

Shueyb Ali

No Gray Area

"The way I look at it, you have two options," the principal told fourteen-year-old Shueyb Ali and his father. "When you start at this school, you'll witness a lot. There are shootings and drugs, and people will try to bring you down through negative influences. You can either succumb to those, or you can join ROTC."

He went on to tell Shueyb that the ROTC kids were top notch, and always went on to futures in the military or in college. "It's your choice, Option A or Option B," he said. "But there's no gray area."

Raised by a single mother, Shueyb had grown up a rebellious, headstrong kid with no respect for authority. He did what he wanted to do, when and how he wanted to do it, without compromise. Once he reached his teenage years, he grew so rebellious that he was sent from North Carolina to Macon, Georgia, to live with his father. Up to that point, the two had spent a week or two together each year, but little more.

For his first two weeks living under his father's roof, Shueyb was allowed to come and go as he pleased. "My father was feeling me out, learning my patterns and habits to get a sense of what was upsetting my mother so much," he recalls today. "Then one day, out of the blue, he asked me to rake the yard. I told him I would do it when I came back from playing basketball, and he told me that wasn't the answer he was looking for. I told him to talk to me about it when I got back."

His father didn't protest, but instead asked him to come inside to sit down for a minute before he left. Seated in the living room, Shueyb was shocked when his father pulled out a gun. "You're not going to disrespect my name," he said. "You're going to listen to me, and you're going to listen to this." Calmly, he set the 357 on the table.

Shueyb had suspected he was living in a new world, and now, he was sure of it. The weight of reality sunk in, and from that moment on, things

were different. He showed respect to his father by raking the yard, and he showed respect for himself by joining ROTC. "The program reinforced many of the important lessons my parents had always tried to impart—respect for authority, discipline, integrity, and a strong sense of values," he says. "When I first put on that uniform, I felt like a different person, and it was the bridge that allowed me to become that person."

Several decades later, Shueyb had achieved the unimaginable, landing a VP position at a company he loved. He planned to stay until he retired, but in time, he found himself at a crossroads when he became aware that a senior leader was mismanaging the company. He then discovered that the individual was also being dishonest, creating a climate that was completely antithetical to the strong values he had cultivated in his teenage years.

Shueyb had decided long ago that when it came to his values and standards, there was no gray area. He immediately gave his two weeks' notice with no backup plan and no outside network to fall back on. "I had to go out and essentially redefine myself," he says. "The economy was bad at that time, and jobs were scarce. My clients had always asked when I was going to go out on my own, so I figured why not? Why not try it now?"

With that, in 2010, Shueyb launched World Services LLC, an IT consulting firm serving both government and commercial clients. Based in Alexandria, Virginia, the company provides system engineering, software development, digitization and scanning, project management services, with a primary focus on federal, state, and local government clients. Today, their largest client is the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, where they work directly with the Chief Information Officer to modernize the agency's IT infrastructure, implement



processes, and update their IT operations and maintenance.

The fledgling government contractor survived sequestration, but struggled to get its footing despite its designation as a Service Disabled Veteran Owned Small Business. It wasn't until it also secured an 8(a) designation that it started seeing real success—a source of disappointment for Shueyb. “It was disappointing to realize that the federal government doesn't value the Service-Disabled Veteran designation as much as it values some other vehicles on the market,” he says.

Nevertheless, World Services pressed forward, cultivating a stellar reputation and a track record of strong past performance. Before long, it was growing at ten percent a year, and by 2013, their annual growth rate had reached an impressive fifty percent. The company now has 35 seasoned, top-notch employees and revenue of \$12 million, with a strong pipeline of exceptional opportunities and plans to double in the next year as they begin landing work with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

Had Shueyb been willing to compromise his values, World Services could have seized on opportunities that would have made it a hundred-person company already, but thanks to his high school years, gray areas were never going to be part of the equation. Trust, honesty, and integrity are the foundational tenets of the World Services culture, and he maintains a steady checks-and-balances dialogue with his COO that thoroughly examines the merits and ethics of every decision. “We would never run up numbers to win a contract, and we refuse to work with someone who's dishonest in how they represent themselves to the federal government,” he affirms. “Our values are extremely important to us.”

This sense of integrity was first modeled for Shueyb by his mother, who separated from his father shortly after Shueyb was born. She raised him and his two older sisters in Kalamazoo, Michigan, where she worked as a county commissioner making a modest salary. Living in Georgia, his father was a musician playing at the local church and teaching in elementary schools.

Growing up in a rough neighborhood, Shueyb was a troubled kid who bucked authority from an early age. But he remembers his mother trying to set a positive tone, showing the children how to set up lemonade stands and help the

elderly next-door neighbors shovel snow in the winters. Because parents entrusted their children to his mother's care, their house was a hub for the neighborhood kids, and there was always a game of kickball going on in the backyard. She also loved to cook when she wasn't working, and would introduce kids to foods they had never been exposed to before. “She always made sure our home was a stable, peaceful, loving environment, no matter what was going on outside,” he remembers. “She taught us about community and the importance of being involved in what's around you. Never complacent, she showed us we had a voice and a way to change things.”

When Shueyb was eight years old, his mother moved the family to Chapel Hill, where she enrolled in law school. She had grown up there and still had family in the area willing to help, so she knew it would be a much better environment to raise her children. Still, Shueyb continued to struggle in school because classroom teaching at that time wasn't geared toward visual learners like him. “I had issues keeping up, but I knew I wasn't stupid,” he recounts. “They put me in a remedial class, which I hated. My mom did all she could to encourage me, but she had so many other things going on at that time, so she delegated some of that to my older sister. She didn't know that I was a visual learner and just needed a different teaching style, so I continued to struggle.”

Shueyb met two very good friends, and he began getting into sports in earnest when they started playing basketball and football together. His cousins in the area were also all very athletic, which opened his eyes to his own talent. He also started to understand for the first time that he was missing out on a father figure—someone who had been invested in developing and molding his abilities. “I never had that, so instead, I was a streetball player,” he says. “That's all I knew, and it was hard to adapt that style into organized sports.”

Fortunately, Shueyb's football coach recognized his talent and encouraged him to pursue the sport. His family couldn't afford the camps and programs the coach recommended, but he was able to attend Carolina Basketball Camp through a program that admitted economically disadvantaged kids for free. “Michael Jordan was there at the time, and I remember how cool it was to meet some of those players,” he remembers.

When Shueyb moved in with his father in

Macon at the age of fourteen and enrolled in ROTC, his innate athleticism landed him spots on both the football and basketball teams in his freshman year. His biology teacher also helped him understand that there was something different in the way he learned, pointing out that he was an intelligent student who grasped the material when it was presented visually. She refused to allow the school to put Shueyb in remedial classes, instead committing to tutor him personally. It was an important turning point for him, and he began to truly excel.

Shueyb balanced all these positive changes with a part-time job first at a pizza shop, and then at a photo store in the mall nearby. "I liked that there was process and order to the way you develop film in a darkroom," he remarks. As college neared, he began applying to colleges and was accepted to several schools, but he knew it would be hard to cover the costs on his mother's salary. He instead opted to enlist in the military when he graduated from high school in 1988, which meant he'd be eligible to take college classes after his first year of service. He commenced his military career at McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey, and once he was eligible, he began taking night classes whenever he could.

Shueyb soon left New Jersey for Clark Air Base in the Philippines, where a nearby volcano erupted soon after his arrival. The ash cloud spewed up into the atmosphere and covered the sun, plunging them into 48 hours of darkness punctuated by earthquakes and a typhoon. "I honestly thought I was going to die," he remembers. "Afterward, I was part of the Mission Essential team that stayed back to help clean up as we closed down the base to hand it over to the Philippine government."

After ten months in the Philippines, Shueyb was sent to Germany, where he was invited to play tackle football on the Interfellow Europe team. He never thought of himself as a leader, so he was shocked when, in 1992, he won the military's distinguished John Levitow Award. The recognition is given to enlisted individuals that demonstrate strong leadership skills, achieve high-level academic success in the leadership school, and receive a high vote by their peers. "It was a defining moment for me because I never knew that other people saw me that way," he remarks. "That moment helped shape me into who I am now because it made me want to learn more

about leadership and see how far I could take it. I started to nurture it, reading more leadership books and taking more management classes."

From then on, Shueyb began to realize that people either wanted to work with him or work for him. After Germany, he was stationed in Korea, and then New Mexico, before his final post at Bolling Air Force Base in DC. It was 1998 by that time, and as the IT boom heated up, he had grown adept at data retrieval, database maintenance, and programming. He saw that consultants with his same proficiencies were making triple his salary, so he decided it was time to make a change.

When he decided to leave the Air Force in 1998 after ten years of active duty, Shueyb took a job at Advanced Technology Systems, an IT firm, as a database analyst. "I saw my peers doing average work, but that just wasn't who I was," he recalls. He completed his undergraduate degree in Computer Studies and continued to learn from an ATS database administrator who would work late into the evenings, with Shueyb studying over his shoulder. "He showed me how to manipulate data in ways I didn't even think were possible," Shueyb remembers. "It really opened my eyes to the vastness of IT."

Shueyb's work ethic and commitment to exceeding expectations quickly caught the attention of management, and he rose through the ranks to Technical Lead and then to Project Manager before landing a Director position at another company in 2003. Over the next two years, he began leading larger teams, managing problems with innate ease and adeptly navigating complex challenges until a client offered him a VP position. "I thought that would be challenging and outside my comfort zone, because I'd have to help set everything up," Shueyb says. Though he never imagined he'd be an entrepreneur starting his own company, the experience was excellent training for the launch of World Services soon thereafter.

In a testament to his mother, who always believed strongly in the power of education, and to his own evolution, Shueyb decided to go back to school several years ago and was accepted to Harvard to get his Masters in Management. "I haven't always been the best student, so to get into a school of that caliber and see that I could excel, was a shocking accomplishment," he remarks. "You have to have a certain level of confidence in this industry because it's so competitive, and getting into Harvard showed me there was

absolutely nothing I can't do. And on hard days, I think about my mother, who was relentless and never let anything get in her way. I still wonder how she raised and supported three kids while making it through law school." Shueyb continues to hold his own academically and is slated to complete the program in 2018.

Through it all, Shueyb has been supported and loved by his wife Ambre, the young woman he met through mutual friends in 2001 who is now a loving mother to their ten-year-old son and six-year-old daughter. "She has been completely amazing," Shueyb says. "Her faith in me and my ability have never wavered, and she's believed in me even when I haven't believed in myself. I am so grateful I found her."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Shueyb emphasizes the importance of face-to-face communication in a world that is increasingly digital. "If you see a problem in the workplace, you should be able to vocalize it constructively to executive management," he says. "More importantly, you should come with solutions in mind." He also underscores the importance of finding the right mentor—something he didn't find until recently. "I always wanted a mentor, but it took me a long time to find someone I was comfortable with," he says. "It always felt like there was a catch and they wanted something out of it. But when I met my mentor, Ahmed Ali, I instantly felt comfortable. He was selfless and did things for me that nobody had ever done, in all my years in business. That was very powerful."

In a sense, Shueyb undertakes the hard work of leadership precisely because it's a form of

mentorship. A compassionate, strong leader, he knows that you can't always be a hard charging crusader who doesn't take no for an answer. "Sometimes people need you to be relatable," he says. "They need to know that you, as a leader, care about them on more than just a professional level. When people share my vision and want to create the type of environment and culture that I do, they become an extended member of my family, and there's nothing I won't do for them. I do what I do because I believe I can make a difference in the lives of individuals, molding them toward the goals they have for themselves. I know how gray and confusing the world can seem when you don't have that leadership to look to in your life. For others, I want something better."

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