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Leadership and work motivation from the cross cultural perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast conventional management thought, its main features of leadership, and work motivation with those from an Islamic perspective. The paper fills in the literature gap that exists, despite the growing importance of a need for knowledge on management from an Islamic perspective.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is conceptual in nature. Therefore, the method adopted is descriptive and approached using revealed knowledge sources, as well as knowledge from conventional management literature from the cultural school of management thought.

Findings – Leadership and motivational concepts in Islamic management are more comprehensive than the conventional theories. Islamic motivation frameworks also provide fundamentals for developing a strong Islamic leadership. Implications of these Islamic management concepts are not only confined to this materialistic world but also have connotation for subscribers of the belief of attaining eternal success in the hereafter.

Originality/value – The paper gives a better understanding and guidelines for managers of multinational corporations, especially those working in Muslim countries, in order to achieve their corporate objectives successfully.

Keywords Islam, National cultures, Leadership, Motivation (psychology)

Paper type Conceptual paper

Background

It is important to understand how to do business in western countries, as it is conducted in a very different manner than it is in many Muslim countries. Today multinational corporations are headed by managers who may have little understanding about Islamic business practices. Many so-called “global managers” are unfamiliar with Islamic management requirements and techniques, leaving big MNCs frequently with little choice but to import talent from elsewhere. The large global Muslim population creates a huge potential market and a critical part of the world economy. Just as Americans go to INSEAD (Association loi de 1901), France and International Institute for Management Development (IMD) Switzerland, to learn how to do business in the European Union (EU) countries, the same should be done by managers in Muslim countries. However, the number of managers taking the Islamic management courses today, including those taking it as an elective in Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs is relatively small. As a result, there is a shortage of talent on Islamic management.

The critical question lies in whether programs such as the MBA and other similar degrees offered in the Muslim countries hold the key to solving the local and the MNCs’ management and leadership problems. In the early days, the MNCs’ manufacturing facilities in the Muslim countries were offering products at a third of their potential



manufacturing costs in the USA. Today, they have become more savvy. More economic expansions are expected within Muslim countries. There will be a greater focus on profitability and efficiency. A wave of NIE companies is challenging western companies for positioning in the Muslim countries. Muslim countries think of their economies and businesses in terms of growth rather than short-term profits.

A growth in Islamic management education is essential because MNCs need capable managers in Muslim countries. Given the growth and demand for foreign investment in the future, there is currently a real shortage of Islamically-trained managers. More educational knowledge, both in Islamic and conventional methods of engaging in business practices and the western industrial experience, are critically needed to compete and grow in Muslim countries. A familiarity with Islamic management as part of the MBA will provide a proper head-start in the right direction. It is an essential requisite for managers of MNCs doing business in Asia and especially in Muslim-majority countries due to the following:

- Despite nearly two decades of corporate globalization efforts, many organizations still struggle to find managers who are comfortable and effective in the increasingly global economy.
- Developing effective global managers is complex as each company has its own specific needs and challenges, and each geographic location presents a unique and rapidly changing market landscape in which the business is to succeed.
- Cultural issues, such as stereotyping, have become the notable source of management problem as people from different cultures and religions tend to misunderstand each other's behaviors.
- Managing in the global environment often means being more sensitive toward time, distance, cultural, social and religious, language, and civilization differences, which is no simple task.

The intent of this study is to fill in the literature gap that exists despite the growing importance and the need for knowledge on management from an Islamic perspective (MIP). Insufficient attention has been given to exploring and theorising MIP in the present context. The literature discussed below represents only a humble beginning and suggests a long journey ahead for further research in MIP.

Islamic management literature

There is very little information available regarding Islamic perspectives of management. Some of the works relating to the exploration of MIP give us an idea of expectations in regard to the study of leadership and motivation from the Islamic perspective.

Abu Sin (1981) explains Islamic administrative theory in terms of variables and factors that affect the administrative cycle in an organization and its understanding of individual behavior in light of social and cultural factors, Sharfuddin (1987) touches upon various aspects of organizational management such as *shurah* (mutual consultation), *nasiha* (advice), conflict resolution, work and job performance as a religious obligation, merit system in recruitment and promotion, motivation, mutual trust between management and employees, and the use of control and authority. Moursi (1995) focuses on self-management, managing people, managing business transactions,

and managing time from the Islamic perspective, while Jabnoun (1994), in relating management to Islam, discusses and collectivism planning, leading, competition and conflicts. Khalifa (2001) presents a different perspective to strategic management in his work where he introduces three Islamic concepts: *falah* (good deeds) in proposing a normative framework for business enterprise and behavior. Other works relating to Islamic management and administration include those such as Al-Buraey's (1990).

Apart from these works, there is a growing body of literature relating to specific aspects of management and administration from an Islamic perspective. These areas include ethics and social responsibility in management (Beekun, 1997; Ahmad, M., 1996; Hanafi and Sultan, 1995; Ahmad, S.F., 1995; Gambling and Karim, 1991; Al Habshi and Ghazali, 1994), organizational behavior (Shareef, 1995; Al-Alwani, 1995), leadership in organizations (Beekun and Badawi, 1999; Ezzati, 1982; Shirazi, 1980), motivation in organizations (Abdel Rahman, 1995; Nusair, 1985; Ahmed, 1986a; Sharfuddin, 1995; Ahmad, F., 1995), human resource management (Siddiqui, 1987; Sallam and Hanafy, 1995; Ahmed, 1986b; Ramzan Akhtar, 1992), organizational communication (Siddiqui, 1988), quality management (Sadeq and Israil, 1996).

More recent books include: *Management from the Islamic Perspective* authored by Ahmad (2006); Ali's (2005), *Islamic Perspectives on Management and Organization*, and Beekun's (2006) *Strategic Planning and Implementation for Islamic Organizations* which may be used by students as text and researchers as reference.

Much emphasis has been given to basic issues such as ethics and administration and those relating to general issues in organizational management. However, there is a lack of sources which focus on Islamic perspectives in functional areas of management such as leadership, motivation, planning, organization, as well as quality management, marketing and selling, or performance appraisal of employees.

Objectives

The background knowledge provided by the above sources and the general state of MIP literature necessitates an objective analysis for setting the pace for future research in this area. Thus, the objectives of this paper are to contrast western and Islamic management practices, to introduce the general objective of Islam, and to test its implications on the leadership and motivational practices of managers.

Contrast in management practices

Several studies indicate that management practices are not universally applicable. One study conducted by Hall (1960), well known in the management circle for the cultural context of managerial communication, presents a management communication model that highlights the issue of context in communication effects (Harker, 1999). Low- and high-context cultures differ in matters concerning the language of time, space, material possessions, friendship patterns and agreements (Table I).

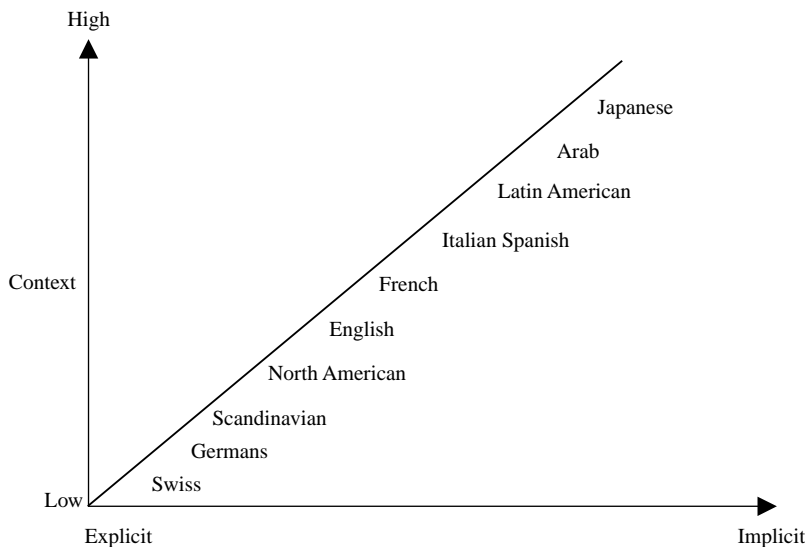
The above factors differ to a great extent in the high-cultural context of the east and the low-cultural context of the west. The findings of the study were tested and are shown in Figure 1. They indicate that the Arabs belong to a high-context culture and differ to great extent with the German and the Swiss who have low-context cultures. Thus, managerial communications common to Germans, Scandinavians and Americans would have negative effects if practiced in high-context cultures such as those in Arab countries.

Similarly, another well-known study on cultural comparisons conducted by Hofstede (1983) in 35 countries concluded that notional cultures differ on four dimensions, which later on became five dimensions. These dimensions are shown in Table II.

As evident in Figure 1, many of the management models have been developed in the USA, the UK and Scandinavia. Furthermore, the USA, the UK, Sweden and Finland are similar in four out five of Hofstede's cultural dimensions, as shown in Figure 2:

Factors	High context	Low context
Lawyers	Less used	Important
Responsibility	Highest level	Devolved
Space	Close contact	Distance
Time	Polychronic	Monochronic
Negotiations	Lengthy	Quick and short
Competitive bidding	Infrequent	Normal
Examples	Japan, Latin America	USA, N. Europe

Table I.
High- and low-context cultures



Source: Hall (1976) adapted Usunier (1993)

Figure 1.
The contextual continuum of differing cultures

Factors	Measures
Power distance	Low-high
Individualism/collectivism	Low-high
Uncertainty avoidance	Low-high
Masculinity/femininity	Low-high
Long-term orientation (fifth dimension)	Long-short

Source: Hofstede (1983)

Table II.
G. Hofstede's four cultural dimensions

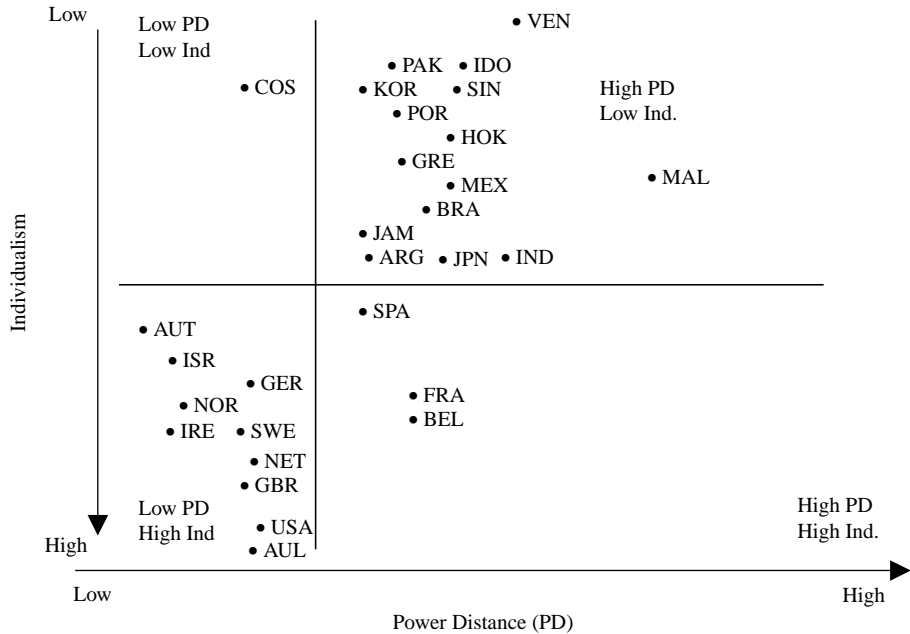


Figure 2.
Individualism by power
distance

Source: Adapted from Greet Hofstede (1983b)

- they are all low on power distance;
- they are all very high on individualism;
- they are all fairly low on uncertainty avoidance;
- their long-term orientation is relatively low;
- the Americans and the British are high on the masculine index, while the Swedes and Finns are low on this score; and
- they are all low-context cultures (Hall, 1976).

The general understanding about conventional management is thus cultural-specific to some cultures in the west and most likely does not reflect the wide range of cultures in which relationship-oriented management is found to be the practice. Conventional management theories have been tested cross culturally, however, within similar cultures, such as in the study undertaken by Friman *et al.* (2002) which was conducted in Sweden, Australia and the UK.

A study carried out by non-western authors, Leung *et al.* (2005), the only significant work coming from outside original European countries, is from China. This typically may be demonstrating an Asian and, more specifically, Chinese version of relationships.

Leung *et al.* asserts that *xinyong* (personal trust) is important for suppliers to establish a personal partnership with a buyer in a Chinese relationship context. *Guanxi* (personal relationship) has a stronger influence on *xinyong* than on satisfaction. Suppliers should demonstrate their psychological commitment to establish *guanxi* with their buyers.

Suppliers' ability to handle conflicts and establish *guanxi* with the buyer will subsequently generate *xinyong* and therefore partnership with the buyer.

Thus, it can be inferred that placing an importance on cross-cultural issues is necessary in the understanding of proper management. The understanding that mono-cultural models from the west are still being propounded as universally applicable, including in Muslim countries, is inaccurate and necessitates the need for Pan-Islamic cross-cultural empirical data to form new models.

Justification for an Islamic perspective of management

The lack of clarity in both domain and terms can limit the progress of studies being conducted for the development of management from an Islamic perspective. So far, there is a lack of convergence in MIP literature. There is a need for more theoretical and empirical cross-cultural works which explore MIP models in Eastern Europe, Central and West Asia, South East Asia and Africa. Specially, these attempts should address high-context cultural dimensions such as power distance, collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and masculinism. In order to prevent a cross-cultural myopia, there is a need to develop an indigenous management model suitable for the Muslim culture – one that is based on knowledge from the revealed sources as well as knowledge about today's business environment. This will necessarily include:

- the changing environment between the 1990s and 2000s;
- global competition;
- global alliances;
- supply chain improvements;
- shorter product-marketing timeline;
- enhanced customer relations, networks and interaction; and
- understanding and management of relationship.

In addition, there is need to conduct a study in the following areas with regards to Islamic leadership and work motivation:

- developing and managing relations between buyers and sellers;
- understanding interpersonal communication;
- focusing on cross-functionalization as opposed to departmentalization;
- understanding the nature, process, and expectations of relationships; and
- recognizing the individual's role as the organization's representative.

Objective of Islam and its implications on leadership and motivation

According to the revealed sources of knowledge, Islam is a comprehensive way of life that enables us to perform our work and *ibadat*. Allah (SWT) says: "I only created the Jinn and mankind for my *ibadat*" (*Al-Quran* 51:57).

Ibadat means to obey Allah by doing everything that He has ordered and avoiding everything that He has forbidden. Thus, it is not limited to just prayer, fasting, giving alms, and performing *hajj*. In Islam, there is a distinction between *ibadat* (worship) and *muamalat* (everyday transaction).

For acts of *ibadat*, everything is forbidden unless it has been authorized in the *shariah*. Thus, there are only two *rakaats* for the *Fajr* prayer. It is forbidden to pray one, three or four *rakaats*. For acts of *muamalat*, everything is permissible unless it is specially forbidden. Thus, in terms of management, every action is permissible unless it is objectionable to the *shariah*.

Fulfilling ones' *ibadat* that is *fardhu 'ain* (obligatory) is a Muslim's first priority. Allah (SWT) says: "Men whom neither trade nor sale diverts them from the Remembrance of Allah, nor from offering prayers perfectly, nor from giving zakat" (*Al-Quran* 24:37). For example, it is a Muslim's responsibility to fulfill the duty of performing the *hajj* as soon as he can afford it, since it is an act of *ibadat*, rather than performing it only when it is convenient for his business activities. However, among Muslims, there are differences of understanding about business and trade and their management.

As regards *muamalat*, there is no one fixed system of *muamalat*. Pertaining to social issues, Islam outlines broad principles from which its followers in different places and different eras define the most appropriate system according to the prevailing circumstances. The system must therefore change accordingly with the change of time without compromising the tenets of Islam and the objectives the *shariah*. Any system developed by Man will have its strengths and weaknesses. The aim should be to decrease the weaknesses and increase the strengths. The best system is one that is based on empirical experience and that is open to changes if empirical evidence shows that it is not working effectively. The empirical experience must be within the moral context of Islam in order for it to be effective. Islamic content sometimes supersedes human reasoning.

Islamic alternative to conventional management knowledge

The Islamic approach to management is an emerging discipline, often referred to as Islamic management. It looks at the management of organization from the perspective of the knowledge obtained from revealed and other Islamic sources which lead to managerial applications that are compatible with Islamic beliefs and practices. Many leadership and motivation theories in the available literature reflect the western world-view which is not applicable to Muslims. Muslim workers find their motivation in their religion and their cultural heritage. Thus, an approach to motivation that ignores this factor is not likely to succeed. The Prophet (SAW) taught that every human endeavor is an act of worship and charity. Thus, for a working Muslim, worshipping his Creator is by itself a powerful motivating factor regardless of any return in material gain.

Leadership in Islam is a trust (*amanah*). It is a psychological contract between a leader and his followers in which the former will try his best to guide, protect, and to treat the latter with justice. The focus of leadership in Islam is on doing good deeds. According to Islam, every individual is the "shepherd" of a flock and occupies a position of leadership. Muslims are required to appoint a leader during a trip, select a leader to lead the prayer, and choose a leader for group activities.

Allah (SWT) says:

Is it they who would portion out the Mercy of your Lord? It is We Who portions out between them their livelihood in the life of this world: and We raise some of them above others in ranks so that some may command work from others. But the Mercy of your Lord is better than the (wealth) which they amass (*Al-Qur'an*, 43:32).

Allah (SWT) commands Muslims to have a leader to conduct their affairs as He says:

“Behold! Each of you is a guardian, and each of you will be asked about his subjects.” “When three are on a journey, they should appoint one of them as their commander.” “Muslims must appoint a leader during a trip, select a leader (imam) to lead the prayer, and choose a leader for other group activities [...] A commander (of the Muslims) is a shield for them.”

According to Islam, a leader has two primary roles, namely leader and guardian leader. A leader is the servant of his followers (*sayyid al qawn khadimuhum*). He is to look out for their welfare and guide them towards good. As the guardian leader, he protects his community against tyranny and oppression, encourages God-consciousness and *taqwa*, and promotes justice.

Leadership in Islam is rooted in belief of and the willing submission to Allah, the Creator and centers on serving Him. To serve Allah, a Muslim leader must act in accordance with Him and His Prophet’s (SAW) injunctions. He must also develop a strong Islamic moral character which will be reflected by his increasingly strong belief in God as he progresses through the four stages of spiritual development: *islam*, *iman*, *taqwa* and *ihsan*.

Islam means the achievement of peace with God, within oneself and with God’s creations, through the willingness to submit to Him.

Because of his *iman*, a leader who practices *Islam* will never see himself as supreme over others. Ali Ibn Abu Talib RA stressed this value to Malik al-Ashtar an-Nukai, the new Governor of Egypt, when he wrote, “Malik, you must never forget that if you are a ruler over them, then the Caliph is a ruler over you, and God is the supreme Lord over the Caliph.”

Iman is faith in Allah. It implies the belief in the Oneness of God and the Prophethood of Muhammad (SAW). A leader with a strong *iman* will consider himself and all his possessions as belonging to God. He will subjugate his ego, his ideas, his passions, and his thinking to God. *Iman* also implies the belief in life hereafter and in one’s ultimate accountability for one’s deeds. A leader with a firm faith will not shirk his responsibility for his actions and will continually emphasize good deeds.

Taqwa is the all-encompassing, inner consciousness of duty towards God and awareness of one’s accountability towards Him. When imbued with *taqwa*, a person’s frame of mind – his thoughts, emotions and inclinations – will reflect Islam. *Taqwa* will restrain a Muslim leader from behaving unjustly.

Ihsan is the love of God. What motivates the individual Muslim to work towards attaining God’s pleasure? Prophet Muhammad (SAW) said of *ihsan*: “Worship God as if you see Him, and if you cannot achieve this state of devotion then you must consider that He is looking at you.” The constant feeling that God is ever watching will prompt a Muslim leader to behave his best at all times.

Similarly, motivation from Islamic perspectives has its spiritual and material aspects and is therefore far more comprehensive than approaches made by the theories of Maslow, McLealand, and Freud. The Muslim worker’s motivation to work and to provide excellent service is derived not only from the notions of self-fulfillment, upward mobility, uplifting of material standards of living, or service to the nation, but also, more fundamentally, from the belief that as a holder of *amanah* or earth, there are several implications, namely that:

- he must search industrially for the bounty Allah has provided for his sustenance, either in the form of natural resources to be explored or new processes to utilize available resources;
- his work is a form of *amal salih* (virtuous deed) which is the key to the attainment of *falah*; true success in this world and well-being in the Hereafter;
- his work is also a form of *ibadah* (servitude to God) as long as it is in conformity with divine; and
- the reward for his good deeds and punishment for bad deeds is not confined to this world, but extends to the Hereafter.

Thus, in striving to gain the pleasure of Allah, the leader's performance does not entirely depend upon the reward system of the organization he works for or the society in which he lives. As he works toward a loftier objective, namely, the well-being of this world and the Hereafter (*al-falah, hasanah fi-d-dunya and hasanah fi'l-akhirah*), a decrease in worldly and materialistic reward would not adversely affect his performance. He will be more ready to defer self-gratification or make some personal sacrifices in terms of time, effort, or money should the organization pass through difficult times.

Islamic motivation consists of four components: drive (an aroused state due to physiological need), instincts and innate biological determinants of behavior, commitment (*ikhlas*), and incentives (external stimuli).

The need theory: contrasted with Maslow's and others

A Muslim looks at wages, salaries and other material benefits as a means to enable him to feed, clothe, and house his family and himself so that he may devote his energy to work, rather than as returns for his labor. His labor is worship, and only Allah can recompense for it.

Instincts and innate biological determinants of behavior

Humans have freedom of choice in their behavior or work (*Al-Quran* 4:66). Islam emphasizes the importance of work (*Al-Quran* 6:135 & 67:15) and retribution for any behavior (*Al-Quran* 2: 85) whether it is *amal hasan* (good deed) or *amal sayyi* (bad deed). Whilst bad behavior is condemned and is promised punishment, deeds reflect underlying faith (*Al-Quran* 38:24 and 103:2-3) and are rewarded on earth (*Al-Quran* 16:97 and 24:55) and in the Hereafter (*Al-Quran* 2:25 and 99:7).

Incentives (external stimuli)

Jannah (Paradise) is a positive motivator while *Jahanam* (Hell Fire) is a negative motivator. Good work is rewarded with *Jannah* and the opposite is rewarded with punishment in *Jahannam*. Each person is rewarded according to his or her *niyyah* (intention) for every deed he does.

Commitment (ikhlas)

Motivation can be intrinsic (self motivation), extrinsic (rewards), or reactionary (not real and temporary) in nature. Motivation is internal whereas manipulation is external. Commitment is described in the *Quran* in several verses (2:139 and 98:5). It is expressed in the intention, and work is the consequence of the intention (*Al-Bukhari*).

Highly motivated individuals have a clear vision of objectives, strategic and tactical plans; have high expectancy, energy, drive, self-confidence, a need for responsibility and control, strong communication skills. They are willing to take risks and criticisms and have a desire for recognition and an interesting job, as well as authority. These are not natural characteristics but can be nurtured in any individual. Several aspects of a Muslim's character affect his motivation, namely *sharaf* (fear of losing face, shame for self, and family), *thawab* (reward in the Hereafter), *karam* (generosity), and *wafa* (fulfillment) (*Al-Hadith*).

Motivated personality

Motivated leaders clarify goals, set objectives, consult and respect followers, and deal with followers with kindness and fairness. Motivation can also be caused by the level of moral development and spiritual maturity of a person. Spiritually, people are classified in three categories as those who have *Nafs Ammarah*, *Nafs Lawwamah*, and *Nafs Mutmainnah*.

Leaders with *Nafs Ammarah*: leaders who have negative motivation are due to have worries, lack of self-confidence, low self-esteem, low self-worth, no respect for other's right and cause followers to feel in secure.

Leaders with *Nafs Lawwamah*: leaders who motivates others, believe in work as challenging, meaningful, and as opportunities for advancement, learning, and personal growth.

Leaders with *Nafs Mutmainnah*: leaders who a high degree of sense of responsibility towards Allah and independence from any kind of fear and anxiety and who provide job satisfaction. They subscribe to the idea of *sharaf* (fear of losing face, shame for self, and family), *thawab* (reward in the hereafter), *karam* (generosity), and *wafa* (fulfillment).

The essence of leadership development is thus, a purification of the soul. If the soul is good, the rest of the body becomes good. Professionals may get overly engrossed in their work, only to realize and find themselves in a spiritual crisis that in turn produces adverse effects on their performance and motivation.

Summary and conclusion

This paper has brought up some fundamental observations on leadership and work motivation from a cross-cultural perspective by contrasting western and Islamic perspectives on these issues. Knowledge of these perspectives is increasingly important for managers in the global environment in which Muslim countries stand as huge potential markets and as a critical part of the world economy.

The study reveals that Islamic perspectives on leadership and motivation are rooted in the Islamic worldview and from the Islamic revealed knowledge. They are significantly different from the western perspective which is primarily based on a secular worldview and on material aspects. From an Islamic perspective, leadership is a trust (*amanah*) involving a psychological contract between a leader and his followers on doing good deeds. Thus, a leader must have a strong moral character developed through four stages of spiritual development: *islam*, *iman*, *taqwa*, and *ihsan*.

Similarly, motivation in Islam has its spiritual and material aspects and is therefore far more comprehensive than the approaches made by western scholars. A Muslim motivation to work is derived not only from the notions of self-fulfillment or material gains, but also from loftier objectives, namely the well-being of this world and the

hereafter (*al-falah*, *hasanah fid-dunya*, and *hasanah fil-akhirah*). The concept can be elaborated further from the four components of Islamic motivations, including the need theory (the drive), the determinants of the behavior, commitments (*ikhlas*) and incentives (external stimuli). In a nutshell, Islamic motivation frameworks provide fundamentals for developing a strong Islamic leadership.

Finally, the discussion should initiate action which will eventually help to narrow the gap of understanding in managing business in the Islamic way. In this context, there is a need to distinguish between Islamic principles and Muslim behavior. Continuous human development in Islam should focus on fundamental human values. In other words, the emphasis on integrity and sincerity could be served through governance and regulations as an external driver, religion as internal motivator and driver, leadership behavior as reinforcing driver, and innovation and knowledge for change management. Moreover, in satisfying stakeholders, there is a need for a performance measurement in management, such as the key performance indicators, to be based on Islamic principles.

The main challenge is, therefore, to integrate knowledge of management for better corporate governance from an Islamic perspective. This will cater to the practicing managers' needs to be better prepared for the challenges of being global managers. There is also a need to build relationships and have frequent interactions and communications between cultures, religions and civilizations in order to be able to work together and to lead effectively. Therefore, Islamic management developed in the Islamic cultural mold can be a model that rivals Taylor's scientific management, Mayo's human resource movement, and Deming's quality management within and beyond the Muslim world. This is expected to cater to the practicing managers' needs to better prepare for the challenges of being global managers in the global economy.

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