



Prophetic Leadership: Servant Leadership in Islam



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Introduction

“And we made them leaders, guiding by our command. And we inspired to them the doing of good deeds, establishment of prayer, and giving of zakāh; and they were worshippers of us” (The Holy Quran [21:73]).

From the aforementioned verse of the Qur’an, a leader must act following Allah’s law (Syariah) and he/she has no absolute freedom to act as desired by fulfilling sensual pleasure or to succumb to the desires of any pressure group.



In Islam, leadership is a process of impacting, influencing, and inspiring followers, on their own free will, to fulfill a clear as well as a shared vision. The ultimate objective of Islamic leadership is to act according to Islam to be Syariah compliant.

Servant leadership is a widely used leadership model which is closely related to the teachings of various religions. It introduces the model where the leader is the servant first which is also found in the teachings of various religious Prophets and religious mentors.

Contemporary Perspective of Servant Leadership

From a contemporary perspective, leadership is a prime function of management; every organization needs a leadership model which may meet the values of work floor culture. A leadership model which is aligned with the organizational values can resolve the dilemmas and can motivate the rest of the functions of the organization (Bawany 2019).

Leadership theories have been evolving in different epochs of time. Servant leadership appears as a fresh model which is people-centered and most effective with the contemporary designs of the organization.

There has been a growing interest in Greenleaf's (1977) servant leadership theory, which advocates putting away the self-interest of leaders for the benefit of their followers. According to Greenleaf (1977), the major purpose of a business should be to generate a positive impact on its employees and community at large. The servant-leader brings together service and meaning to all the stakeholders. The leader should familiarize themselves with basic spiritual values and, in serving those values, the leaders serve others including colleagues, the organization, and society



at large. Service in this sense is thus not a special case of leadership, but rather a special kind of service guided with spirituality.

The framework for servant leadership consists of helping others discover their inner spirit, earning and keeping others trust, service over self-interest, and effective listening. The core of Greenleaf's (1977) servant leadership model is based on four tenets of moral authority:

1. Sacrifice.
2. Inspires commitment to a worthy cause.
3. Teaches others that end and means are inseparable.
4. Introduce the world of relationships.

For a Servant Leader, empathy can also be seen as demonstrating active concern for people and their needs by forming close and supportive relationships with others. Leaders who lack empathy may be perceived by others as cold, uncaring, and having little interest in them as people. Leaders, who score high on this competency, work to develop close bonds with others. They spend time getting to know people and can give their colleagues the feeling that they are personally involved with them. They tend to emphasize the importance of being generous and kind and displaying a sincere interest in the well-being of others (Bawany 2015).

In today's leadership crises within organizations (including businesses and government institutions) across the globe, the underlying factor is the inability to identify, assess, select and develop leaders who can manage the near-insurmountable challenges operating in a highly disruptive and ever-changing business environment (Bawany 2020).

What do people want in their political or business leader?



Research has shown one of the main reasons good employees leave a workplace is their dissatisfaction with leadership. So what can you do to be that inspirational leader we all want and deserve? We've compiled a list of positive traits that employees love to see in their leadership.

People want leaders who listen to them and empower them rather than who practices power over them. Such a responsibility would create a sense of anxiety for any leader especially in trying to adopt an appropriate leadership style to produce the required change. It is believed that Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) embraced the leadership approach that focused on people and their needs as a priority.

The Servant Leadership of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)

It is impossible for those who study the life and characteristics of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to feel anything else but reverence for him as both an inspiring leader and teacher. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was ranked first on the list of the most influential people in history (Hart, 1978). Hart indicated that after thirteen centuries since the Prophet's (peace be upon him) death, his influence is still pervasive and effective.

According to the Qur'an, the Prophet's (peace be upon him) mission was primarily to correct belief and promote habitual change to establish mercy and compassion to humankind. "And We have not sent you, [O Muḥammad], except as a mercy to the worlds" (The Holy Quran [21:107]).

In his book, *The Sealed Nectar*, Al-Mubarkpuri (1979) pointed that the Prophet (peace be upon him) emphasized belonging and showing respect regardless of race, religion or position



when the treaty between Muslim and Jews was signed after the Muslim migration to Madinah, He emphasized being merciful to all without exception.

He is recorded to say that “Allah is not merciful to those who are not merciful to people” (Bukhari & Muslim, 2009). Since many believe that the Prophet’s leadership style demonstrates that he was a leader who empowered others and cared about them, his biography would be a precious source for leaders to analyze his method of leading and unifying people.

As stated in the first post on the series published on 6 April 2021, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the best example of a leader in Islam. The Quran states explicitly: “And indeed, you are of a great moral character” (The Holy Quran [68:4]).

Following the above-mentioned verse and in a bid to fulfill the objective of this article, it will be useful to reflect on some of the leadership qualities of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

These leadership qualities could be gleaned from published books and literature on the Seerah (prophetic biography) of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) as well as through narrations and Ahadith (a collection of traditions containing sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) which, with accounts of his daily practice (the Sunnah), constitute the major source of guidance for Muslims apart from the Quran).

When reading the Quran, one would discover that there are hundreds of verses narrating the main incidents and aspects of the life of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) including the stages of his prophethood.

Despite the Prophet’s (peace be upon him) noble standing as the most beloved prophet of Allah (The Exalted) and even as a member of an elite tribe in Makkah, he was neither an



arrogant despot nor an oppressive tyrant. Rather, he portrayed the best example of an inspiring and servant leader (Al-Mubarkpuri 1979).

Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) Leadership Trait: Justice and Fairness

One of the significant leadership traits of the Noble Prophet's (peace be upon him) is 'Justice' which was an uncompromising aspect of the Prophet's (peace be upon him) life and mission and in this; he followed in the footsteps of the Prophets (peace be upon them all) preceding him (Amoloye 2011).

Allah (The Exalted) says in Qur'an 57:25: "We have already sent Our messengers with clear evidences and sent down with them the Scripture and the balance that the people may maintain [their affairs] in justice. And We sent down iron, wherein is great military might and benefits for the people, and so that Allah may make evident those who support Him and His messengers unseen. Indeed, Allah is Powerful and Exalted in Might" (The Holy Quran [57:25]).

The concept of justice in Islam is rooted in God's Divine nature. The Qur'an 4:40 states, "Indeed, Allah does not do injustice, [even] as much as an atom's weight; while if there is a good deed, He multiplies it and gives from Himself a great reward" (The Holy Quran [4:40]).

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) quotes God as saying, "O My Servants, I have forbidden injustice upon myself and have made it forbidden amongst you, so do not commit injustice." (Sahih Muslim No. 2577)

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) firmly established the rule of justice amongst his people and such was his understanding of the rights of people and the need to dispense them with absolute fairness and justice.



Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) Leadership Trait: Mutual Consultation

(Shura)

Shura constitutes one of the four cardinal principles in the Islamic perspective on the socio-political organization. The other three are justice, equality, and human dignity.

What is the shura principle in Islam? It can be viewed essentially parallel to the democratic principle in Western political thought, having analogous aspects and about the same tendency or direction. It is predicated on three basic precepts. First, that all persons in any given society are equal in human and civil rights. Second, those public issues are best decided by the majority view. And third, that the three other principles of justice, equality and human dignity, which constitute Islam's moral core, and from which all Islamic conceptions of human and civil rights derive, are best realized, in personal as well as public life, under shura governance.

Shura, as a principle, is rooted in the Qur'an itself. The Qur'an has presented shura as a principle, and not as a system of governance.

Allah (The Exalted) described this significant trait of the Prophet's (peace be upon him) leadership in the Qur'an 3:159 as follows: "So by mercy from Allah, [O Muḥammad], you were lenient with them. And if you had been rude [in speech] and harsh in heart, they would have disbanded from about you. So pardon them and ask forgiveness for them and consult them in the matter. And when you have decided, then rely upon Allah. Indeed, Allah loves those who rely [upon Him]" (The Holy Quran [3:159]).

According to some of the commentators of the Qur'an, such as ibn Jarir al-Tabari and Isma'il ibn Kathir, this verse was revealed shortly after the battle of Uhud, when the Muslims were reflecting on the mistakes they had made during Uhud. Some of the Muslims had begun to



regret that during the shura (consultation) process before the battle of Uhud as to what strategy they should adopt, many of them, especially the courageous young people in their midst, had opposed the Prophet Muhammad's opinion that they should fight the Quraysh from within the city walls of Madina (Amoloye 2011).

Had he wished, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) could have easily imposed his opinion on his followers, and no one would have questioned his decision. After the Prophet (peace be upon him) emerged from his tent wearing his armor, the army had in the meantime decided to abandon the majority view and follow their leader's opinion to fight from within the walls of the city of Madina. But the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was keen on using this as a critical 'coachable' moment where he wanted to use that specific occasion to teach his companions and subsequent Muslims an important lesson in leadership. He wished to drive home to them the fact that he who has the authority (a ruler) must never impose his own will on his followers. He must always consult with his followers because through mutual consultation the right course of action will emerge. And so it was that Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) subjected himself to the view of the shura, the majority position (Amoloye 2011).

Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) Leadership Trait: Mercy and Compassion

The Qur'an 9:128 speaks of the Prophet's (peace be upon him) mercy and compassion for his followers as thus: "There has certainly come to you a Messenger from among yourselves. Grievous to him is what you suffer; [he is] concerned over you [i.e., your guidance] and to the believers is kind and merciful." (The Holy Quran [9:128]).



Such indeed was the Prophet (peace be upon him) as a servant leader. He was just, democratic, merciful and compassionate amongst other qualities to his followers! We should remember the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “Each of you is a guardian, and each of you will be asked about his subjects” (Sahih Bukhari, Hadith 3733). And surely we should not also forget Qur’an 3:31 which states: “Say, [O Muḥammad], “If you should love Allah, then follow me, [so] Allah will love you and forgive you your sins. And Allah is Forgiving and Merciful” (The Holy Quran [3:31]).

Conclusion

All the fundamental facets of servant leadership are well covered and taught by Islam, which was visible in the life of the Prophet (peace be upon him) as the Egyptian Proverb says: “The master or leader of the people (nation) is the one who serves them (Sayyedu al-Qumi khademahum).” (Pasha 1986) This proverb, derived from Islamic customs and is an exhortation for humility. To be a leader is to serve people, not order them around.

Similarly, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was seen digging the trench with other companions like an ordinary laborer at the battle of the trench (Khan, 1998).

The Prophet (peace be upon him) also used to sit in a circle imparting knowledge rather than others who are mediating and one day stated that “I am sent to you as a teacher, making clear the importance of wisdom and exercising it” (Shah, 2014). Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) gave clear instructions over serving each other and left the legacy of his teachings among his companions and transformed his companions right accordingly to the modern term of transformational and inspirational leadership.



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