

# COMMUNITY TIMES

## Akhlakona: An Ethical Program



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The prevalent view amongst Egyptians is that ethics and morality are on a continuous path of decline. Despite the abundance of religiosity exhibited on every corner of the Egyptian street, the core of religious teachings seems to be missing. In the absence of morality passed down either through a system or through reasonable religious leadership, Egyptians thirst for ethics and character.

These are a few reasons that prompted “Akhlakona”, a program by “Edge Consultants” aimed at character development and ethical training. “Edge Consultants” was founded in the late nineties by Iman Sabry whose main interest is the human character. Sabry has a degree in psychology from the American University in Cairo (AUC) as well as numerous diplomas and certificates in character development from various universities, such as Harvard and the University of Florida.

“I wanted to bring a group of people who are unique in character and create a project that is distinctive in nature,” explains Sabry.

Akhlakona targets youngsters from ages 4 to 15 years of age. They either participate in summer camps or year-round programs. Its goal is to spread ideals that are found to be lacking in our society like respect, confidence, honesty and responsibility, to name a few. Participants are taken through several stations where activities help with character building and lesson learning. There is a hands-on station for arts and crafts; an illustrator station, to teach kids how to draw; a story telling station, a cooking station, a theatre station and an outdoor station for physical activities and games.

“We try, to the best of our abilities, not to be too theoretical in what we teach to the kids,” says Ahmed Atteya who has been working as a trainer for three years. “Honesty, for example, is just a word which they don’t know how to practice. We give them the know-how by exposing them to a lot of different situations at the stations.” What makes Edge unique is that the trainers are continuously required to develop themselves as part of the Edge philosophy. The kids are taught through mentoring and their trainers are expected to practice what they preach whether they are on or off duty.

“How can I go into a classroom and teach the kids something that I myself am not practicing?” says Character Coach Shaimaa Omar (29) who has been working at Edge Consultants for a year and a half.

Besides being shown ethics in practice, the participants are asked to draw upon their own experiences and explain situations when they have managed their anger, or shown honesty, courage or forgiveness. The main driving force behind Edge Consultants is Sabry’s belief in the importance of human character. “Humans are the masterpiece of creation,” says Iman. That is why the culture at Edge promotes self-confidence and self-reliance. The word ‘problem’ has been removed entirely from their dictionary and replaced by ‘challenge’. Nothing is impossible and a very important rule to top them all: “always ask, never assume.” Everything is done by the staff, whether it’s writing stories or songs, or creating games or decorations.

At the core of Edge Consultants, there is great respect for the human being, but Sabry believes that respect is lacking elsewhere. “When people talk to one another elsewhere in the world, they respect each other’s beliefs, they don’t care what your religion is, or what you’re wearing or what your sexual orientation is. We as Egyptians and Arabs sometimes do not respect that. We are not God, so then why are we playing God?” It does seem paradoxical that the further away we move from ethics, the more we are judgmental of other people’s values. “In the past, no one was veiled and yet people had more ethics. Some time back, people started focusing on the superficial aspects of religion,” says Sabry.

She attributes this state of affairs to the sheikhs for not having done their homework. They teach the same message without looking for relevance to real life. Hence, the average person can’t make the link between what’s being preached to today’s mode of living. With all these ideals, why then isn’t Edge Consultants a charitable NGO? Edge Consultants take their work seriously and aim to pay competitive salaries to their employees. By making Edge Consultants a company, it makes that goal attainable and gives employees the satisfaction in working for a company that’s turning a profit. “One day, people working in multinationals and large organizations will come to a point when they will not be able to continue and will seek to do something of value,” says Sabry.

So what’s not to like about a job that pays you well enough to continuously improve yourself? With ambitions to expand, moving to Edge Consultants should be an easy one. But getting hired isn’t easy. “Many people are interested in working with us, but we have a very tough process to hire people and interviews are extensive and may go on for up to four hours. “The interview probes the candidate for character, thoughts and ideas. Flexibility and adaptability are crucial. After the interview, the candidate works for one month pro bono before getting hired. During this time, he/she is under constant probation to make sure they are reliable, responsible and flexible enough to continue. Above all, the candidate has to be someone that can be trusted.

“Work is like marriage, you can’t marry someone you don’t trust. Likewise you can’t work in a place you don’t trust,” says Sabry. But once you’re in, there’s not a lot more you can ask for.

Kanzy Shouhaib, 24, who has a marketing degree, is the camp organizer and has been working in “Edge Consultants” for over six months after having spent a year in a brokerage firm. “The experience here is a life changing one,” she says. “Fun is part of the equation, but imagine a job that offers you continuous coaching.” Edge Consultants is currently being outsourced by schools, to include their training as part of the school curriculum. Other programs offered by Edge Consultants are: “It’s All About Me” and “It’s All About Youth”. They are both life-coaching programs targeting adults and youngsters between the ages of 16 and 25 that help develop character and skills.

The question remains, in the face of a society with skewed morality and the absence of successful role models, can one company actually make the difference? Changing people may be ambitious, but Sabry believes it can be done. “Change takes time but if I can change five people out of a hundred, then it’s fine.” n