

The power of energy

A recent trip to Saudi Arabia gives Mark Salway a chance to meet some of the country's female charity workers.

IN THE LAST week I have been in Saudi Arabia at their first major conference for civil society. The main event was 800 participants strong with around 600 men and 200 women all thinking about how charities can help them build towards Vision 2030; their new blueprint for the kingdom. The ministry was engaged and enthusiastic, as were the participants and foundations. All pulling in the same direction and looking forward to positive change.

The speeches were on a stage, with two huge video displays and television and newspaper reporting with TV booms like nodding donkeys swooping over the audience. It was amazing to see the effort.

It was strange for me to see the women separated from the men in the hall, and it was only when you stepped on stage that you saw the engagement of the women in the audience, separated from the men as is the custom in Riyadh.

Exceptional vibrancy

I was one of two presenters subsequently invited to give workshops to the women's group as well as the men. I had found the Saudi men eloquent, thoughtful and really interested in social investment and charity finance and how it could help them in the Kingdom. However, the women brought a vibrancy and energy which was different and exceptional.

The women encouraged each other, got the ideas behind social enterprise and social investment straightaway, and within 30 minutes had dreamt up gyms for women, had already assembled an army of needy women to sew and cook, had shared their

ideas and realities for a restaurant for a campus university and had also challenged the legal framework of charity, suggesting politely that it needed to change to embrace this new way of working.

The women told me that they were the workers who would make sure that things got implemented properly and with discipline. What really struck me, however, was that the passion was different from the men. In a deeply powerful way.

“ The women's passion was different from the men in a deeply powerful way ”

When I worked in Care International and KPMG, they were both huge organisations and extremely energy-centric. Where there was energy for a project, it grew and flourished. Where there was none, it died. My job was often to make sure we rode the energy waves with clients, and also put energy behind critical projects; such as the implementation of new systems.

I really do believe in the power of energy; sensing and avoiding those projects with none, and feeling the energy of change. It's also interesting to reflect that we do Pest and Swot analysis as part of our strategy work, but often don't consider the energy within organisations that will sit behind our technical analysis and bring this to life.

Budget-setting process

Reflecting on this, I wonder whether we also use energy during our budget-setting processes and

planning cycles. Do we ask the hard questions about whether projects are worth investing in, or do we just add a small percentage to last year's budget? Do we consider energy enough? Or whether the organisation is so busy it cannot take on anything new?

It would be interesting if the finance director could guarantee funding to those priorities with most energy, moving forward projects and enabling profound change. Like Shaolin monks, we could become masters of energy – aligning energy and money together becomes a powerful combination.

One way I have found to guarantee energy is when setting a “must do” list during the year-end planning process. Mandate only those items which absolutely must be done, and say to staff that we can do the other things if we have energy and time. This will allow important projects to bubble to the top in a way that is energy-centric and bottom up.

Female energy

I certainly feel excited about Cass Business School's work in Saudi because I realise there is energy, especially within the women. I also understand the real energy they have for social enterprise and creating different models of charity for the future, not just built on donations and grants.

I wish you a happy new year and hope that you can feel the energy in your organisations, riding this to create powerful change. ■



Mark Salway is director of social finance at Cass Business School and a former charity finance director