

# The blind show us the light

**'DIALOGUE IN THE DARK' WORKSHOPS:** It is the visually impaired who taught us to see during team-building session

**Z**ULKARNAIN harboured the dream that he would be a teacher one day. The Malacca lad thought that he could impart knowledge and be part of the teaching profession, which he considered to be noble, inspiring and meaningful.

But, fate intervened. The boy from Lubok China contracted *retinitis pigmentosa*, an inherited, degenerative eye disease that causes vision impairment. Often, this leads to blindness.

Zulkarnain's dreams were dashed. Instead, he ended up acquiring other skills and is now a qualified masseur. His mother has the same disease, as do his siblings. Five of his sisters are in the same predicament.

But, Zulkarnain, far from being defeated and wallowing in self-pity, is engaged as a facilitator, tasked with "teaching" the sighted. He is part of a small group called Dialogue in the Dark. It is a social enterprise that, among others, runs workshops and team-building activities.

I met Zulkarnain and his teammates at a session in Sabah last week. He, along with his fellow facilitators, highlighted the importance of teamwork and trust in any endeavour.

Dialogue in the Dark is part of an international group. It has its origins in Germany. According to Wikipedia, its founder, Andreas

These guys may be blind but they showed us the way towards enlightenment in more ways than one.

**Ahmad A Talib**  
is Media Prima  
executive director  
of news and  
editorial operations



Heinecke, worked as a journalist and documentary writer for a broadcasting company in Germany in the 1980s. He discovered that being blind was another form of life with its own set of challenges and capabilities.

He saw the discrimination against blind people and sought to act as a bridge between the blind and the sighted, hence the social enterprise Dialogue in the Dark.

Locally, it is being led by co-founder Stevens Chan with headquarters in Mont Kiara, Kuala Lumpur.

Dialogue in the Dark has reached



Zulkarnain is a facilitator with Dialogue in the Dark

30 countries and more than 130 cities across Asia, Europe and the Americas.

Stevens took his group across the South China Sea to enlighten a group of executives, who had thought that a workshop held in complete darkness would not yield much. Since it was part of a three-day retreat and workshop, some of us joined it with this thought; what else is new?

None of the participants had met Stevens, Zulkarnain or any of the facilitators. They were all in a big room where the workshop was being conducted. The people who gave us instructions before we were ushered into the room were just like any one of us — bright, cheerful and friendly. They were very patient, too.

Stevens and his facilitators had other ideas, though. The room, where the workshop was held, was enveloped in complete darkness — the drapes were drawn; each outlet where light could filter in was covered with black paper, plastic



Dialogue in the Dark co-founder Stevens Chan (centre) leading a team-building session.

sheets or cloth; lights were switched off; and the doors were shut tight, with not a ray of light shining in.

Each one of us was given a blind man's walking stick. We were ordered not to display our mobile phones and those whose watches had luminous dials were told to keep them safely in their pockets. Most, if not all of us, joined the session quietly, thinking that this was nothing more than fun and games.

Once inside, we were told to locate other members of our team. The "ginger" team had to group themselves at one table, as did the "asam" team and the "tea" or "coffee" teams. Each of us was given packets containing these items and we had to locate team members using our sense of smell and taste. Amid much shouting and jostling, and with the help of facilitators, we finally found our groups. It was utter chaos.

My facilitator was Yus, who guided me in the dark to my teammates.

I remember asking Yus: "Are you using night vision (goggles)?"

We were then given parts of toys; my group was asked to fix a train set, complete with tracks and parts. In the dark, our task was to put the set together using our communication skills. Somehow, we managed to do that.

After almost three hours, the activities and workshop ended. The lights were switched on and we "regained" our sight. What a relief! What followed was a revelation.

Only then did we discover that our facilitators were visually impaired! We realised that the really blind people are those who refuse to see. Zulkarnain, Stevens and Yus as well as several others taught us that despite our shortcomings, we could be achievers if we have trust and rely on our communication skills. These guys may be blind but they showed us the way towards enlightenment in more ways than one.

✉ AhmadT@paipahitmanis  
✉ ahmadt51@gmail.com