

## WUN – Vancouver, September 2017

### My journey: triangles, circles and other geometric reflections

First of all thank you for the opportunity to share my journey. I do not believe that it is up to me to declare myself a leader so I have retitled this thought as “**my discoveries about leadership during my journey**”. I will attempt to answer some of the questions that Steve sent us:

- What is your personal leadership journey?
- How were you influenced and by whom?
- What are some of the key principles which guide your understanding of the Y and leadership of it?
- What are your hopes for the future?

As a student of mathematics, geometric shapes such as the triangle, the circle and the Mobius strip are the most helpful symbols I could find for organizing my story.

- So we begin with **the triangle, or pyramid**, in my culture, because you can't understand my story without understanding that I came to North America as a child born into a Muslim family from Egypt. That I came to find a home in the YMCA with its holistic understanding of spirit-mind-body, and its symbolic triangle, may therefore be of no surprise to you. There is much common ground to be found in the Abrahamic traditions shared by Muslims, Christians and Jews. That I was fortunate enough to land in a city that is one of the most exciting experiments in pluralism and multiculturalism helped to create a deep sense of belonging.
- While I have learned from many leaders and as Tennyson said in his poem Ulysses “I am a part of all that I have met” the one thing that has influenced me most, has been family. They have taught me, and continue to teach me, everything I have needed to know:
  - My parents sacrificed and endured significant hardships as we made our way out of Egypt to the projects in Pittsburgh, back to Egypt and then to Germany before finally coming to Toronto. Throughout this uncertain journey my mother and father displayed a strong sense of optimism and hope. They never panicked and focused on making a better life for their children. Regardless of our financial state – and we did find ourselves without money or country on more than one occasion – we were always given a gift for our birthdays and holidays stressing the importance of rituals and generosity in challenging times. In the face hardships my mother and father were together as partners and remained resolute and steadfast setting an example for me.

- My wife Ann – has shown me time and again the value of persistence. She has been courageous and relentless in her devotion and energy to saving our youngest child Kareem who was born with a condition called Chromosome Deletion Syndrome, whose development peaked at the age of three before finding himself under siege with convulsions that have left him entirely helpless. He is now 26.
- My youngest child, Kareem – keeps me completely grounded in the mystery of daily life and never fails to remind me of life’s central purpose: love. He generates nothing but love and kindness in all those around him despite what he has been through. He is our family’s greatest gift. He has provided me with clear perspectives on what is truly important.
- The second thing that will help you understand my story is to know that I stopped reading management books. That is not to say that we do not have an obligation to apply the most effective management techniques to advance our mission in a sustainable manner. We have a strong fiduciary accountability to our communities and to ourselves. But there is no one school of thought that I hold to. Leadership is not a “thing” that can be taken apart and reassembled like a car engine. It is about the person one chooses to be and how one navigates through this world with people in order to achieve a common good. We may hold the title of executive by the institution but it is our volunteers, staff and community, and the impact we have that will decide whether we are worthy of the title of leader.
- I recall as a child in the sixties watching with awe the civil rights movement in the USA and how stirred I was by its leaders. It was also the same era when John Kennedy put out the challenge to put a man on the moon and bring him back. What stood out for me and is etched in my mindset until this day was the line “we do these things not because they are easy but because they are hard”. The antithesis of what I often hear “under promise and over deliver”. It inspired me to, as they say “reach for the moon and even if you don’t succeed you will be among the stars” and as Eleanor Roosevelt once said “the future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams”.
- In my frustration with the flavor-of-the-month anecdotes from management theory, I turned to science because of the questions it asks, the humility of scientists in acknowledging what they do not know, the awe it inspires as we come to understand this world better, the tentative structures it creates to contain chaos and find patterns; its nurturing of curiosity and creativity in one’s thinking. It has opened me to different ways of thinking and being.
- As I have worked in our federation over the years, the triangle of my youth and early days at the Y was strangely transformed into **a circle**. How did this come to be? Very

simply, I saw that the circle as a geometric figure has an infinite capacity to expand. That for me it has four key elements. When sitting in a circle you can always fit one more person in. Every point on the circle is equidistant from the centre (the YMCA triangle). And everyone in a circle is visible. As the circle has an infinite number of points so it has no limitations. It is about possibility and hope. And as Canadian author Margaret Atwood said in one of her books “we must be a beacon of hope, because if you tell people there's nothing they can do, they will do worse than nothing.” You’ll rarely find a square or rectangular table in my office. For me that is the nature of the YMCA’s work.

- And with that realization, fell seven principles that I endeavor to work from:
  - Begin with the premise that the person I am sitting with is doing the best they can in that moment and focus on their strengths, reminding myself that context is everything: what is a weakness in one set of circumstances can be a strength in another.
  - Modern life and providing leadership to the modern organizational life has become entirely too complex for any single mind to embrace. It isn’t about an *individual’s* intelligence or capacity for problem solving. The only way to be effective is to share leadership and bring many hearts and minds to bear upon a challenge.
  - When I openly share leadership, I am made vulnerable. It is not comfortable, but I have learned the admission of one’s vulnerability, in that moment, can be transformed into a gift: it allows for our humanity to shine through and to connect with others. It relieves us of the need to try to make what is uncertain, certain. It allows us to acknowledge that our decisions and behavior impact others (sometimes with unintended consequences); it frees us to apologize and ask forgiveness.
  - For those of us in executive roles there is a constant danger of becoming isolated from the front line of our work and communities. Our privilege of position may have us forget that it is the volunteers and staff who deliver on our mission. So staying connected and grounded in our work is a high priority for me. For me this is a constant a reminder that the bond between privilege/leadership and the group is fragile. It is easily broken when not understood that there is a price to leadership: a willingness to run *into* the danger to protect those who depend on us.
  - One of the difficult challenges I have faced is determining with whom to part company. What programs to divest. What opportunities to say no to. The tension between loyalty to a person who has given years to the work and the

responsibility to the Association is difficult at best. I have found that basing decisions on principles of dignity and respect is critical to demonstrating our values as we manage these difficult matters. It's incumbent on leaders to make the tough decisions. As has been said "strategy is about choice" but that is easier said than done.

- The philosopher Schopenhauer once said, "Every man takes the limits of his own field of vision for the limits of the world." Said otherwise, not sure how you can aspire to leadership if you don't understand yourself, your biases and vulnerabilities. Konrad Adenauer, a post-WW I German statesman said, "We are all born under the same sky, but we do not all have the same horizon." These express my commitment to self-reflection, and with that understanding, my devotion to the principles of diversity and social inclusion.
  - I have come to understand that we are an organization with vision and a willingness to strive for it. Our focus is on creating and providing the tools that allow communities to thrive. For that to happen, functions have to align to the work. We need the right people committed to the work to not limit our horizons as a "YMCA" leader, but to what it might mean to be a community leader.
- And so the circle as symbol has been transformed into a **Möbius strip** – where the outside and inside edges are one. My inner awareness of a self that is inextricably bound by family, cultural heritage, my life at the YMCA and my relationship to the broader community means there is no beginning or end to the flow between these. My *self* is not a separate entity from these. I have nothing but gratitude for the richness of all that this represents and what I have been given. I only hope that I continue to be afforded the opportunity to encourage others to stand in the circle with me, to widen our reach and make room for the next person; to understand the joy of service to others.