

To: Ruthi Gilat, Director
Education Department
The Yitzhak Rabin Center for Israel Studies

From: Ann Overton, Executive Director
The Mastery Foundation

Subject: Report on visit and program in November 2006

This memo serves as my report on our most recent visit and my recommendations for future visits.

Our work with the Young Leaders of Rahat on this visit

This was our third opportunity since July 2005 to work with the young leader group in Rahat. We held a two-day workshop in the community center in Rahat on November 3rd and 4th for 40 young men and women, ranging in age from about 12 to 19 years old. Of this total group, we estimate that no more than a third had participated in the two previous programs.

As before, our objective was to significantly influence the way in which these young people see and relate to the concept and practice of leadership. From our past experience, we know they tend to think and act from an authoritarian or hierarchical model. Our goal was to broaden this view so that they begin to think of relationship, listening, and speaking as essential and powerful tools in working with others.

The first day was focused on exercises in listening – listening both to themselves and to others. Using the World Café exercise, we began with groups of four or five seated around small tables covered in paper. One person at each table acted as the host. We gave the groups four rounds of topics or questions to discuss and packages of crayons so they could draw or diagram their discussions. Between rounds, we asked them to report on their conversations and then asked everyone but the host to move to a new table.

The topics and questions we presented them with were: Tell a story about a time when someone in this room made something happen that wasn't going to happen anyway. Tell a story about a time you made something happen that wasn't going to happen anyway. From the stories you just heard, what did you notice about leadership? From the conversations you just had, what is good leadership?

The conversations were very spirited and rich with examples from their families, school, and community. These topics worked to bring their discussions of leadership away from more idealistic situations removed from their own experience to a very personal and practical level. And in the process they moved from being observers of leadership to the practitioners of it.

Over the course of the morning, they also began to see how their experience supported our assertion that leadership happens in the give and take of conversation with others and the importance of developing the skills of listening and speaking.

After lunch, we began with a movement exercise, both to engage them physically and to give them an experience they could relate to the points we wanted to make about listening. In the exercise, the whole group moves around the room together following instructions from the leader. There were three basic instructions: “Red light,” “Green light,” and “Jump.” (This was a bit of a challenge for us because of the language differences, but they caught on fast.) As the exercise progresses, it becomes more interesting as the leader tells the group to stop and go at the same time without being instructed to, or to have only four people go at a time, again without anyone saying who the four people should be.

After the exercise, there was an animated discussion about how each of them had listened – not just to the leader but also to themselves and others in the group. It was clear that even when there was no verbal instruction, each person was still listening and responding to some cue. From the experience of the exercise, it was easier to see how who and what we are listening to is a key factor in leadership.

On the second day, which was designed to emphasize speaking as a critical skill of leadership, we began by giving them a way to develop better relationships within groups. Again working at paper-covered tables, we asked them to design questions they could ask each person in a group or team that would connect them to the purpose of the group and to each other. Then each table shared their connection questions with the other groups in the room.

It was interesting that while they worked through this exercise well, they seemed to find it less relevant than other parts of the workshop. On reflection, I think this is the result of the nature of and assumptions about relationships and connectedness in Bedouin communities. Their experience of connection is quite different from that of more individuated cultures. Learning the principles and skills of connecting people in small groups is still useful to them, but in the future, we would approach it in a way that built on and went beyond what they already know.

Again, after lunch we had an activity designed to get them moving and to set up our conversation about different ways of speaking. This time, we divided them into two groups by gender. As your facilitators, Sharon and Lihi, had pointed out to us, there are a number of gender issues present in the group. So we were aware that in Bedouin society, boys and girls do not mingle freely in social situations, and certainly it would never be considered acceptable for them to touch each other. In fact, Sharon told us that some parents are reluctant to let their daughters participate in the Young Leaders program because it is coed.

But these are also teenagers with iPods and cell phones who, more than most teenagers, must live and deal with a high degree of tension between the restrictive ways of an older, traditional culture and permissiveness of the modern culture all around them. All of this is a powerful

undercurrent in the group, but – whether for lack of trust or safe space – it is never discussed. Before this program was rescheduled from July (because of the war in northern Israel and Lebanon) and moved from Tel Aviv to Rahat, we had planned to separate the groups and let them talk about it. Now, having found ourselves conducting the workshop in Rahat, we felt there was not enough time and distance to include that conversation in this program.

So for the Crossing the Swamp exercise, there was a boys' team and a girls' team. The room was divided in half and each half was declared to be a deadly swamp, full of crocodiles. Across each swamp we laid out a path of 'stones' (sheets of paper) and told each team the objective was to cross the swamp without getting 'eaten' (touched by one of the facilitators) by the mean old hungry crocodiles. And just to make it interesting, if no one was standing on one of the stones, the crocodiles would eat that, too. Whichever group got all its members from one side of the swamp to the other was the winner.

Raucous fun ensued, but after a few minutes, the girls' team won. This did not go over too well with the boys. So after some group discussion, we re-set the swamps, and let them do the exercise again. This time, the boys – having learned something about collaboration from the girls – won. Again, we debriefed the exercise, asking them what they had noticed about the whole experience.

We then related the swamp of the exercise to what we call 'swamp talk' – that is the kind of speaking made up of complaints, excuses, opinions, and stories that often swamps our best attempts at leadership. Before there was time to move on to other, more powerful ways of speaking, one of the girls asked for an example of swamp talk and asked if her comment to her friends about a mistake the girls made in doing the exercise was swamp talk. From across the room, one of the boys interjected a statement along the lines of "Girls are a mistake." (They were speaking in Arabic, so we had to wait for the translation.)

The girl who had asked the question felt compelled to respond to this comment, and before long the entire room had erupted in a back-and-forth argument between the boys and the girls, each side justifying their view and escalating the emotional and decibel level of the conversation. When they had argued themselves out, I stepped in to say that this was the perfect example of swamp talk. Yes, there had been a lot of speaking, but none of it had made a difference. No opinions were changed, nothing new was said, nothing creative happened, no new possibilities had opened up for anyone. Don't ask why the world looks the way it does, or why there isn't peace, or why communities everywhere struggle to move forward. We know why, and we – when we speak, listen, and act this way – are the reason why.

It was what is sometimes called 'a teaching moment.' While we never got back to our original program outline about speaking promises, requests, and declarations, we did spend half an hour talking about what they had not been able to discuss together about the differences and disparities between men and women in Bedouin society. For them, it was clearly a breakthrough in awareness and engagement with a subject previously thought undiscussable and left to fester beneath the surface.

As we completed the workshop and had lunch, the atmosphere among the youth was more sober and earnest. They continued to talk seriously with each other about what had happened, how they felt about it, and the implications for them. Both Sharon and Lihi were very excited that the subject was now public and that the group was engaged in it in a way that was not positional but thoughtful and questioning. I hope they have been able to use this opening to continue the conversation with them.

Conclusion and Recommendation

While I could repeat here each of the conclusions and recommendations made in my Spring 2006 report, I would instead like to emphasize my one overriding recommendation, which is that we find a way to train all the Rabin Center program leaders and facilitators in the tools we use and teach.

As you already know, as a result of this and previous workshops, Sharon and Lihi have made this request, and never more strongly than they did at the end of this program. Because they (like you) have had the opportunity to observe and learn from our methodology, they know how powerful and effective it can be. If we can find the funding and support, I am confident that within two years we could have transferred to the staff of the Education Department enough of our knowledge base to leave you with the ability to independently train your facilitators in our technology. I hope we will be able to focus more of our efforts on beginning this process in 2007.

As always, it is a pleasure to work with you and the staff at the Rabin Center. Your work teaching that the principles of social equality and respect for the individual within a community are the foundation of democracy is the real and difficult work of peace building and of creating a new future. We are honored to be your partners in this and look forward to continuing to work with you.

