



Unlikely Leaders

Maryam Bibi

Richard Blundel:

My unlikely leader is a woman in her early 60s. She comes from north-west Pakistan from a remote rural area. She is an unassuming woman, very traditionally-dressed, and her leadership has done much to benefit the lives of women and children in this region of Pakistan.

I'd like to introduce you to Maryam Bibi.

My name is Richard Blundell. I'm a senior lecturer in enterprise development at the Open University and I work in the Department of Public Leadership and Social Enterprise.

Maryam co-founded Khwendo Kor, a non-profit, non-governmental and non-partisan organisation that operates in the remote tribal regions of north-west Pakistan. Maryam's vision has been to promote the development of women and children, and a progressive society.

Khwendo Kor is a Pashto term and it means 'Sister's Home'. It's built schools to provide educational opportunities for young women. It's trained traditional birth attendants. And in my own interest area, it's set up micro credit schemes.

And this grass-roots organisation that Maryam founded in 1993 has now grown into a really substantial undertaking that operates from seven offices around the region, and employs around 300 people.

Maryam's an unlikely leader in two distinct but related ways. Firstly, there's her capacity to break out of this traditional society that I talked about earlier. She was born to an illiterate woman and she grew up in a deeply traditional community, married at a young age. By the time she was in her 20s she had four children. But she did manage to get an education.

I think she can also be described as unlikely in the way that she challenges many cosy western assumptions about leadership. She challenges our overly-individualistic view of leadership. In Khwendo Kor the task of leadership is inherently collective. Leadership is shared amongst the team of similarly courageous, determined and visionary co-workers.

Of course, this is by no means unique but it's often obscured in the west. If you look, for example, at the popular media representation of heroic industry leaders and entrepreneurs, she challenges the notion that leadership is all about command and control. Fundamental to Maryam's work is the task of building trust and legitimacy over an extended period.

Social structures in these predominantly rural communities where she works are deeply conservative, feudal and patriarchal. And there's this really sharp segregation of women and men. Each initiative that she works on has to start from the ground-up, recognising the needs of tribal leaders and all the other different parties that are involved. Her secret seems to be in combining this profound local insight with new forms of knowledge. And it's this combination that provides the basis for real and lasting change.

Lastly, we in the west have a lot to learn about resilience and its role in entrepreneurial leadership. Entrepreneurs often have to deal with setbacks, but Maryam and her colleagues operate in conditions that most of us can barely imagine. How do they endure when, despite their patient efforts to build legitimacy, a new school is bombed? Or when new initiatives prompt very real threats of violence against them?

Despite these formidable challenges, Maryam's organisation has managed to improve the life chances of thousands of women, children and men.

We have our own fair share of economic, social and environmental problems that are in desperate need of better solutions. I think the largely untold stories of Maryam, and of many others like her, need to be better understood. The way they pursue a clear moral vision with humility, courage and persistence should challenge, inform and inspire us.

I think in boxing there is a lot of swagger and posturing.

What shines through with Nicola is her modest actions and her behaviours engage people. And Prime Ministers and other leaders want to be connected with her now.