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# Creating A Wave Of Change, One Conversation At A Time



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Dina El Bawab, Participant on one of Soliya's programmes. SOLIYA

In the last month, how many awkward conversations have you had? How many times have you avoided an awkward conversation? Soliya is an organization that wants us to have more of these difficult conversations and has created a successful track record in demonstrating how to have them. Soliya works with students to teach them how to engage in some of the most challenging conversations they have ever faced. Their reason for doing this is apparent: Soliya is an organization committed to helping individuals recognize the value of diversity and pluralism by exposing students to immersive experiences forcing students to have tough conversations. To date, Soliya has worked with students from over one hundred universities in thirty countries across the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, Europe, and North America

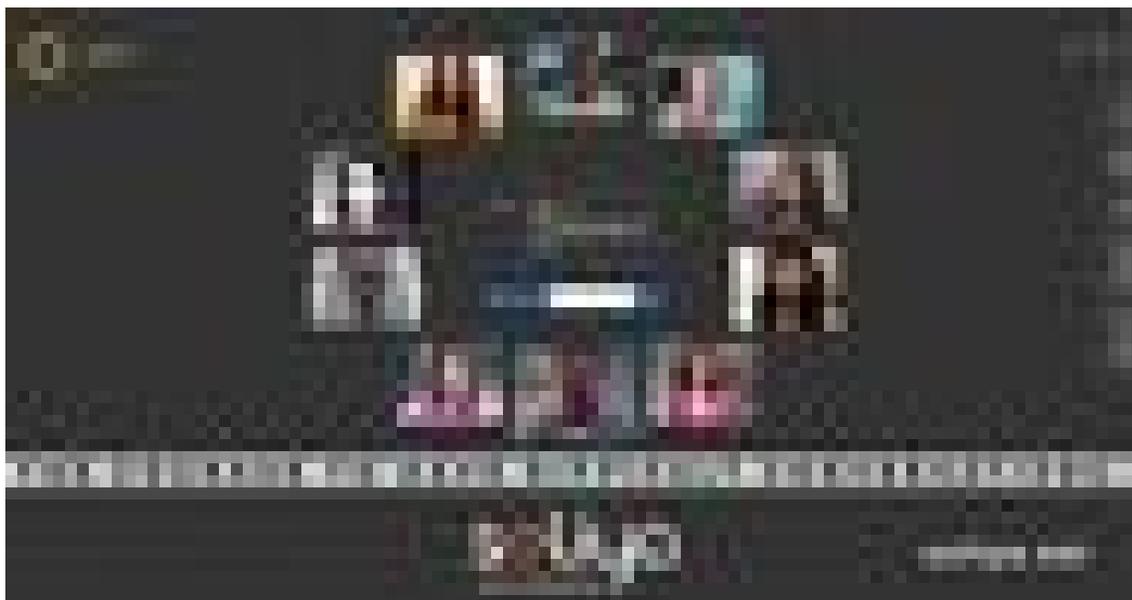
Waidehi Gokhale, CEO of [Soliya](#) explains why this format works: "We all know that if you are taking a course or in a classroom with others it's quite easy to walk away from information that is giving to you bilaterally or unilaterally. It's difficult to walk away when you have a shared experience with others in the room."

Creating conditions where individuals have to take time to listen and consider an opposing and often difficult view compels individuals to discuss their reactions to others and become more self-aware and reflective.

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Soliya creates conditions where individuals have no choice but to engage; whether it's through University degree programs or other initiatives, including language groups, religious education centers, and youth camps. The crux of these programs lies in the power of the conversations, by actively listening to what is shared creates empathy, often between individuals from disparate backgrounds with very little in terms of shared experiences. Empathy is as a critical concept for leaders in organizations. Nobel Prize Winner, [Daniel Kahneman](#) in his book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, where he highlighted the importance of the following distinction: "We are not thinking machines that feel, we are feeling machines that think."

As with many programs in the diversity and inclusion field, there is a risk these programs can generate a vast amount of goodwill, but the longer-term effects can be challenging to measure. Gokhale has taken a deliberate approach to measure progress working with a range of academic institutions and creating a strong evidence-base for the programs. [MIT Saxelab](#) evaluated the impact of the Soliya program in Spring 2013 by measuring attitudes towards Islam and Muslims following the Boston Marathon bombings. The research found American participants were insulated from increased negativity towards Muslims compared to the control group, indicating the ability to separate the action of two Muslim individuals rather than blaming the wider Muslim community for the atrocity. Gokhale attributes this behavior shift to a focus on identity overlap and measuring how this behavior changes before and after the program. For Gokhale, this is critical as she states: "If you feel your identity overlaps with someone else you increase humanization and connect with other people . . . if you feel your identity doesn't overlap, you are more likely to dehumanize."



Soliya Virtual Platform SOLIYA

The above example illustrates why the [Global Centre for Pluralism](#) has recognized the impact of Soliya, and this work as one of ten organizations supporting and promoting a shift towards creating pluralistic cultures. The Centre, located in Ottawa, Canada, has become a powerhouse for recognizing initiatives that work towards the global view of pluralism and a hub for projects to collaborate in sharing good practice and develop new opportunities to keep promoting pluralism. The awards are presented once every two years celebrating individuals, organizations, government, and businesses who have achieved remarkable success in supporting building more inclusive societies to enable human diversity to flourish. The [Chair of the Jury](#) Joe Clark, former Prime Minister of Canada, describes the importance of the awards in the current context: "At a time of heightened hatred and escalating tensions in communities around the globe, these winners embody the best of humanity. The emphasis on pluralism is much more important now than ever. In only a few years, we have moved from a time in which there was, at least, a general acceptance of difference, to a time where there is fear about it, and very often a contesting of it."

The current wave of fear felt by many people lies in not knowing enough and insufficient empathy in how they relate to others where they feel little or no connection.

The impact of Soliya's programs goes beyond the classroom; from changing how individuals consume information by humanizing the people in the articles to thinking about their role and influence in their workplaces and broader society. The value of this program is evident when freedom of speech is under more significant pressure, for example, students faced considerable barriers to continuing the program during the Egyptian Revolution in 2011, further hindered by shutting down internet access for University. The students relocated to local internet cafes but found the male students had to create barricades to ensure the female students could safely continue their sessions.



Nada Emad EL-Din, Facilitator, Egypt SOLIYA

The examples of perseverance are compelling, and each person on this program recognizes they are part of a global tribe. By developing the skills of open and honest communication Soliya has created a fleet of individuals across the world who has the capacity to tilt the world onto different axes. It's time to turn up the volume on these conversations and amplify the impact of this work.

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