INSIGHT 05

MAKING SPACE FOR OTHERS

From inclusion to authority: building the conditions for lived experience leadership



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REFUGEE YOUTH SERVICE
LEARNING HUB

PART OF THE LEARNING HUB

RYS Insights draw on ten years of frontline work alongside people on the move. They include contributions from former staff, volunteers and leaders, presented through case studies, first-person accounts, questions for discussion and practice prompts.

They can be read alone or discussed with a team. They are intended to support reflection and discussion, rather than provide fixed answers or concrete solutions.





This Insight can be read alongside the following RYS Learning Hub resources:

PRACTICE GUIDE 01

THE RYS PRACTICE PRINCIPLES

Shares the practices and principles that informed and led RYS' way of working across a decade.



PRACTICE GUIDE 05

ACCOMPANIMENT OVER RESCUE

Explores the value of walking alongside young people, rather than 'rescuing' them.



INSIGHT 06

ENDING WELL

Reflects on how to close projects and organisations in ways that are responsible and values-driven.





IN THIS INSIGHT

What it takes to move beyond inclusion and genuinely share leadership.



01 Why inclusion is not enough



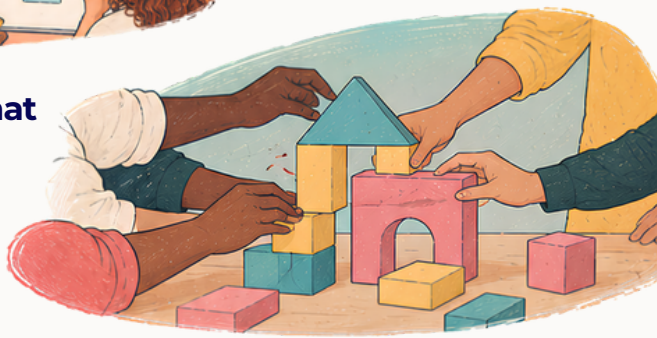
02 The power of lived experience leadership



03 Learning to recognise a different authority



04 Stepping back from the centre



05 The conditions that make leadership possible

FROM INCLUSION AND INSIGHT TO POWER AND AUTHORITY

People with lived experience are often valued in caring organisations for their understanding of the issues being addressed and their ability to reveal what others might miss. Yet inclusion does not necessarily change who makes decisions or sets the direction of the work.

This Insight explores what becomes possible when people with lived experience can shape decisions, lead teams and define the work itself. It follows Mustafa's journey at Velos Youth, RYS' sister organisation, from Youth Support Worker to CEO, and considers what made that progression possible. The Insight is written from the perspective of one of RYS' founders, who helped establish Velos Youth in Athens.

ONE JOURNEY, NOT A FIXED PATHWAY

Mustafa's journey reflects one person and one organisation. Others will begin from different places, and many people with lived experience will already be ready to lead. The wider learning is about creating opportunities, recognising authority and changing how organisations work.



UNDERSTANDING THE LIMITS OF INCLUSION

Velos Youth was created by RYS in 2017 with a deliberate intention: we did not want people with lived experience, language skills and cultural knowledge to sit around the edges of the youth centre, limited to interpretation or cultural mediation for other staff. We had come to see this as a common pitfall of other projects and organisations.

Instead, we wanted people with lived experience of forced displacement to hold central roles, and to build relationships with young people in their own right. We wanted them to hold the space, shape the culture, and become trusted adults.

That decision made the work better from the beginning. People with direct experience formed relationships, held trust, understood things the rest of us would have missed, and became central to the life of the centre.

But we soon came to understand the limit of this kind of inclusion. A person can be valued and trusted, and can shape the daily experience of the work, while its core direction and purpose remain unchanged. Yet if people with lived experience understand those realities better than anyone else, and are often best placed to judge what is needed and how support can be offered well, then keeping them inside roles defined by others means a significant opportunity is lost.

INCLUSION CAN MEAN...

- Welcomed
- Trusted
- Consulted
- Valued
- Shapes daily life

BUT NOT YET...

- Holding senior authority
- Setting priorities and direction
- Representing the organisation at highest levels
- Changing the terms of the work

A person can be central to the work without having authority over its direction.

‘ONE DAY I WOULD LIKE TO RUN THIS’



Mustafa arrived in Greece in 2015. Like many young people arriving then, he was having to make a life in a city that had not been built to receive him. Support existed, but it was limited and difficult to navigate. Much of what he needed had to be found through trial, persistence and the relationships he built.

His interview for the role of Youth Support Worker was chaotic and memorable. We still laugh about it now. Between my quick, deep voice and his nerves and still-developing English, neither of us properly understood the other. Somehow, we still spoke for over an hour.

But beneath the confusion there was something unmistakable. He had confidence, purpose and a sense that he wanted to build something. He joined as part of the team that launched the youth centre and quickly became central to its daily life.

Not long after it opened we were clearing up at the end of a long day, when he said, almost casually: “One day I would like to run this.” I remember replying, without hesitation: “One day I hope you will have my job.”

I had responded instinctively, but the question of whether the organisation could make that progression real soon emerged.

FROM SUPPORT WORKER TO CEO

Over the next few years, Mustafa progressed quickly through a number of roles. His lived experience of the issues young people were facing shaped and strengthened each role differently.

By 2019 we were sharing leadership of the organisation. Eventually, as I stepped further back, Velos Youth created its first CEO role, and he took it on. That progression was not automatic. It depended on trust, real opportunity, growing responsibility and room to learn over time.

Mustafa was a strong communicator and a natural storyteller, secure in his abilities and hungry to keep learning. He had a clear vision for what the work could become, and the presence to bring others with him. His connection to young people's realities gave that vision a particular weight.

This mattered especially when he had to say no. The boundary did not land as something arbitrary or detached. Young people could recognise that it came from someone who understood what the request meant, and what it cost to hear that answer.

Youth Support Worker
Built trust quickly through recognisable understanding.

Senior Caseworker
Brought lived understanding of the impact of casework decisions.

Project Manager
Shaped daily practice from close knowledge of young people's realities.

Co-director
Shaped the organisation's strategy and direction.

CEO
Led and represented the organisation at the highest level.



WHEN AUTHORITY TAKES AN UNFAMILIAR SHAPE

Mustafa's progression might sound straightforward when told quickly: he was talented, he grew into the work, and eventually he became CEO. But that is rarely how power moves.

As he progressed, there was resistance from some staff. Some of this may have reflected the difficulty of being led by a former colleague. But it also raised a harder question about whose authority people were accustomed to recognising.

Mustafa was not Greek and did not have the familiar qualifications of a local professional. I was not Greek either, but I arrived with a kind of authority people already knew how to read: White, Western, connected to funding, and assumed to have permission to lead. Mustafa's authority did not come with that protection.

AUTHORITY CAN COME FROM DIFFERENT PLACES



Formal status
Qualifications, position and professional recognition.



Lived knowledge
Closeness to the work, experience and understanding.



Relational authority
Trust, judgement and knowledge of people.

One of the first moments when Mustafa's authority became visible was when he took the lead on the case management system. He knew every young person's name, their circumstances and what support they needed. This gave him a view of the organisation that extended beyond his own relationships and helped change how the team saw him. His growing authority came not from formal qualifications or founder legitimacy, but from his command of the work and his ability to understand the needs of young people across the service.

THE AUTHORITY WAS ALREADY THERE.

What needed to change was whether others could recognise it.

WHEN STEPPING BACK BECAME REAL

My own continued presence became another challenge to the transition. I needed to step back far enough for Mustafa to occupy the space in practice, not only on paper.

As long as I remained physically present, the form of authority people already knew how to read remained available. Questions and concerns were redirected to me, even when they belonged more properly with him. When I was absent, those same questions returned to Mustafa.

In the end, we decided that I would only be present in the centre for specific reasons that could be clearly explained. If I remained constantly available as the old centre of authority, Mustafa's authority could not become fully established.

The difficulty became clearest when disagreement surfaced. Shortly after Mustafa became co-director, a team member raised a concern with me about a decision he had made. By then, my role was increasingly behind the scenes. I could listen, offer perspective and share feedback if that seemed appropriate. But I could not become the person who resolved it.

Part of me wanted to smooth things over, find a way through, or make the outcome less painful than it was becoming. But I had to hold back.

Making space for Mustafa's authority meant accepting that I would not always choose the outcome.

After all, if power only belongs to someone else when they use it in ways we approve of, then it has not really shifted at all.



WHAT CHANGED WHEN AUTHORITY SHIFTED

Mustafa's leadership had changed how the work was understood, how it was communicated, and how decisions were made.

Some of that change was visible externally. Velos became more confident in how it spoke about its work, more credible with partners, and more able to explain what young people were facing without flattening or simplifying their realities.

Some of it was visible inside the youth centre. Young people saw someone leading who understood parts of their journey from the inside. Staff were asked to take seriously a form of judgement that did not come only through professional training or external expertise. The boundaries he set, and the decisions and priorities he carried, had a different kind of weight.



THE DIFFERENCE IN PRACTICE

An organisation's achievements are never attributable to one individual. But Mustafa's leadership took Velos Youth into new chapters and directions that I do not believe would otherwise have emerged.



STRONGER CREDIBILITY

The work could be explained from closer knowledge of young people's realities.



CLEARER BOUNDARIES

Difficult decisions carried weight because they came from someone who understood their cost.



MORE GROUNDED STRATEGY

Priorities were shaped by lived understanding, not only external analysis.



GREATER ORGANISATIONAL CONFIDENCE

Velos could speak for itself with more clarity and authority.



LEADERSHIP YOUNG PEOPLE COULD RECOGNISE

Authority was no longer only held by people outside their experience.

WHAT WE HAD TO LEARN BETWEEN US

The transition required Mustafa and me to learn how to work across different experiences, references and assumptions.

We did not always read situations in the same way. Sometimes we brought different expectations about how decisions should be made, how direct disagreement should be, how much explanation people needed, or what kind of leadership a situation required. Those differences had to be worked through rather than ignored.

In our case, the transfer needed time. It unfolded through conversations, disagreements, handovers, meetings, silences and moments of uncertainty.

What helped was making space to reflect together, name what was difficult, ask what each of us was carrying, and keep returning to the question of what the organisation needed next.



Different ways of reading situations



Different assumptions about leadership



Different cultural and personal references



The need to explain more, not assume understanding



The importance of reflection, trust and honest conversation

> Some of this was personal. Some of it was cultural. Some of it came from the different positions we had occupied in the organisation.

HAVING TO PROVE MYSELF

By Mustafa Mohammad
CEO, Velos Youth



Looking back, I realise that becoming a manager or CEO was never just about receiving a new title. Authority does not become real because it appears on an organisational chart. It takes time for people to recognise it, and that process can be difficult for everyone involved.

One of the biggest challenges I faced was that, while Jonny trusted me to lead, not everyone around me did. Some colleagues and external consultants questioned my judgement, not necessarily because they wanted to resist change, but because they were unsure whether I had the experience to make the right decisions.

As someone with lived experience who had progressed through the organisation, I often felt that I had to prove myself in ways that others might not have had to.

That experience pushed me to work harder. I asked more questions, looked for opportunities to learn, and tried to understand not only what decisions needed to be made, but why they were made.

LEARNING TO TRUST MY JUDGEMENT

I realised that if I wanted people to trust my leadership, I first had to build confidence in my own judgement. And one of the greatest gifts Jonny gave me was not teaching me how to be a manager, but teaching me how to think like a leader. He rarely gave me answers or told me exactly what to do. Instead, he helped me understand the thinking behind leadership. We would talk about why a decision mattered, who it would affect, what values were guiding us, and what the consequences might be.

Those conversations taught me how to approach problems rather than simply solve the one in front of me.

I also learned that leadership can be lonely. As my responsibilities grew, there were times when I felt isolated. Some people would come to me with a request, and if I said no, they would go to Jonny hoping for a different answer. It would have been easy for him to step in and resolve those situations himself. Instead, he consistently reinforced that decisions belonged with me. Looking back, I realise that protecting my authority was one of the most important ways he supported my development.

Our Tuesday meetings became an important part of that journey. They were not meetings where Jonny told me what to do. They were spaces where I could reflect, share frustrations, question my own decisions and think through difficult situations.



Over time, I became less dependent on someone else's approval and more confident in my own judgement.

LEARNING TO LEAD IN MY OWN WAY

Perhaps the most important lesson I learned is that transferring leadership is not simply about promoting someone with lived experience. It is about creating the conditions where they can genuinely lead. That means trusting them to make decisions, allowing them to make mistakes, supporting them through difficult moments, and resisting the temptation to take authority back when things become uncomfortable.

Looking back today, I understand that Jonny never seemed motivated by status or by being the person at the centre of the organisation. His goal was to build an organisation that would ultimately be stronger without depending on him. I believe that willingness to step back was one of the greatest reasons why the transition succeeded.



> **At Velos, 'lived experience leadership' was not created simply by giving me a title. It was enabled through trust, patience, mentorship, and a genuine willingness to share power.**

WHAT MADE THIS POSSIBLE

Mustafa and I reflected together on what made this progression possible. He brought the talent, judgement and lived understanding needed to lead well. But individual capability alone could not shift organisational authority. Velos Youth also had to create the conditions in which his leadership could be recognised, exercised and sustained.



TRUST OVER TIME

The progression depended on relationships built over years, not one appointment.



REAL RESPONSIBILITY

Mustafa needed roles where his judgement mattered and had consequences.



SPACE TO LEARN

Leadership had to include feedback, mistakes, support and development.



NAMED AUTHORITY

People needed clarity that his decisions carried organisational weight.



THE OLD CENTRE MOVING BACK

My authority had to become less available for his to become real.



SHARED REFLECTION

We needed space to talk honestly about culture, disagreement, confidence and responsibility.

THESE CONDITIONS DO NOT APPEAR AUTOMATICALLY.
THEY HAVE TO BE BUILT, PROTECTED AND REVISED OVER TIME.



QUESTIONS TO CARRY INTO PRACTICE

These questions are for organisations, leaders and teams that want people with lived experience to move beyond contribution and hold meaningful authority. They may also be useful for people with lived experience who want to assess where authority sits in the organisations where they work, especially if they are stepping into leadership or feel their insight is welcomed while their authority remains limited.

01 **Are we including people with lived experience while keeping authority elsewhere?**



02 **What kind of authority do we recognise most easily, and why?**



03 **Are people with lived experience trusted to shape decisions, not only relationships?**



04 **What conditions would make leadership possible here?**



05 **Who needs to step back for someone else's authority to become real?**



THANK YOU FOR READING

Continue exploring

This resource forms part of the Refugee Youth Service Learning Hub, which brings together Insights, Practice Guides and Tools developed through ten years of work alongside displaced children and young people.





INSIGHTS

Learning and reflections on key themes from our work.



PRACTICE GUIDES

Guidance drawn from frontline practice.



TOOLS

Worksheets to support frontline practice.

REFUGEE YOUTH SERVICE

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