



Br. Moheeb Hussein Murray

“The young leading the young is like the blind leading the blind; “they will both fall into the ditch.”¹ That is the view of many people in today’s world toward youth. Unfortunately, some youth tend to perpetuate that view by starting projects or organizations with youthful vigor, but without the long-term commitment and necessary preparation to see their plans through, which can sometimes leave a mess for others in the community to clean up. Thus, this perception is an obstacle to overcome for almost any start-up Muslim youth organization. But it is a hurdle that is easily cleared with some early introspection, planning, and teamwork by the would-be leaders of such a youth organization.

As with any group, if the various aspects of leadership are properly balanced, a youth group’s chances for success increase dramatically. Having good leadership will provide the group with vision, direction, and continuity that will allow the group to achieve its mission and to transition from one set of leaders to another when necessary. With the importance of good, strong leadership in mind, the leaders of a youth organization should pay particular attention to achieving a balance of leadership as individuals, within the group dynamic, and with non-youth advisors, such as senior advisors or religious leaders.

Achieving the Balance at the Individual Level

Many people want to lead in a youth organization, but not everyone is able to do so effectively. Before assuming the mantle of leadership and its associated responsibilities, a person should first ask the following questions to determine if he or she has a proper balance among the following:

- A balance of skills – Do I have the skills that can be of benefit to the organization? Are my skills applicable to the purpose and goals of the organization? Are any shortcomings in my skills such that they will not negatively impact the organization? If I lack certain skills now, will I be willing and able to develop them through my work with the organization in a way that will not hold the organization back?
- A balance of missions – Are my personal “mission” and the organization’s mission in sync? How much do I really care about what the organization hopes to achieve? Am I committed to the long-term success of the organization even after I leave it, or am I merely looking for some short-term gratification? Is it my mission to merely receive the benefits of the organization, or to add value back into it?

¹ Lord Chesterfield, in a letter to his son Phillip Stanhope, *The Letters of Philip Dormer Stanhope, 4th Earl of Chesterfield*, vol. 3, p. 1057 (1932).

- Balance of values – Do my values correspond with those held by the organization? Am I willing to maintain or adjust my lifestyle so that it will not be in conflict with the values and teachings the organization seeks to promote? Am I willing to promote the organization’s values and teachings to others?

Achieving a Leadership Balance Within the Group

Leaders cannot lead in isolation. They must work with other leaders within the organization as well as with non-leadership individuals the group serves. Thus, they must be able to achieve a balance of leadership, not only within themselves, but with others as well. The following are some questions for leaders to consider:

- Are the individual leaders of the youth organization willing to lead collaboratively, or is each person on a power trip? Will they each balance their personal interests with the greater good of the organization?
- Can the leaders work together so that they can balance out their skills and shortcomings to move the organization forward efficiently and effectively?
- Are the leaders willing and able to balance their personal feelings against a sense of integrity and confidentiality such that the leadership’s “dirty laundry” is not aired all over the community?
- Are the leaders willing to balance their interests in leading the organization now with the interests of the organization in grooming new leaders for the future?
- Is the leadership of the group sufficiently concerned with maintaining a proper balance of male and female leadership so that the organization is as inclusive as possible?
- Will the leadership group sufficiently balance the social and business aspects of its work so as to properly uphold the values and teachings of the organization and further its mission? Can the leaders not only “talk the talk,” but “walk the walk?”

Achieving a Balance Between the Youth Leadership and the Non-Youth Leadership

There is perhaps no greater asset to a youth organization than experience. But by the very nature of a youth organization, its members are often relatively inexperienced, as they have had only limited exposure to the broader world. That is where the importance of having strong ties with non-youth leaders is critical. By leaning on their experience, a youth group can better avoid costly mistakes and more easily navigate the social and political landscapes that can hold youth organizations back.

Because the youth and non-youth advisors must work together for the betterment of the organization, but may have different ideas about how to do it, it is critically important that their roles be balanced. A few aspects of the dynamic between the youth and non-youth leadership to consider are:

- The youth must be willing to recognize that non-youth advisors have much to offer by way of experience, and should be willing to listen to suggestions and constructive criticism. Thus, it is a balancing act between having an organization run by youth and realizing that the youth simply do not “know it all.”
- The non-youth advisors should be willing to *assist* the youth organization toward achieving its mission without trying to do everything themselves. They must be able to balance their ability to help guide the organization with a sense of trust that the youth will be able to implement that guidance on their own. While offering guidance, they should also be open to new ideas.
- Like the youth leaders, the non-youth leaders must be able to balance the needs of their personal lives with the mission and vision of the organization, to ensure they are the right “fit” for the organization.
- The youth must balance the need to trust the guidance and leadership non-youth advisors can provide with the need for the youth to express their ideas. In other words, the youth should not be intimidated by non-youth advisors and merely abdicate to their wishes, but they should feel free to express their ideas in a respectful, constructive way that serves the organization. Usually, by working collaboratively with non-youth advisors and exploring new ideas, an optimum solution can be discovered.

In sum, proper balance in the leadership of a Muslim youth organization is critical. Without that balance, an organization can easily spin out of control before it ever gets off the ground. Therefore, it is important for the leadership to be balanced in starting the organization, running the organization, and perpetuating the organization for youth to come. Such a balance will come about where there is a balance among the youth leadership on an individual level and group level, and with non-youth advisors. After achieving such a balance, it is much easier for the organization to stay focused achieving its mission and vision – with the young leading the young *to success*, instead of “falling into the ditch.”

Written by: Brother Moheeb Hussein Murray

Brother Moheeb Hussein Murray is a practicing lawyer in the State of Michigan. A past Leadership Council Director of the Young Muslim Association of the Islamic Center of America and dedicated community activist, he is diligent and sincere community member in Southeast Michigan’s Shia community. To contact Br. Moheeb email at moheebm@comcast.net.