Connecting the Young with the Community

When attending various mosques, centers and organisations, I have observed that many have a markedly strong representation of older people, with the addition of some children. Missing are the members of the community in their 20s and 30s, while these are the members who will tend to have the energy, motivation, and capability to bring these places to life and promote their growth. This was not the case 20-30 years ago.

This article hopes to ignite a conversation about why certain demographics (namely the young) are underrepresented in a cross-section of today's community organisations and their events.

What constitutes young in our context?

A broad description of young people here is those who have reached the age where they are making their own decisions on where to spend their time, energy and resources. I have not specified a minimum or maximum age for this consideration. I think the age of exclusion can vary between individuals and is not as relevant as behaviours. Generally, a young person in our context will have the following attributes. The list is not exhaustive:
- The ability to speak with other young people in a familiar and engaging way.
- Being familiar with the way young people engage with current technologies and being able to identify the appeal of these technologies.
- Being culturally aware (of the youth culture).
- The ability to maintain a meaningful conversation with other young people, rather than communicating with them like they are children.

The idea is that community organisations need to understand the young in order to deliver quality services that meet their needs. The best way to do this is by involving the young in the organization.

A History Lesson

Any student of *Seerah* will be aware of a number of young names featured prominently in the life of the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings upon him. A study of these names grants some insight into the roles they were given and the trust they were afforded. To keep things concise, I have mentioned only one of the accomplishments of each in the table below:

Personality	Age	Achievement
Al Arqam bin Abi Al Arqam	21	Hosted the Muslims in his home for their meetings and classes with the Prophet, peace and blessings upon him, despite the risk to himself if the idol-worshippers were to discover this.
Khalid bin Al Walid	30s	Accepted Islam and exhibited excellent strategy and leadership in battle.
Sa'd bin Mu'adh	Early 30s	Responsible for his entire tribe accepting Islam and was a strategic advisor to the Prophet, peace and blessings upon him.
Mu'adh bin Jabal	20s	Governor of Yemen.
Ali bin Abi Talib	25	Was asked to stay back in Mecca to settle the Prophet's affairs.
Mus'ab bin Umair	40	The Prophet's delegate to the people of Madinah
Ja'far bin Abi Talib	20s	Migrated to Ethiopia and represented Islam as well as all the Muslims who migrated there.
Abdullah bin 'Amr	33	Was permitted to write the hadith while other companions were instructed not to.
Zaid bin Thabit	Early 20s	Supervised the collection of the verses of the Quran into one Manuscript.

You will notice in the following hadith that the Prophet, peace and blessings upon him, in addition to giving them positions of authority and responsibility would at times praise their great qualities and mention them alongside some of the highly regarded companions:

عَنْ أَنَسٍ بْنِ مَالِكٍ، قَالَ: قَالَ رَسُولُ اللهِ صلى الله عليه وسلم " أَرْحَمُ أُمَّتِي بِأُمَّتِي أَبُو بَكْرٍ وَأَشَدُّهُمْ فِي أَمْرِ اللهِ عُمَرُ وَأَصْدَقُهُمْ حَيَاءً عُثْمَانُ وَأَقْرَؤُهُمْ لِكِتَابِ اللهِ أُبَيُّ بْنُ كَعْبٍ وَأَفْرَضُهُمْ زَيْدُ بْنُ ثَابِتٍ وَأَعْلَمُهُمْ بِالْحَلاَلِ وَالْحَرَامِ مُعَاذُ بْنُ جَبَلٍ أَلاَ وَإِنَّ لِكُلِّ أُمَّةٍ أَمِينًا وَإِنَّ أَمِينَ هَذِهِ الأُمَّةِ أَبُو عُبَيْدَةَ بْنُ الْجَرَّاحِ " ‑ رواه الترمذي وقال: حديث حسن صحيح

Anas bin Malik narrated that the Prophet peace and blessings upon him said: "The most merciful of my *Ummah* (people) towards my *Ummah* is Abu Bakr, and the toughest with respect to the commands of Allah is Umar, and the most truly modest of them is Uthman, and the best reciter of the Quran among them is Ubayy bin Ka'b, and the most knowledgeable among them with regard to inheritance is Zaid bin Thabit, and the most knowledgeable of them with regards to what is permissible and impermissible is Mu'adh bin Jabal, and every *Ummah* has an *amin* (upholder of the trust), and the *amin* of this *Ummah* is Abu 'Ubaidah bin Al Jarrah." – Jami' Al Tirmidhi

The observant reader will have noticed that 2 of these names appeared in the table above. Zaid bin Thabit and Mu'adh bin Jabal, both of whom made their contributions while in their early 20s. This would mean that they were nurtured and that they became known to the Prophet, peace and blessings upon him, as being ahead of others in these fields. It appears that the young at the time were empowered and enabled to achieve and were given positions of leadership and responsibility. Their value was recognized, their energy was guided into something of benefit, and they were able to identify their accomplishments. So where are the young Muslims of today?

The Risks we are currently facing

A young person is like a flowing river, driving its path through the land that poses the least resistance. There are some paths a river must not take, but what would you imagine would happen if the river was prevented from taking any path?[1]

It is not uncommon for a young person to lose motivation and subsequently lose confidence in an organisation. A range of factors can contribute to this, including when they feel their voice is not being heard and the direction of the organisation is not seen as relevant to the needs of the people. This is especially true today, where things happen very quickly and there are many competitors for a person's time, attention, and energy. I have seen that even when organisations profess the importance of involving the young in the da'wah effort and in senior positions, they struggle with it in practice. An organisation understandably will not want to endorse or support an idea they may see an issue with but for the benefit of all parties it is more appropriate to approach this in a more advanced way.

The Growth Mindset

One of the steps leaders in community organisations can take to ensure this does not happen is to adopt what is known in contemporary literature as a "growth mindset".[2] Having a growth mindset entails looking for opportunities rather than flaws, seeing challenges rather than obstacles, and always seeing potential for improvement. One of the ways an organisation can work towards having a healthy growth mindset is facilitate and drive the importance of regular upskilling for everyone involved.

In the corporate world, upskilling is an unrelenting part of the culture. Upskilling opportunities were abundant, and their pursuit was expected. This is also clearly noticeable for a range of professions, including psychology, teaching, accounting and law where requirements of ongoing accreditation include a minimum yearly requirement of professional development.
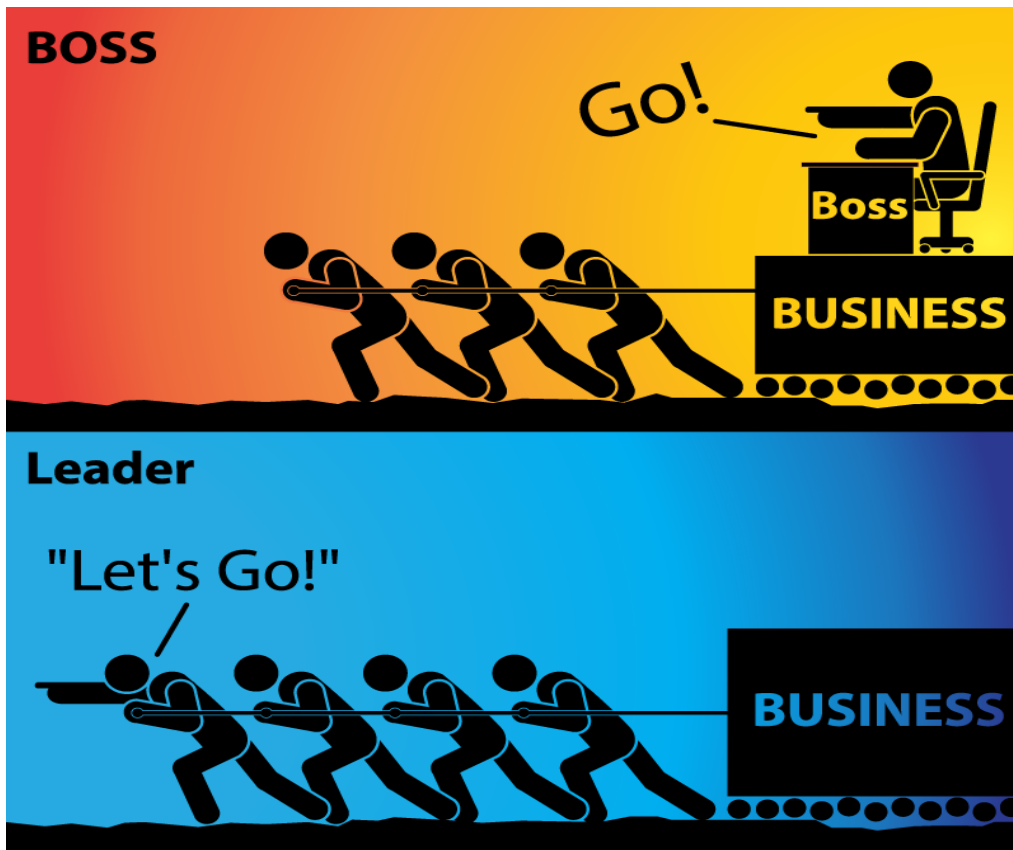
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[1] This is relevant not only for involvement with community organisations, but also in many other areas including identifying with family and even their faith.
[2] American Professor Carol Dweck discusses growth mindsets in her book "Mindset" (2008).

I think it is important for all members of community organisations, whether in paid or unpaid positions, to adopt an upskilling culture, so that they continue to offer their best, most effective selves in the service of the community. This is especially important in this fast-paced, ever-changing world we currently live in.

Are you just a boss or are you a leader?

It is a good idea for a person in any kind of managerial role to consider whether they are guiding or just ordering, whether they are inspiring or just issuing dull tasks. Consider the below illustration:

The suggestion is that the leader in the illustration builds more motivated, invested, and successful people. When it comes to community organisations, the goal is to serve the community, and the community is represented by the people. The role of the leader and the organisation is to produce outcomes for the people.

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Conclusion:

The needs of the community are to a large extent represented by the needs of the young. The inclusion of the young was exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings upon him. It is important for organisations to actively and regularly explore ways to include the young at the receiving end of a service, at the delivery end, and even at the development end. The young person being, as stated above, like a flowing river. They look to opening paths for themselves to progress through life. If they find the resistance in the organisation is too strong, they are likely to look elsewhere.

Organisations will be empowered to do their best work when they adopt a growth mindset and actively seek out upskilling opportunities. I would recommend budgeting for upskilling opportunities for all people involved in community organisations so that the organisation is at peak performance in its service of the community.

I ask Allah to guide all our community organisations to best practice models that delivers a great service to the community and meet the community's prevailing needs.

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