

The much-needed Cultural Change and the Paradigm Shift in USMAA, under 2.0

Salaam dear Members,

I write this to you after weighing the pros and cons of the anticipated reactions to this email. I am hoping this will have a positive impact as opposed to a negative one.

Historically, USMAA AGM's have been plagued with dramas where members have used the AGM as a platform to attack the Management Committee (MC) and shine the spotlight on themselves. The MC is made-up of volunteers who sacrifice their personal time for the sake of Allah and for the benefit of the Community. However, at the AGM, this fact is totally forgotten and the MC is often unmercifully grilled and upstaged by a few members. Issues should be flagged directly so that the MC can take steps to address the situation then and there and not repeat the oversights in the future. Rather, some members seem to prefer to criticise the MC privately with their circle of friends, with Trustees and then use the AGM to have their own '15 minutes of fame.'

Alhamdulillah, this year's AGM did not have such dramas. However, I would like to point out a matter that arose on the eve of the AGM instead. As you may be aware we were unable to present the financials at the AGM held on 25 July 2020. This was because a couple of our members found 'fundamental errors' in them. The grenade was dropped at the 11th hour (night before AGM) leaving the MC with little time to address these errors prior to the AGM. However, we explained to a member concerned that the errors related to a system error and a few balance updating oversight. Unfortunately, we were 'forced to' withdraw from tabling the financials. We felt that we were held at hostage. Investigations post the AGM revealed that these 'fundamental errors' were not really show stoppers. Further, one of the "errors" was a consciously posted liability in the financials for 2018/2019 and was moved and seconded at the AGM the year before. If it were a 'fundamental error', it should have been flagged at last year's AGM and not this year. This was clearly articulated in the minutes, so if one does not attend the AGM, one could always read the minutes.

As the leader charged with uplifting, rejuvenating, rekindling an organisation, which has a history of cross-examining the MC of volunteers, I'd say there is a bigger picture at play, which most would not understand or would not like to understand. There is no point chasing rat and mice..

I do acknowledge that our brothers had the best intention at heart when they highlighted the errors in the financials prior to the AGM and spent their personal time preparing a full report to assist, a day later on Sunday, but the timing and tone of the message was frustrating. Since the Financials were circulated to the membership more than a week before the AGM, we would have appreciated if these issues had been flagged with sufficient notice to enable the MC to address them and continue with the agenda as planned.

Perhaps we are all victims of a negative culture that has been allowed to continue for too long, but if we keep this up our organisation will not be sustainable. It survives due to a handful of dedicated individuals, which makes up the backbone.

The circus of belittling your Management Committee at AGM's has to stop and stop now. It has gone on for 30 years and if we do not, you will continue to find it quite arduous to recruit members to run this organisation, as we are experiencing right now. I know there are individuals who want USMAA to fail, but for me and many others this organisation kept the Muslim community spirit alive when we were students, especially with the Ifthars. For that we are thankful and want to pay it back to the Founder Members and subsequent members who dedicated their time and efforts, and also pay it forward.

So how do we fix this going forward ?:

- The MC should be declared a 'protected species' as no sane individual would want to volunteer their time to an unappreciative membership and to be humiliated at an occasion, when they should be celebrated for sacrifices and the achievements for the past year. Thereby, I would like to unofficially call it the 'AGM Celebration' as opposed to the AGM Circus. However, members may have a go at each other (without dragging the MC in to it) at the AGM should they wish, which can provide the entertainment factor, thus drawing in the crowds
- So does this mean that the membership cannot question the MC? Of course not, they can, but do it before the AGM if it pertains to end of year reporting. Any questions with regards to the financials or any other reports should be brought to the attention of the MC at least a week before the AGM so that they could be rectified in time, without holding the MC hostage at the 11th hour by saying "don't present, or else", which has happened in the past. Fear not as we are not breaching any ACNC guidelines.
- Stop harassing our Trustees, but come directly to the MC with any queries. We have setup a feedback form where one could remain anonymous. You could be celebrated as someone who has assisted the MC as opposed to the opposite. The Trustees do not run the show, the MC does. The Trustees need a well-earned rest after 30 year of service. Also how can the show runner edit the script if the feedback we get is in dribs and drabs and are also like Chinese whispers?
- Offer your assistance a couple of months before the AGM, in the form of a pulse check. Given an MC turns over every year, every MC struggles with the end of year duties. This is considered constructive feedback as opposed to waiting till the last moment and providing destructive feedback. Members have all the right to question the MC for not following the manual, but if there is no manual developed after an organisation has been in operation for 30 years, then I would say it is a bit unreasonable to expect high standards
- Do not expect perfection. Let's be realistic, we might be the biggest SL migrant Muslim organisation and the second oldest, but in the grand scheme of things we are a small organisation run by volunteers. The young adults and the mature adults have no skin in the game and may not share the same passion as the senior generation. What was good for the goose does not work for the gosling. The last thing you want to do is get the MC on the offside by complaining about emails being misdirected, too much salt in the biriyani or that the lobster was underdone. These are all attributes displayed by individuals who want an organisation to fail and they see an empty glass even when it's filled to the brim. Expect imperfections and allow room for it.

Where to from here?

We can take this point as a watershed moment and as a community to rally together, shed our differences, our attitudes and our jealousies (yes, I did said the taboo word) or we can get offended by this email, boycott USMAA events and wish it a quick death.

Just want to state that by Allah I have not written this email to insult or belittle any individual/s, but to bring to the attention a cancer that is crippling us as an organisation and as a community.

I have also not joined the committee to "do my year", but to make this sustainable for future MC's, thereby keeping it alive for our children and IA grandchildren. I will not be bullied in to submission in the pursuit of progress.

I may come across as the villain who spoke the truth today, but I envision and hope IA that this will be the catalyst for the paradigm shift in attitudes that we have longed for. Also, this may look like washing dirty linen in public, but it is better to wash it than keep it dirty forever!

Finally, please note that my MC members have nothing do with this email. I have watched and heard all the USMAA stories for the past 23 years, therefore enough is enough. Every positive or negative action by USMAA members have consequences and in fact there will be consequences

of me writing this paper as well, but I am willing to cop it in the chin for Allah's sake, so if you do not take this positively, kindly aim your vitriol my way, directly or through the feedback form.

Your humble President, Falih Shums

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