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LEADERSHIP IN ACTION REFLECTION

Rise Academy, San Francisco

Reflecting on my time working with Rise Academy on the "Fitrah & Fulfillment" project, I'm struck by how much I learned, the relationships I built, and the occasional moments of humor that made the whole experience unforgettable. The project aimed to develop a sex education curriculum that aligned with Islamic teachings—a task that required careful thought, sensitivity, and a lot of listening.

From the start, my meetings with the Saba Center and Rise Academy board members were eye-opening. They were supportive of the project, but it was clear they had concerns. The board members, many of whom were seasoned professionals in the tech industry, questioned how we could blend traditional Islamic values with modern sex education. I remember thinking, "Sure, I've got this," but when one of the board members asked, "Can you give us an example of this working elsewhere?" I realized I should've come armed with more concrete examples. The issue was that this has not really been experimented with elsewhere but for these board members hailing from Silicon Valley with their tech backgrounds and business knowledge, proof of concept was crucial in selling the pitch.

As the project progressed, I really started to connect with the community, especially during Muharram, the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar. Muharram is a time of mourning and reflection for Shia Muslims, commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussain. Volunteering during this period was a profound experience. I joined in organizing charity drives, serving food, and attending the lectures that are central to this time of year. The community's dedication to justice, compassion, and human rights was palpable, and it resonated deeply with the goals of our project. It wasn't just about creating a curriculum—it was about weaving these core values into the education we were developing.

Talking with parents, particularly the older generation, was both enlightening and, at times, hilarious. These were folks who had seen their community evolve over decades, and while they were conservative, they understood the need for their children to be informed about topics like gender, consent, and healthy relationships. I remember one parent, after a long

discussion about the importance of consent, leaned in and said with a wink, "You know, in my day, we didn't talk about this stuff. Now my kid's going to be smarter than I ever was!" It was a funny moment, but it also highlighted how times have changed and how even the most traditional members of the community see the value in what we were doing.

The resident Imam was another key figure in shaping the project. He was deeply knowledgeable about Islamic teachings and was incredibly supportive of our efforts to address topics like marriage, women's rights, and love within an Islamic framework. His guidance ensured that the curriculum was not only educational but also spiritually enriching. He even joked that we were taking on a task usually reserved for scholars with decades of experience, but he was glad to help us "youngsters" find our way. His insights were invaluable in making sure that the program would be well-received by the community.

A pivotal moment in the project came when we conducted a survey with students in grades 9 through 12. Their honesty was both refreshing and sobering. Many students admitted that most of their knowledge about sex and relationships came from friends or the internet, leading to a lot of confusion and misconceptions. They were eager for accurate information that respected their cultural and religious values. It was clear that the curriculum we were developing was not just necessary but urgently needed.

When it came time to present the tentative curriculum to the board, I was a bit nervous. The board members, with their tech backgrounds, were initially skeptical. They asked tough questions, and at times it felt like I was trying to sell them on a new software upgrade. But instead of talking about the latest app, I was discussing the importance of teaching their kids about consent and healthy relationships. I cracked a joke to break the tension, saying, "Think of this curriculum as the latest update—except this one won't crash your system!" The joke landed well, and it helped me connect with them as parents who, like all parents, just want the best for their kids.

After that meeting, I worked closely with a few teachers to refine the curriculum based on the board's feedback. We adjusted the language to make it more accessible, scaled back on some of the more advanced topics, and added more direct references to Islamic teachings. This process was a reminder of how important it is to be flexible and to collaborate with others to create something that works for everyone.

The real turning point came when I piloted the first module with a group of grade 12 students. The small group setting allowed for open discussions, and I could see how much they appreciated being able to talk about these topics in a space that respected their faith. After the session, a group of students invited me to a Yemeni café nearby. I happily accepted, and we spent the evening talking about everything from TikTok trends to their thoughts on the curriculum. At one point, trying to keep up with their slang, I asked, "So, what's the new 'lit' these days?" They burst out laughing and told me that "lit" was still in, but "cringe" was probably more my speed. It was a humbling and slightly embarrassing moment, but a reminder nonetheless that true leadership requires learning from those you aim to lead.

Later that week, the leadership team at Rise Academy invited me to dinner at a restaurant with a breathtaking view of the Pacific Ocean. As the sun set over the waves, we discussed the progress of the project and how it could serve as a model for other communities. The beauty of the setting matched the warmth and support I felt from the team. They were genuinely interested in how the students had engaged with the material and were pleased with the positive feedback from the pilot session. We talked about the broader implications of the project and how it might be adapted for other religious or cultural contexts.

Reflecting on my time at Rise Academy, I'm filled with gratitude. The project was about so much more than just developing a curriculum—it was about building relationships, earning trust, and bridging the gap between tradition and modernity in a way that respected the community's values. The personal moments—whether it was a deep conversation with a parent, a joke with a student, or a reflective dinner with the leadership team—added a richness to the experience that I'll carry with me. Working with this community has taught me the importance of empathy, cultural humility, and the power of connection in leadership. And, of course, it's taught me that no matter how much I think I'm in touch with youth culture, there's always something new to learn—like the fact that "yeet" is still cool, but I might need to work on my "cringe" meter!