of following orders in the fresh graduates, rather than imbuing them with the confidence of assuming leadership roles.

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The social enterprise established by 3 graduates of the first BBLT batch is ample evidence that, once shown the way, the young generation will not hesitate to bear the mantle of responsibility and leadership by themselves.

Ejaj Ahmad believes that a bright future awaits Bangladesh. The youth is no longer content in being passive observers of the problems of the country; they are hungry for real change. All they require is a proper platform to provide them with opportunities. This is the invaluable lesson that BYLC has learnt from its experience in organizing BBLT 2009.

URL:

<http://www.thedailystar.net/campus/2009/08/01/camspotlight.htm>

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