

How the Afghan Institute of Learning is at the center of cultural change in Afghanistan



Dr. Sakena Yacoobi shares the core values at the heart of AIL's mission.



What I have known intuitively and practiced for nearly two decades among the Afghan people is now being recognized as the most effective way of managing humanitarian efforts. NGOs and even for-profit corporations have seen the success of the Afghan Institute of Learning and come to me to ask what the secret to our success is.



AIL Founder and Executive Director, Dr. Sakena Yacoobi, has been recognized worldwide as a leader in transforming lives through community-based learning.

I tell them that I have always begun at the grass-roots level. From AIL's beginning, I have trusted the people we serve to know best what their needs are, and I invite them to become involved in finding creative and innovative solutions to meet those needs.

I take the time to listen to them to establish a level of trust among the community, and I build on that trust by following through with programs and training that make sense to them — solutions that bring the community together.

To build trust and integrity among the people — from the most vulnerable beneficiaries to the least-affected government leaders — is the key to bringing about the kind of sustainable change that we are now seeing in the people we serve.

We like to say Afghanistan is being rebuilt one community at a time, because it's true. It's what we see every day in the community centers: Women and girls, men and boys, the entire community transformed in the way they see themselves, their roles in society, and their potential as a people to progress toward higher goals.

AIL is helping to bring about a cultural shift in Afghanistan through our quality education and training programs. As a result, Afghans have a raised awareness of democracy, the rights of citizenship and rule of law. They have excelled in learning and have come to believe in their ability to create a better future for their country.

Afghans have accepted their individual responsibility as change-makers and are willingly working together to restore Afghanistan to a land of peace, equality and harmony. At its core, our work is bringing balance and harmony to people's lives.

At the heart of this cultural shift are the five core values that guide all of our work at AIL and have found their way into the hearts and minds of the Afghan people we serve. I encourage you to make these core values yours and watch what grows from them.



Listen and Learn: Plant seeds of trust

People in conflict zones want and need our help, but they don't need organizations handing out cookie cutter solutions, telling them what to do. They need to know we respect and care for them enough to listen to their struggles and concerns and to learn what it is they need to better the situation. So we

ask the questions that will help us understand their immediate needs — such as trained teachers, books, sewing classes, or healthcare — and long-term goals.

Through their answers we learn who the community is at its core — what are its values, what are the hopes and dreams of its people, and what obstacles stand in its way. The communities we serve want teachings that bring about peace, justice, love, and equality.

By gaining a clear understanding of their history and a vision for their future, we are able to develop a culturally sensitive response to meeting their needs.



Leverage Community Support: Get people to join hands and work together

At AIL we don't move forward with any plans or programs until we are assured of the community's full support. We stress the need for each member and community to contribute something — whatever they can afford — as a sign of their commitment to support our programs and their willingness to be a part of the solution. We raise the standards for participation, and in meeting them, their self-esteem grows. Over time, members of the Afghan community have come to see their individual potential for self-sufficiency and the power they have to shape the future of their country.



Lead the Way: Pave the path to reaching each person's goals

AIL takes the lead to implement our community-tailored programs, and in so doing, teaches what it means to be a leader.

We demonstrate confidence in our programs and every community member by coming alongside them as they take their first steps toward their goals. We make good on our promise to help by offering quality, holistic education, equipping them with the tools and resources needed for their success. And, we encourage them every step of the way. We do our part to help them reach their goals, and they are happy to do theirs.



Evaluate your work: Collaborative discussion results in new directions

Each program, training or new initiative AIL sponsors is evaluated periodically by staff and participants to determine that we are meeting our objectives.

We look at what worked and what didn't. We celebrate the wins and enlarge our circle of influence as other communities realize the power of education to better their lives. We also learn from the losses — revising existing programs to better meet needs or creating new programs to keep communities moving forward and closer to their goals.



New goals: Innovation never stops

Our work brings us great joy and a wonderful sense of fulfillment. But it is also hard — and sometimes dangerous — work. As goals are met, new ones are added. The work seems to never end.

When we find ourselves mentally, emotionally and physically tired — maybe even worn down by the demands of our work — we go back to the beginning. We remind ourselves

of the why behind our work, the mission behind our methods, and the inspiration that fueled our work in the first place.

For me, that inspiration has always been my belief in the power of education to change lives. If you teach people how to reach their goals, they will thrive. I have found my way in my work with AIL by regularly going inward to listen to what my heart is telling me. In quiet reflection, I am often able to see a new direction to take or find a solution to an on-going problem. Always, I find new energy for the journey and the courage to renew my commitment to our mission.

These core values have proven invaluable in our work. Over the years AIL has supported more than 340 learning centers, and now support 44 in eight provinces of Afghanistan. Each one is community-driven and supported. All have become Women's Networking Centers, places where women and children can learn to read and write, develop skills, and access information about peace, health, human rights, gender equality and violence against women.

It has taken time, but Afghan women, men and children are rebuilding their communities around our centers. These centers are the places where people have learned to trust one another and to keep their communities safe together. They are the models for the country we know that Afghanistan can be—one of peace, equality and harmony.

AFGHAN INSTITUTE OF LEARNING

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