

BLACK AND WHITE REGISTER

I think we can all agree that the one thing we complain most often in life (and probably the most in terms of quantity) is the way people treat us. As creatures of emotions, we are easily affected by words, actions and gestures thrown at us. The impact corresponds with the nature of the input we receive, which can be either positive or negative.

We also cannot deny the following obvious facts –

- a) Everyone loves to be treated nicely;
- b) Everyone hates to be treated badly.

This law of nature known as the Golden Rule can be found in nearly every human culture and religion. This coincidental fact suggests that this rule forms a fundamental human nature. Its applicability in life is translated into actions as follows –

- a) We should treat others as we would like others to treat us (or better still, treat others as how we would treat ourselves);

Anas reported: The Prophet (ﷺ) said, "No one of you becomes a true believer until he likes for his brother what he likes for himself".

Bukhari and Muslim

b) We should not treat others in ways that we do not like (or want) to be treated.

'Abdullah bin 'Amr bin Al-'As said: The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said, "He who desires to be rescued from the fire of Hell and to enter Jannah, should die in a state of complete belief in Allah and the Last Day, and should do unto others what he wishes to be done unto him."

Muslim

The Golden Rule is applicable to the different areas of life, be it social, politics, family or economy. At a high level, it defines the correct way for us to interact with each other and lays down the basic principles of a healthy human interaction.

For instance, the Golden Rule from a sociology standpoint translates to concepts such as “love your neighbors like you love yourself”. The same concept can be applied to other types of relationships – between individuals, between groups or between individuals and groups.

Aishah narrated: The Prophet (ﷺ) said "Jibril continued to recommend me about treating neighbour kindly and politely so much that I thought he (Jibril) would inherit from the neighbour."

Bukhari

There are many Islamophobes who claim that the Golden Rule is not part of Islam's teaching. The truth is actually the opposite – Islam even takes it further to greater detail. For instance, in the case of caring for our neighbours, Muslims are even encouraged to cook extra portions to be shared with our neighbors.

Abu Dharr narrated: That the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said: "Let one of you not consider any good to be insignificant. If he has nothing, then let him meet

his brother with a smiling face. If you buy some meat or cook something in a pot, then increase its broth, and serve some of it to your neighbor."

At-Tirmidhi

The Golden Rule is such a simple and basic rule, which in theory guarantees a happy life. However, in reality it does not produce the intended results, at least not in a big scale.

Why does this happen?

There are no flaws in the rule, the feelings and expectations we discussed do come naturally. The problem lies with its implementation, the difficulty to practise the directive (positive) and prohibitive (negative) actions. Without a conscious effort to practise it, it would surely slip our mind. The level of awareness of its importance is very low as we allow our selfishness to dictate our actions.

***We make a living with what we get.
But we make a life by what we give.***

Winston Churchill

We focus our efforts on receiving rewards rather than giving them out. Whenever we actually decide to give out, instead of giving out good things, we give out negative energies – anger, frustrations, sarcasm.

The chain reaction is straightforward; we get back what we give, one way or another.

***You attract what you put out.
Be mindful.***

Alexandra Elle, author and motivational speaker

Application of the Golden Rule – A Life Learning Tool

As mentioned, the Golden Rule can only be effectively practised if there is a conscious effort to apply the directive and prohibitive filters in any actions taken. Guilty as charged, I must admit that it had also subconsciously slipped my mind before, to be honest it still does. I was concentrating more on how I felt I should be treated rather than how I should treat others.

But it was a leadership lesson imparted by my mentor that literally reintroduced this concept back into my life – an effective and practical method to learn about leadership is to observe the leaders around us, especially on how they treat people. Leadership is primarily about managing people and the effectiveness of leaders can be gauged based on how engaged the people are with them. From such observations, we can then define the best leadership style and methods we want to adopt.

He introduced me to a rather traditional method of performing and recording this observation exercise – to write down and maintain a list or register of “dos” and “don’ts” based on our observations and experiences interacting with the leaders. Basically, what we are doing is committing to ourselves what we will do or not do to our subordinates once we are in a leadership position. We define the behaviours of an ideal leader that we want to emulate –

- a) “Dos” refers to the actions of leaders that are in line with how we want to be treated – the feel good factor. For example, there are leaders who make it a point to remember the names of all their staff knowing that it makes a big difference to the staff for them to be greeted warmly by their name. Such a warm and engaging action is undoubtedly a good leadership practice that we should emulate.

b) “Don’ts” refers to the actions of leaders that are far off from how we want to be treated – interactive actions that are not in line with our values. For instance, if we do not like to be reprimanded in public and we observe a leader doing it, we should list it down in the register as a reminder for us not to do the same to others in the future.

This list or register is what I refer to as the “Black and White Register” – black representing the “don’ts”, i.e. negative actions and white representing the “dos”, i.e. positive actions. It reminds me of what I should or should not do when dealing with others.

I diligently practised the method for quite a while, taking note of the different behaviours and actions of the leaders, some I liked, some I did not. My mentor was not spared as well. Although there were a lot of things I liked about his style, there are some actions or decisions that I don’t entirely agree with him. In some instances, I just happen to be a victim of his misjudgments – I guess everyone has those moments. Nevertheless, in either situation, it provided me with the opportunity to learn and improve. The list grew from simple things like smiling to one another to more serious matters such as performance rewards methodologies.

I must say that it was a fulfilling and beneficial exercise. Listing the “dos” and “don’ts” down made it easier to differentiate between good and bad leadership practices. The approach allowed me to personally experience each of the actions observed, creating a bigger and lasting impact on me.

It fostered empathy, an extremely important emotion that enables a person to place oneself in another person’s position, to feel and understand what the person is going through. This encourages a positive understanding of

other people's actions and behaviours, which is integral in developing a healthy and strong relationship with others.

***Empathy is seeing with the eyes of another,
listening with the ears of another,
and feeling with the heart of another.***
Alfred Alder, Austrian medical doctor, psychotherapist

However, it does not seem practical to continuously manage a physical list for a long period of time. At a more fundamental level, there is more than just the list; the concept itself offers limitless boundaries – it boils down to our mindset and how diligently we apply the golden rule in our daily lives.

Expanding and Generalising the “Black and White Register”

By tackling it at the root i.e. the mindset, we should be able to do it more frequently and cover a wider perspective of life. Ultimately, what we want to do is to embed it as part of our conscious and subconscious decision-making process, which would enable us to objectively choose the best interaction approach when dealing with people.

The mindset adopts a similar method but instead of physically listing it down, we register it virtually in our mind. We put in conscious efforts to judge the present situation in our mind in real time and determine whether the action we are about to take falls into the “dos” or the “don'ts” categories.

As we develop the discipline to perform the virtual “Black and White Register” consistently, we will form a healthy habit of practising empathy in whatever we do. I personally found a lot of similarities between the Golden Rule and empathy as both are focused on understanding another person.

Empathy is about finding echoes of another person in yourself.

Mohsin Hamid, Pakistani novelist and writer

The importance of understanding others plays an integral role in defining the way we treat and interact with others. It also refers to our own behaviours and character.

Empathy and social skills are social intelligence, the interpersonal part of emotional intelligence. That's why they look alike.

Daniel Goleman

Come to think of it, as we unfold the different lessons and concepts in life, everything about us seems to be interconnected and dependent on each other. If we ponder a bit further on the fact that almost all culture and religion emphasises strongly on the Golden Rule, we will come to realise that it reaffirms an obvious fundamental fact about humans – we live in a community and we need each other. This is why it is so important to establish healthy interaction approaches and practices based on the concept laid down by the Golden Rule.

The safest approach is to treat both friends and foes alike, while maintaining to be within the parameters set – treat others like how you would like to be treated and vice versa. Embrace this approach and see how much it can change your lives socially as well as your relationship with Allah.

Treat those who are good with goodness, and also treat those who are not good with goodness. Thus goodness is attained.

Be honest to those who are honest, and be also honest to those who are not honest. Thus honesty is attained.

Lao Tzu