

## S E S S I O N 6

# How Will We Empower Each Other?

### Session Objectives

- To analyze what empowerment means.
- To discuss the long-term value of empowering others.
- To examine how a leader can be empowering.
- To share participants' personal strategies for empowering others.

### Suggestions for Facilitation

Read aloud the following story about Sakena Yacoobi's efforts to educate, train, and empower her fellow Afghans in refugee camps in Pakistan.

Discuss among the group her strategies for compounding her efforts to have a wide and long-lasting impact. A group activity designed to explore the power of positive intent and communication within a group setting follows.

The Question and Answer (Q & A) facilitation method is a good tactic for this session. By focusing on the last three-four questions following the story, the facilitator can broaden the discussion and encourage the participants to think and talk about themselves and their own experiences (see Appendix B for more information).

## Work with People, Help People Learn

### **Sakena Yacoobi: Educator**

*Sakena Yacoobi left Afghanistan as a young woman in the early 1970s to attend university in the United States where she studied biology and later received a Masters Degree in Public Health. Thousands of miles from home, Yacoobi observed with growing alarm the developing political unrest in Afghanistan. When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1980, she lost contact with much of her extended family. Aware of the difficulties many Afghans were facing, Yacoobi was inspired to raise funds and collect clothing and basic essentials to send them. She teamed up with other foreign students and colleagues from Asia and the Middle East to bring relief to her compatriots struggling in refugee camps, while pressing U.S. immigration authorities to grant her parents and siblings political asylum.*

*In 1988, Yacoobi secured the safe passage of her family to the U.S. but her concern for the fate of other Afghan refugees persisted. After four years of watching the suffering from the sidelines, Yacoobi, who was by then teaching science to university students in the U.S., decided to leave her position to work in the refugee camps in Pakistan. She felt the time had come to use her abilities to empower her people through education. She found the camps' inhabitants handicapped by poverty, corruption, and pervasive hopelessness. She resolved to provide Afghans with the schooling and training they would need to rebuild their country.*

*Yacoobi became the coordinator of the International Rescue Committee's female education programs for Afghan refugees, and developed teacher training projects aimed at helping teachers strengthen students' learning skills in and out of the classroom. Rather than relying on gaining knowledge through memorization, the curriculum emphasized independent inquiry and analysis. The first fifteen women in the program in turn trained 50 additional teacher trainers, who trained others, culminating in over 3,000 participants. Yacoobi was particularly interested in the welfare of Afghan girls, who were suffering unique deprivation in the camps. She endeavored to establish teaching standards and to increase attendance in 25 local girls' schools. The effort led to an increase in the number of girls from 3,000 to 15,000 in just one year.*

*In 1995, Yacoobi and two of her colleagues founded the Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL) in Peshawar, Pakistan. Her vision was ambitious: to plan and implement programs that would enhance the quality of education at all levels for every Afghan refugee. In its first year, AIL conducted four seminars that were attended by only 20 teachers. In the*

*following year, 100 teachers were trained. Soon schools throughout the refugee camps were sending their teachers for training and today over 3,000 teachers have participated in the training courses. To better touch on the concerns affecting women's lives in the camps, special workshops were added to address human rights, violence against women, and health education issues.*

*Today, there are very few options for Afghan refugees seeking university or graduate level education in Pakistan. Yacoobi's dream now is to see accredited university courses in computer science, the health sciences, psychology, and education offered through the Internet to help provide the skills needed to create a healthy and prosperous Afghan society. Moreover, she hopes that one day education programs can be extended to women inside Afghanistan itself.*

*Asked about what motivates her to empower others, Yacoobi replied, "When you give something of yourself, give your best. Work with people and help people learn. I try to help people through community participation to become self-sufficient. . . . This way Afghans can get out. Out means to be released, to be free, to speak their minds . . . . This is the way I am helping to rebuild our country . . . ."*<sup>19</sup>

## Questions for Discussion

- What are Sakena Yacoobi's connections to and feelings toward the community that she seeks to empower?
- What lessons does she learn from her constituency? How do its needs guide her?
- How does Yacoobi capitalize on her personal experience and training?
- What are her short-term goals? What is her long-term vision?
- Why is learning through independent inquiry and analysis emphasized? What are the advantages or disadvantages of this approach?
- How does Yacoobi pass on her ideas and/or vision?
- How does the educational model she uses empower women and Afghans in general?
- What does empowerment mean to you?
- Do you consider yourself to be empowered? How can you further empower yourself?
- How do you or can you empower others? Why? What strategies would you use?
- Is empowering others a component of principled leadership? Why or why not?

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<sup>19</sup> Based on materials sent by, and a telephone interview with, Sakena Yacoobi on December 14, 2000 by Women's Learning Partnership.

## Group Activity: Empowering Others

*Allow approximately one hour for this exercise.*

1. This exercise is designed to offer a brief experience of how to empower each other through giving and receiving positive feedback. The facilitator or another volunteer keeps time for this exercise. When the time-keeper starts the exercise, everyone is instructed to find a partner.
2. For five minutes the partners in each pair speak to one another. Each partner will provide the information requested below. Partners may take turns responding to each item, or each partner may answer all three at once.
  - State something you particularly like about the other person (her ideas, the way she works, listens, speaks, etc.).
  - Describe an activity you would like to do with the other person or something you would like to learn from her.
  - Provide a piece of advice that might be helpful to the other person.
3. After five minutes, the time-keeper asks everyone to seek out a new partner with whom to repeat the exercise.
4. When everyone has spoken to four partners in total, the group reconvenes to discuss the exercise and to consider the following questions:
  - What was easy about this exercise? What was difficult?
  - Was any of the information received from other participants particularly welcome or helpful? If so, what was it? Why did you like hearing it? Was it the manner in which the positive information was conveyed, or was it what was said?
  - Did the exercise help you to know or understand a little better some of the workshop participants?
  - Did the exercise generate trust? Was communication open and candid? Why or why not?
  - Did the exercise enhance your feelings towards the group generally? Why or why not?

