

# The Journal of Values-Based Leadership

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Volume 11

Issue 2 Summer/Fall 2018

Article 8

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July 2018

## A Muslim Perspective of Leadership – Insights from Oman

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### Recommended Citation

Al Asmi, Khalfan R. and Caldwell, Cam (2018) "A Muslim Perspective of Leadership – Insights from Oman," *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22543/0733.62.1239>

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl/vol11/iss2/8>

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## **A Muslim Perspective of Leadership – *Insights from Oman***

### **Introduction**

As leaders worldwide deal with the stunning reality that only 13% of 30,000 employees surveyed are positively engaged (Mann & Harter, 2016; Fuller & Shikaloff, 2017) in support of their organizations and only 18% believe that their leaders tell the truth (Edelman, 2013), many would-be leaders struggle with what apparently are seriously deficient leadership models currently being practiced (Hurley, 2011). These widely cited survey results suggest that trust in business leaders is alarmingly low and that trust in leaders of governments is even worse. In contrast with this alarming evidence about the decline in leadership and trust, opportunities still exist for leaders to increase follower trust and commitment that is so critical to creating competitive advantage (Beer, 2009).

The purpose of this paper is to present a Muslim perspective of leadership as viewed from observing leaders in Muscat, Oman – the capital city of the Middle East country that has grown at the rate of just under 4% per year since 2000 (Trading Economics, 2018) and is awash with residents from places throughout the world. In Muscat, Oman residents are hard-working, happy, and friendly and actively support their leaders who typically adhere to the culture and practices of the Muslim faith.

This paper begins with a brief summary of traditional moral perspectives that are implicit in leadership, summarizing the widely accepted but contrasting points of view of Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan. It then presents a perspective of leadership from an Islamic perspective, citing a variety of scholars in describing unique Muslim insights about human relationships, the importance of the pursuit of harmony, and a long-term view of goal achievement. In presenting this summary, the paper identifies six important propositions about leadership which have application for would-be leaders – regardless of their cultural background or country of origin. The paper then summarizes its practical contributions for leaders and concludes with a challenge for practitioners and scholars.

### **Two Perspectives of Morality**

Two often-cited models for assessing moral duties are the related but distinctly separate moral theories proposed by Lawrence Kohlberg (1976) and Carol Gilligan. Kohlberg's model,

based upon assumptions primarily founded on principles of justice and rationality (Ellertson, Ingerson, & Williams, 2016), is often described as a masculine framework for moral development—primarily based upon a cognitive or belief-based view of relationships and moral duties (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thomas, 1999). In contrast, Gilligan (2016) offered a feminine moral perspective that is clearly affective, feminine, and based upon caring, relationships and responsibilities (Nodding, 2013).

Kohlberg's (1976) original model, consisting of six stages and three levels of moral development, is a cognitive theory of moral reasoning in responding to moral dilemmas that was derived from a study of the responses solely of young men. Kohlberg derived his model from the work of Piaget and suggested that his framework had application regardless of gender – despite the fact that his research involved young men entirely.

In contrast, Gilligan (2016) argued that a feminist moral perspective was much more affective and closely tied to moral responsibilities associated with interpersonal relationships and caring about moral duties owed to others. Gilligan's (1982) moral framework intentionally incorporated the responses entirely of women and was developed to document the unique nature of the feminine perspective in examining moral duties. Known in the ethics literature as the Ethic of Care, Gilligan's research affirmed that moral outcomes needed to focus on much more than rationality, justice, and rules of law (Held, 2006).

Kohlberg's moral development model is clearly more rule- and justice-based and goal-oriented – seeking ideal outcomes and classified as a teleological ethical framework (Brady, 1999). Gilligan's Ethic of Care is a feminine ethical perspective that seeks to honor others, protect their interests and rights, and pursue their individual welfare as an axiological ethical classification (Brady, 1999). In many ways, the contrasting moral frameworks mesh comfortably within the two goals of leadership identified in the original Ohio State and Michigan leadership studies. Both of those studies concluded that leadership focused on both the pursuit of task-based outcomes and the maintaining of interpersonal relationships; and both acknowledged that leaders who integrated both factors were likely to achieve superior practical results (Chemers, 1997). Consistent with this summary of the masculine and feminine perspectives of moral development and their Muslim applications, we present our first proposition.

**P<sub>1</sub>: Because Omani Muslim leaders appear to be high in both masculine and feminine moral values, the followers of those leaders will perceive their leaders high in personal integrity.**

Integrity, or the ability to honor commitments and keep promises, is one of the three most important conditions precedent to organizational (Caldwell & Clapham, 2003) and interpersonal trustworthiness (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007). Because integrity and trustworthiness are so closely related, we suggest our second proposition.

**P<sub>2</sub>: Because Omani Muslim leaders appear to be high in both masculine and feminine moral values, the followers of those leaders will perceive their leaders high in trustworthiness.**

Lennick and Kiel (2011) have suggested that high moral intelligence consists of 1) a commitment to create value short-term, 2) a commitment to create value long-term, and 3) a

commitment to doing no harm. The moral perspective of Omani Muslims integrates both masculine and feminine ethical frameworks that incorporate the adoption of interpersonal moral responsibility as well as the application of rational and responsible leadership in honoring duties to stakeholders which encompass the three obligations of moral intelligence.

## Islam and Leadership

Ali, (2009) has suggested a model of Islamic leadership that incorporates cultural, religious, and traditional management insights. In this assessment of the Muslim perspective of leadership, we build on the work of scholars to describe this integration of these three factors that affect Islamic leadership and present six propositions related to Muslim leadership.

### *Cultural Insights*

For Omanis and many other Muslim countries, there is a logically rational but sometimes ironic relationship between culture and leadership (Ali, 2009). Culture provides both meaning and context to what leaders do and “induces followers to respond and act in a particular way” (Ali, 2009, p. 161). The complexity of the Omani culture and the evolving nature of the role of women in that culture has changed the dimensions of leadership, the expectations of leader roles, and the historic rationale about leadership norms – with major changes in the role of women since Sultan Qaboos extended to women the right to work and to obtain tertiary education (Goveas & Aslam, 2011). In the face of evolving norms and cultural and economic change, we propose our third proposition.

**P<sub>3</sub>: Because Omani leaders have become more pressured to be inclusive about women and their place in society, more responsive to the input of others, and more willing to share responsibility current Omani leaders will be perceived as more responsive and inclusive than their predecessors of previous generations.**

In Hofstede’s classic study of national cultures, he identified the six factors that typically describe culture. Hofstede (2003) described culture as collective programming of the human mind within a cultural group that distinguishes the members of that group from other groups. *Table 1* provided below, briefly summarizes the six well-recognized cultural dimensions of Hofstede’s (2003) cultural model and suggests how those factors apply

Cultural Criterion	Brief Summary	Impacts for Oman	Effects on Leadership
Power Distance	This dimension includes the degree which less powerful members of organizations and institutions accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.	Oman is high in Power Distance and differences in status are recognized. The recent effort to upgrade the status of women has reduced this distance.	Respect for those in the position of leadership is very high and leaders are shown deference in decision-making – even when superior options are available.
Masculine-Feminine	Masculinity identifies the preference for achievement, heroism, assertiveness and material rewards for success whereas Femininity is the preference for	For a Mid-Eastern culture, Oman is relatively neutral in this factor and women are increasingly allowed to obtain an education	Although men tend to be in many top leadership roles, women have increasingly significant influence in the Omani society and can now fill

	cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak and quality of life.	and participate actively in the work force. However, women clearly are expected to be more modest.	important administrative roles.
Uncertainty Avoidance	This dimension identifies the tolerance of a society for ambiguity, uncertainty, and risk.	Oman is quite high in Uncertainty Avoidance and prefers to avoid unnecessary risk or speculation.	Omani leaders make carefully thought out decisions and may move slowly in making changes if risk is perceived.
Individualism vs. Collectivism	Individualistic societies have loose ties wherein the emphasis is on the “I” versus the “we.” Collectivism, describes a society in which tightly-integrated relationships tie extended families and others into in-groups.	Like most Mid-Eastern cultures, Oman is low in Individualism and definitely Collectivist in its perceptions about the importance of the group and the family unit.	The impact of high Collectivism is reflected in Omani leaders’ commitment to outcomes which benefit the entire community.
Long-term vs. Short-term Orientation	This dimension associates the connection of the past with the current and future actions and challenges and also reflects respect for traditions.	Oman has moved in the direction of being short-term focused in its commercial growth and economic expansion but also respects long-term objectives and tradition.	The innate courtesy and kindness of Omanis result in their interpersonal courtesy and respect for leaders and their pursuit of long-term positive outcomes.
Indulgence vs. Restraint	A society high in Indulgence gratifies present needs whereas a society high in Restraint controls gratification of needs and regulates it by means of strict social norms.	Because of the high moral standards of the Islamic faith, Oman is very high in Restraint.	The Islamic faith imposes high moral standards of ethical leadership.

**Table 1 – Hofstede’s Cultural Factors and their Omani Leadership Impact**

within the Omani culture – including a summary of the significance of each cultural factor as it may apply to the Muslim leader-follower relationship in Oman.

Summarizing *Table 1*, the Muslim culture is high in restraint, uncertainty avoidance, collectivism, and power distance while being more neutral in time orientation and gender role identification. Applying this profile and its impact on leaders seems to affirm that leaders in the Muslim and Omani culture are likely to be highly respected by followers, focused on what is good for the whole, and concerned about making decisions that preserve what is good about the status quo and reinforcing of high moral standards.

For Muslims in Omani, culture serves as a normative yardstick which affirms what works and what does not work and Omani culture determines the boundaries of appropriate conduct (Ali, 2009). The six dimensions of Hofstede’s (2003) cultural model identify how Muslim norms affect much of Omani society, the expectations held for leaders, and the degree to which the leadership relationship affects interpersonal assumptions and human interaction.

As noted in *Table 1*, the Islamic culture places a high priority on relationships and responsibility and honor and integrity are defining values. Culturally, relationships respect the importance of harmony and incorporate the notion of “a soft landing” by which to resolve conflicts. Respect for leaders preserves their prestige and group members honor the leader’s role by focusing on solutions that reinforce harmony. Success is emphasized from a big picture perspective and is viewed by Omanis as a journey rather than an end point. Accordingly, substandard leadership decisions are met with high follower patience and gentle feedback to help a leader make decisions that are better choices. Our fourth proposition incorporates this great respect for Muslim leaders in Omani.

**P<sub>4</sub>: Because power distance is high and leaders are highly respected, Omani leaders are more likely to be shown patient respect regarding decisions that they make than leaders of other countries.**

Two frequently heard Arabic phrases in the Omani culture reflect the Islamic perception about the pursuit of virtuous results. One phrase, العربية ألهمدوليللا or “Alhamdulillah,” means “All the praises and thanks be to Allah.” This phrase not only emphasizes the humility of the Islamic faith but the acknowledgement of dependence upon God for a successful outcome (McIntosh, 2017). Similarly, the phrase إن شاء الله or “inshallah” literally means “if God wills” in Arabic. Both phrases suggest great reliance upon the will of God (McIntosh, 2017). However, *The Quran* teaches that Muslims have a personal obligation to do much more than to simply turn responsibility for problems to Allah. Faithful Muslims who follow the *Quran* must make a full effort on their own part, and only then do they believe that Allah will bless their efforts. This important distinction also applies to the leader-follower relationship wherein followers assist leaders to succeed – even when a leader may make a decision that a follower deems to be imperfect. Consistent with the values reflected by these two often-used Omani phrases, our fifth proposition:

**P<sub>5</sub>: Omani followers of Muslim leaders are more likely to demonstrate the Islamic faith’s commitment to supporting leader efforts even when they disagree than followers who disagree with their leaders in non-Muslim societies.**

### ***Management Factors***

The Islamic faith is centered on the pursuit of peace and justice (Gulen, 2011). Muslim and Islam both are derived from an Arabic three letter word that means “surrender or submit to God” and the goal of every Muslim is to achieve a state of inner peace (Unal, 2013). Ali (2009) explained that Islamic individuals are held responsible for promoting and enforcing justice and noted that *The Qur’an* (4:58) requires that “When ye judge between people that ye judge with justice.” This masculine emphasis on justice is balanced by the Omani cultural commitment to open hospitality, welcoming kindness, and omnipresent deep familial love – distinctly feminine moral virtues consistent with the Ethic of Care (Held, 2006). The Omani greeting, “As-salam alaikum” or “Peace be unto you” conveys the warmth of the Muslim greeting extended to each person and reflects the authentic concern, generosity, and kindness that is the foundation of Omani relationships (Trip Advisor, 2017). Omanis balance this masculine commitment to justice with a feminine caring about the importance of relationships. Consistent with this summary of the Omani Muslim leaders’ foundation assumptions about interpersonal relationships, we present our sixth proposition.

P<sub>6</sub>: Omani Muslim leaders are perceived as more ethical than other Muslim leaders who are not from Oman because of the influence of both the masculine and feminine moral standards that permeate the Omani culture of human relations.

## Practical Implications

Understanding the nature of Omani Muslim leaders offers valuable insights for Omani leaders who may not have consciously reflected on how they interact with others as well as for followers who work directly for those leaders or for companies that interact with a firm led by an Omani Muslim. Regarding the practical implications and applications of this paper we identify four significant insights.

- 1) ***Omani Muslim leaders have high moral standards that integrate both masculine and feminine ethical values.*** Omani Muslim leaders combine highly rational justice-based values characterized by Lawrence Kohlberg's (1976) masculine theory of moral development as well as the caring, responsibility, and concern for relationships which up the feminine Ethic of Care developed by Carol Gilligan (2016). This high level of moral commitment encompasses the three duties of moral intelligence and is a legitimate basis of confidence for those who interrelate with Omani Muslim leaders.
- 2) ***The characteristics of the Oman culture described herein provide useful context for understanding the values and tendencies of Omani Muslim leaders.*** The six dimensions of the Hofstede cultural model help to clarify that these leaders are concerned about values that benefit the collective Oman community. The Hofstede model also affirms that Omani leaders tend to be conservative, risk averse, and highly committed to virtuous outcomes. By framing opportunities in terms of long-term and short-term benefits to the entire Oman community, those who do business with Omani leaders are likely to be able to appeal to the values of the culture in an exchange relationship.
- 3) ***Recognizing the Oman respect for leaders and the pursuit of organizational harmony reinforces the value of a collaborative approach with Omani leaders.*** The values of the Omani society are biased toward supporting their Omani leaders and pursuing an organizational outcome that promotes organization harmony. Being patient and sensitive to the value of internal organization support for leaders – even if and when those leaders make decisions that do not optimize organizational outcomes – is a wise strategy for dealing with Omani Muslim leaders, as opposed to reacting prematurely if a leader makes a decision that may not be in his organization's best interests.
- 4) ***Testing the six propositions of this paper provides opportunities for increasing one's understanding of individual Omani leaders.*** Hofstede noted that differences in cultural attributes within a cultural group may be as broad as the differences between national cultures. Accordingly, individuals working with Omani leaders may wish to test these propositions as they do business with Omanis to determine whether the propositions are on target with the leader with whom those individuals are currently dealing. Although the propositions of this paper support the general insights provided by this paper, it is nonetheless wise to double-check how the responding Omani leader will act with regard to these propositions.

## Conclusion

The ability to communicate effectively with others is a valuable leadership quality for generating follower trust, just as understanding how that leader thinks enables those who work with and for that leader to support that leader's efforts in achieving organizational excellence. As leaders and team members improve their understanding of one another, their organizations improve and their working relationships become both more satisfying and more productive.

As Oman continues to grow in economic health, in population, and in its status in the region's economy, the success of its leaders and their ability to earn the trust and followership of others becomes extremely important. By clarifying the qualities and characteristics of Omani leaders, those who work with those leaders – whether as employees, customers, or cooperating partners – can benefit and can create more effective relationships that enable stakeholders to create stronger alliances and improve their ability to achieve personal and organizational goals.

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