

The Islamic Perspective on Leadership

Leadership is a much researched topic in the western/contemporary school. From charismatic, transactional, transformational, and servant leadership theories, which were the most extensively discussed, the focus has now moved to the ethical and moral dimension of leadership.¹⁻³ Hunt and Conger assert that the range of new leadership conceptions is quite broad. In the western/contemporary school of thought, leadership is big on the agenda.⁴ In addition to leadership principles emerging and hailed by top corporations, many leadership gurus are publishing both in leading journals and authoring full texts on the subject.

There are a wide variety of theoretical constructs around the concept, which generally begin by a discussion on trait leadership, which is defined as a set of properties individuals portray as inborn characteristics; some also include physical factors and other characteristics as part of the discussion on trait theory of leadership. Nevertheless, there is another view on leadership that identifies it as a process that involves interaction between leaders and followers. This perspective makes leadership a learned behavior.

The scope of leadership has been researched from many perspectives such as culture, situation, spirituality, and religious leadership. It is not uncommon to find studies on leadership based on ethical, Christianity, Judaism, and Islamic perspectives. In an interesting article in a leading journal on leadership, the central thesis was that in each of the major religious traditions of the world, there are indications of a common underlying multiple level ontology of spiritual leadership, which can be, and is applied in organizational settings.⁵

From the Islamic perspective, the leadership theme is given substantial significance. We shall draw evidence of leadership from the Holy Quran and the life of the holy prophet (pbuh), and the Islamic literature

available as explained in an earlier part of the text. In the life of the holy prophet (pbuh), Muslims have a thorough role model. The Quran also verifies this statement and states that he is the best of leaders according to the following verse:

For you the life of the Prophet is a good model of behavior. (Quran 33: 21)

Indeed, for the purpose of understanding Islamic leadership, I will therefore in addition to the verses of the Holy Quran, be utilizing actions from the life of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and his companions who offer excellent leadership models. Specifically, I shall utilize the compilation titled “Peak of Eloquence”—an English translation of the book titled *Nahjul-Balagha* containing the sermons, letters, and traditions as quoted by Holy Ali (A.S.⁶) who was a close comrade of the holy prophet (S.A.W.) and the fourth righteous caliph. Moghaddam and Gholamzadeh⁷ express the significance of the text by saying, “*Nahjul-Balagha* is similar to a precious counsel in the humanities’ hands that depicts the visage of a perfect human and a meritorious society in all of its chapters which depict the sketch of four seasons as a beautiful painting.”

The approach taken should therefore help readers understand how leaders should be from the Islamic perspective and thus what leadership entails. To begin with, I shall be looking into Islamic leadership principles. Early research defines Islamic leadership principles as a group of leadership principles that were extracted primarily from the Quran and the biography of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions for the orientation of governmental affairs and the construction of good and ethical leadership to guide Islamic leaders in running Islamic organizations appropriately and effectively. The point to be remembered is that, what distinguishes Islamic leadership most from traditional Western notions of leadership is the close attachment of leadership to religion, especially its moral and human roots.⁸

The importance of leadership can be judged from the following saying: the holy prophet (pbuh) has said that if two (or three) persons travel together, they should choose one of them as their chief and manager. This tradition shows the extent of importance Islam attaches to leadership and to discipline. In another tradition, it is narrated on the authority of Abu Dawud⁹ that, the holy prophet emphasized the importance

of having a leader; Muslims must appoint a leader during a trip, select a leader (*imam*) to lead the prayer, and choose a leader for other group activities.

There is clarity on the understanding that leadership is a much larger responsibility and mere management is perfectly adequate when routine operations are in action. The concept of leadership is therefore developed in many varied ways to observe how effective leadership is successful in bringing about change.

From the Islamic Lens What Is Leadership All About?

I begin with a quotation by Imam Ali from the text in *NahjulBalagha* as follows:

Whoever wants to be a leader should educate himself before educating others. Before preaching to others he should first practice himself. Whoever educates himself and improves his own morals is superior to the man who tries to teach and train others.¹⁰

There are quite a few interesting facts that can be gathered from the quotation above in the context of organizational leadership and leadership implication:

1. One can desire to be a leader, that is, leadership is an art that can be learned like any other arts.
2. Once leadership is desired, the first step is to educate oneself, followed by educating the followers.
3. What is learned by the leadership must be practiced (for what is not practiced, refer to the model in KA department).
4. And a final statement on the dominance of the educated one: one who works on developing himself morally is surely superior versus one who resorts to just teaching others without practicing the learning himself.

I shall take forward the understanding from the quotation above that leadership is an art that can be learned. In the western/contemporary management, it is well known that the leadership paradigm is changing, and a leadership model based on ethical principles is finally emerging.

Interestingly this is the position that Islam has taken from the start. The belief in ethical values as prescribed by Islam takes precedence in the entire value system. Hence, drawing the basis of leadership from the Islamic perspective, we shall dwell on the life of the prophet to seek guidance and be able to develop a model. I am still utilizing the quotation above, where one of the principles learned is that one who desires to be a leader must practice. Let us look at the example of the holy prophet (pbuh) who pronounced prophethood at the age of 40.

Even before the holy prophet (pbuh) announced his prophethood, his honesty and reliability were very well known. People used to call him Muhammad, the trustworthy. People entrusted their valuables to him for safe custody. Hence the understanding that a sound character is an important element for any future leader who wishes to have his message delivered and followed. Look at the future value; even after the holy prophet (pbuh) announced prophethood in Mecca, despite the fact that not all inhabitants of Mecca picked up Islam they still continued to deposit their valuables with him, for safekeeping. A study conducted by Allison et al. reported that a leader's immoral actions are likely to posthumously stain both the leader's reputation and the organization's image.¹¹ The organizational implications of a moral leadership are vast and many researchers comment on ethics being at the heart of leadership studies.¹²⁻¹⁴ The Islamic principles dictate that even those aspiring to be leaders, in the role of leadership, or both must adhere to honesty and safekeeping.

Leadership learning from the life of the holy prophet (pbuh) as expressed in the Holy Quran and his conduct can be a source of understanding leadership skills for those seeking leadership positions. Thus within the premise of this text we shall be looking at generating Islamic leadership principles that can fairly be referred to as inspirational leadership principles from Islam. What is also important to understand here is that we shall not be dealing the topic in line with the western/contemporary school of management where leadership is of different types; instead the discussion shall identify attributes that predispose an individual to succeed in a leadership role. These are the practiced principles and, as explained above, are the basis of leadership in an Islamic environment. However, in order for the text to be comprehensible for all readers alike, I shall draw from the quotations, sayings, verses and Islamic scriptures, and

the life and conduct of the holy prophet, the nature, qualities, behavior, and styles of leaders and leadership as they ought to be. Nevertheless, what must be kept in mind whilst reading the text is that, Islamic leadership is a comprehensive approach and leaders ought to possess the attributes discussed below; weightage of the attributes then leads to developing leadership styles appropriate to organizational perspective. Hence, what needs to be understood in the context of Islamic leadership is that, in Islam, leadership is all about a discernable and marked set of skills and behavior evident via one's actions.

Learning Check: Be Sure You Can

- Discuss the different arrays of concepts associated with leadership within western concepts.
- Describe the importance of leadership from an Islamic perspective.
- Understand the importance of education to leadership in Islam.

Study Questions

1. How can you link the holy prophet's attributes of honesty and reliability to his to be announced prophethood (leadership)?
2. What are the sources of Islamic leadership principles?

Leadership Principles From the Life of the Holy Prophet (pbuh)

I begin to explore for you the leadership principles from the life of the holy prophet (pbuh) using a verse from the third chapter in the holy book, where Allah (SWT) pronounces:

It is by the mercy of Allah that you (the Prophet) were lenient to them, for if you had been harsh and hard-hearted, they surely would have left your company. Therefore pardon them and implore Allah to forgive them. And hold consultations with them in regard to the conduct of affairs. Once you are resolved, put your trust in Allah. Allah likes those who put their trust in Him. (Quran 3: 159)

Analyzing the verse above, holy prophet (pbuh) is realized to be

- an approachable and forgiving leader;
- a thoughtful and tolerant leader who had the utmost concern for his companions as he seeks forgiveness for them.

And analyzing the verse above, there is clarity on the fact that Allah (SWT) desires to see a leader who gives importance to his companions and holds consultations with them.

Example of Prophet's Consultations

The holy prophet (pbuh) used to hold strategic discussions with his companions and he provided them with the opportunity to exercise their intellect in tactical matters such as the first battle of Islam: the battle of Badr. This was an important time for the Muslims since this was the first time the devotees of the new faith were out there in the field defending themselves under the banner of Islam. They were not only few in number as compared to the opponents, they also did not have enough artillery and war animals for transportation. At this critical juncture, the holy prophet (pbuh) consulted with his companions on whether taking military action against the enemy was the right thing to do, where the camping ground should be, and even after the war was over he sought their advice on matters such as how to deal with the prisoners of war.

Because this is not a religious text, narrating the entire incident of the various battles where the prophet sought the advice of his companions, their advice, and the account of the battles is out of scope of the text. But it is worth mentioning that the holy prophet (pbuh) took into consideration the advice of Salman al-Farsi, one of the companions, who hailed from Persia. This was despite the narrow-mindedness and the superiority complex held by Arabs at that time and also given that the prophet himself was an Arab. The lesson from the above discussion is that by embracing diversity in consultations the holy prophet (pbuh) embraced Salman al-Farsi's advice. The holy prophet (pbuh) promoted not only diversity, he preached and practiced parity. His action of acknowledging equality and brotherhood is evident in examples such as one of his

closest companions being a former Negro slave, Bilaal; one of his trusted lieutenants was Suhayb from Rome. These followers came from different places, spoke different languages, and were of different heritage. However, in their teacher's company, they were all the same, equal to each other without distinction (Great Prophet, n.d.).

Salman al-Farsi,¹⁵ who knew far more of the techniques of warfare than was common in the Peninsula, advised the digging of a dry moat around Medina and the fortifications of its buildings within. The trench took 6 days to dig and the opponent's army was taken by huge surprise, the trench, an obstacle they did not calculate. It is also worth mentioning that the holy prophet (pbuh) also participated in digging the moat.

From the western/contemporary school of leadership, the practice of seeking advice falls into the category of consultative leadership. Being a consultative leader is all about building confidence in your team, subordinates, or both. And following from the above discussion based on the Holy Quran, the holy prophet's (pbuh) personality is justified of being approachable. The prophet consulted his companions and valued their views, and this was done with the view of helping them develop their personality. However, what does not have an exact parallel in the western/contemporary school is the exercise of leaders engaging in work with the followers; it is more like leading from the front and the closest term to the act is exemplary leadership.

A case of his exemplary leadership was his dynamic and proactive interest in the propagation of Islam. He used to take personal initiative, in addition to sending deputies to Ethiopia and Yemen. Once he went to Taif (a place in Mecca) for this purpose. During the annual pilgrimage season, he used to invite nearby tribes to convey his message of Islam. He sent a good number of his companions to Ethiopia. He also took various initiatives by writing letters to various heads of states to explain his message.

According to the western/contemporary school of leadership, such actions of the holy prophet (pbuh) can be seen as those of a strategic and visionary leader; one who provides vision and direction and makes wise and deliberate choices about how to lead and at the same time, as visionary leaders are, predominantly future-oriented, preemptive, and risk-taking. By definition, these leaders center their decisions and activities on

their beliefs and values, and share their value system with the followers. In the case of the holy prophet (pbuh), the long-term vision was spreading the knowhow of Islam in the world. In a span of 23 years, he made this huge task achievable and manageable by sharing the understanding of his vision with his followers. Visionary leaders on the other hand, according to the literature, are focused mainly on the future and the direction their vision should take in future. A combination of visionary and strategic leadership skills can yield progressive results in the short and long run. This is a perfect combination for a leader to possess, strategic and visionary leadership skills. Being a strategic leader implies one is focused toward envisioning a future considering the present set of affairs and in parallel paying attention to short-term stability. A combination of visionary leadership skills implies a leader with an understanding of what is to be achieved in the long term.

From the organizational perspective, the learning is fairly straight onward. For organizations to be effective, a strategic leader must be able to build an expressive long-term vision and work toward achieving it and attempt to communicate their understanding of this desired vision with others in the organization. And a visionary leader is concerned with ensuring the organization's future prospects. This means that a combination of visionary and strategic leadership skills covers the entire continuum of managerial leadership capability. The strategic sect would ensure day-to-day operations run in harmony and the visionary aspect would mean that the focus on the long term is not lost at any point in time.

Another saying of the holy prophet (pbuh) as quoted from Sirah Ibn Hisham—the holy prophet told Mu'az bin Jabal:

Make things easy for the people; do not make them difficult; win their hearts by telling them pleasing things; do not scare them away; and when you offer prayers with them, your prayers should be such as suit the weakest of them.

The Islamic perspective on leadership skills that can be gathered from the saying above is that the ability of the leader is to be able to simplify both facts and tasks for followers and companions. Expressions that contain jargon may sound impressive but in reality these frighten people away.

The way prescribed to gain people's approval and cause them to understand your vision is to tell them simple things expressed in unpretentious language.

What is the most important learning that can be taken away from the above saying? It refers to leaders whilst they are leading prayers. This is quite symbolic. Muslims offer prayers five times a day and offering prayers in congregation is highly recommended. The holy prophet is clarifying how an Imam (the one who leads prayers) should offer prayers; it should be such that the weakest of those offering prayers behind him should not be at a disadvantage. The prayer leader must consider that the followers (mamoom—those who follow an Imam) do not get tired by too long offerings or that if the prayers are offered to fast, many who are weak or old may not be able to keep pace. The organizational implication can be stretched to many scenarios, ranging from time adherence in meetings to clarity in communication skills, considering the needs of all types of staff that the organization employs. If the organization has a policy of employing workers with special needs or employees nearing retirement age, such a set of workers may have different needs. A leader (who may be the strategic leader) must ensure that no one feels lacking in anything and any communication is correctly understood. Refer back to the “Human Resource Management in Islam” chapter where we have discussed “the knowledge acquisition department” and self-appraisal. A product of self-appraisal by a leader may well be a need to communicate such that all followers are treated with parity. This identified training need then goes through the process of actual KA. Recall the last step in the KA process (human resource management in Islam) where the one who acquires knowledge then has the duty to further impart it; hence the leader must propagate the learned skills.

Learning Check: Be Sure You Can

- Describe consultative leadership from the Islamic perspective.
- Understand how the Islamic leadership can be both visionary and strategic.
- Explain simplicity in communication skills of a leader as a desired attribute.

Study Questions

1. How does the combination of strategic and visionary leadership yield progressive results?
2. How can a leader ensure that the weakest subordinate is not disadvantaged?

Education and Leaders—The Islamic Perspective

From the Islamic perspective on leadership, the third and the most stressed point is “Education.” Prophet Muhammad emphasized the prominence of education, decreeing education as a must for all people, irrespective of any gender restrictions (male or female). How does education assist the leader and the followers?

From the Islamic lens, the merit of the “Alim” (the learned) over the “Abid” (the devout) is like the merit of the moon over the stars on a full-moon night.¹⁶

Therefore, if the leader remains “the learned” and continuously strives to learn, propagates the learning amongst the followers, the workforce is more apropos to take on the modern day challenges. Stress on education means further focus on developing the followers and helping them grow through edification; it also means leaders in Islam are required to show concern for companions and followers, that is, they are by nature required to be “compassionate leaders.” As a compassionate leader, the holy prophet (pbuh) understood the needs of the time and knowing that encouraging knowledge will help his followers gain an edge, he stimulated his companions to focus on attaining knowledge and gaining literary skills and, as mentioned above as a religious command, he pronounced that it was incumbent on children to learn reading and writing.

One of his sayings, again emphasizing that knowledge has no boundaries—he specifically said:

Wherever you find a useful piece of knowledge, acquire it. It does not matter if you find it with a disbeliever or a hypocrite.

What needs to be understood at this point is that compassionate leaders do not just mean kind leaders. It is about living up to the responsibility

placed on their shoulders. His own method of disseminating his message and preaching was gentle and warm, not tough and severe. He filled his companion with hope and refrained from simply scaring them away. To the deputies who he would send to far-flung areas to preach and convey his message, he would specifically provide instructions such as:

Be pleasant and do not be harsh. Tell the people what may please them and do not make them disgusted.

The holy prophet (pbuh) addressed all issues striking the right balance, applying his power positively with passion. Surely it was his farsightedness, compassion, and visionary leadership that helped Muslims develop their strength and base speedily.

Loyal and Passionate Employees or Loyal and Passionate Leaders

From the organizational perspective, organizations are always on the outlook for loyal and passionate employees. Interestingly, such is possible in employees when the manager/leader himself or herself is also dedicated and passionate! There's a powerful link between productivity and what has been identified as "compassionate leadership" in organizations according to a research study conducted by a lecturer at the Australian School of Business.¹⁷ The study looked at the links between leadership and organizational performance. According to the study, the single greatest influence on profitability and productivity within an organization is the ability of leaders to spend more time and effort developing and recognizing their people, welcoming feedback, including criticism, and fostering co-operation among staff (as revealed by data from more than 5,600 people in 77 organizations). This is quite in line with the discussion above and also further deliberation to follow.

Taking on from the success factors identified in the study above, as a leader the holy prophet (pbuh) was patient with his followers. He had the tolerance required to listen to comments even if they were mere criticism. Occasionally he had to face the criticism of his companions, but his way forward was always to explain his side of the story and explain to them as

to why a certain decision was taken. Through his communication skills, he would explain his decision without being harsh to them and help them understand the situation at hand; this would then result in their agreement. One of the things however, that he stood steadfast in was his displeasure toward flattery and uncalled-for praises. As a sign of abhorrence, he used to say: “Throw dust on the face of the flatterers.”

The Major Principle of Islamic Leadership Is Consistency and Orderliness

The holy prophet’s (pbuh) actions were all directed by the utmost regularity. All his activities were worked around a timetable that would have a fine balance between his family life, time devoted to speeches and teachings to his companions, and offering religious preaching. This included a part of every night being devoted to saying prayers, to worship. His daily activities were arranged in such a manner leaving no room for idleness. He did not approve of wasting time and used to say:

O’ Allah! I take refuge in you from laziness, lethargy, disability and worthlessness.

In today’s competitive world, leaders need to possess the utmost disciplinary skills. Discipline is a thoughtful attribute and in essence it is a large aspect in great leaders. A follower would only want to be disciplined within the rules or guidelines of the organization and not feel resentful if the leader practices the same.

The holy prophet (pbuh) was a principled leader, and withstood all threats, challenges, and difficulties in the hardest of financial predicaments. He showed consistency in completing his task of spreading his message despite the threatening environment. The perfect example is the famous words of the holy prophet (pbuh) which were uttered after the chiefs of Quraysh (tribe in the city of Medina where the prophet was propagating his mission) reached out to the holy prophet’s (pbuh) uncle Abu Talib. They openly asked Abu Talib to stop his nephew from spreading his message and threatened him to take the holy prophet’s life if he didn’t stop his mission. When his uncle conveyed the message, the holy prophet of Islam remarked,

I swear by Almighty God that even if they put the sun in my right hand and the moon in my left, and in return, demand of me to quit the propagation of Islam and pursuance of my divine aim, I will never do what they want me to. I am determined to carry on my duty toward God to the last moment of my life, even if it means losing my life. I am strongly determined to attain my goal.

The Quraysh then even tried to entice the holy prophet (pbuh) by offering him money, wealth, position, and power, but to their utter disappointment he was found firm in performing his duty.

Perseverance as an Islamic Leadership Principle

From his life then the leadership principle is that of showing perseverance, willpower, and belief in his mission. It is evident that he was able to display a wonderful willpower. The total period of his mission as a prophet contains lessons of perseverance, where his mission took precedence over any other striving in the way. In the endeavor toward fulfilling his mission, a number of times the conditions seemed hopeless but he never let the word failure reach his mind. He stayed steadfast and showed enormous willpower.

From the western/contemporary leadership approach, leadership does have a moral dimension and whenever leaders need to make an ethical decision, it is often the willpower of a leader that helps him or her make the decision with morality. The social psychologist Roy Baumeister argues that willpower is a quality that predicts positive outcomes in many areas of life, and ranks it as one of the most important factors in this respect.¹⁸ Within the study of leadership, lack of willpower may affect a leader's ability to act morally.¹⁹ Hence, perseverance and willpower are studied under moral leadership in the contemporary school of management and leadership studies.

The Islamic Leader Delegates

As a leader, he was able to identify his companions and followers' skills based on which he distributed the tasks. After he migrated to Medina,

he formed the Islamic state and systematized a special secretariat, and formed groups of people for performing different tasks. For example, one group of people scribed the revelation, some of the people chosen were assigned the job of drafting letters, yet another group logged legal transactions, and others kept financial records. These examples elucidate that Islamic leadership is all about developing people to their fullest potential.

It is a commonly known fact that a good leader should be able to delegate; it is essential to remember that although a leader distributes work, he is still held accountable. Now, that is the key; delegation does not imply dumping jobs on subordinates. Successful delegation in the organizational perspective means employee empowerment. And at the same time, it helps the leader free up his time for more pressing issues. Because a leader is still accountable, delegation is also about the leader knowing his subordinate's skill set. If the job is assigned to the right person, not only will it get done correctly but it will also make the subordinate confident and add to his or her self-esteem. On the other hand, if leaders believe they are the only ones who can do things right, they do not let their workers develop. The old saying fits here: "Feed a man a fish, feed him for the day, teach a man to fish, feed him for a lifetime."

What must not be forgotten is that involved and engaged workers feel motivated and feel the ownership of the undertaking.

At this point, it would be prudent if readers could connect the HR aspect here, that is—How does a leader delegate tasks? The factors to consider should well fit in with self-appraisal by workers. An exercise that shall assist them to understand their knowledge and skills as they fit the task and what they may wish to progress into, and thus develop their knowledge and skills is the "knowledge acquisition department."

The Charismatic Leadership in Islam

True charisma from the Islamic perspective is in one's conduct. It is quoted from verse 33 of the Holy Quran:

Most certainly, you (people) have in the messenger of Allah an excellent pattern (of behavior). (Quran 33: 21)

And in sermon 103 in “Peak of Eloquence,” Imam Ali has been quoted; whilst describing the holy prophet (pbuh) he said:

Then Allah deputized Muhammad (S.A.) as a witness, giver of good tidings and warner, the best in the universe as a child and the chastest as a grown up man, the purest of the purified in conduct, and the most generous of those who are approached for generosity.

Learning Check: Be Sure You Can

- Describe compassionate leadership from the Islamic perspective
- Relate to a leader’s call on discipline.
- Explain the importance of a leader’s ability to withstand threats and challenges.
- Explain the role of delegation as an attribute of good leadership.
- Understand charismatic leadership in Islam.

Study Questions

1. What is the moral dimension of leadership from the Islamic perspective?
2. How is delegating a task related to the activities of the knowledge acquisition department?

Leadership Advice From Imam Ali

To take the discussion forward, I shall now utilize Imam Ali’s letter advising Malik Ashtar (his governor to be) when he was being sent to lead the people of Egypt. This particular letter is being used to derive leadership implications from an organization perspective by generalizing the rules mentioned. For this purpose, excerpts from the letter have been used below.

Imam Ali advises as follows:

Develop in your heart the feeling of love for your people and let it be the source of kindness and blessing to them. Do not behave with them like a barbarian, and do not appropriate to yourself that which belongs to them.

Certainly the recommendation for a leader is to lead the people with something beyond self. The Islamic leadership is not about the leader's greed, ego, or arrogance—it's about showing care for your subordinates. This explanation is quite similar to the concept of compassionate leaders as gathered from the life of the holy prophet (pbuh); the added description is the behavioral aspect of a leader, which should not be ruthless and inhumane. As Imam Ali explains, do not take away from your followers/workers what is theirs. This is the quality of a beast; it seizes and snatches what belongs to others. The Imam has compared this to a barbaric act, meaning the leader should not be uncultured, ignorant, and cruel. The Islamic leader ought to display humanity values. The reason that the Imam explains a leader should display compassion is given below (although the Imam has used "citizens of state," we are generalizing this to the common man, since after all it refers to mankind). Imam Ali said:

Remember that the citizens of the state are of two categories. They are either your brethren in religion or your brethren in kind. They are subject to infirmities and liable to commit mistakes. Some indeed do commit mistakes. But forgive them even as you would like God to forgive you. Bear in mind that you are placed over them, even as I am placed over you. And then there is God even above him who has given you the position of a Governor in order that you may look after those under you and to be sufficient unto them. And you will be judged by what you do for them.

The reason the Imam has given for leaders to be kind and forgiving is fairly logical; he says that all human beings are similar, either followers of the same faith or of the same kind (which means all humans are the same in needs, requirements, in the way their physical form is defined). Now that is very simple; it's all about treating people as equal human beings. Imam Ali has further stressed the point that humans by their very nature are subject to committing errors, but he advises leaders to move on by forgiving them just as they expect Allah (SWT) to forgive them. The rationality offered here is that God has given one a position like that explained in the earlier chapter, where verse number 43: 32 is quoted from the Holy Quran:

We have apportioned among them their livelihood in the life of the world, and raised some of them above others in rank that some of them take labour from others. (Quran 43: 32)

Hence the rank and status is raised by God to whom even the leader is answerable (refer to law of accountability in Islam in Chapter 2).

In another saying in *NahjulBalagha* (English translation available under the title “Peak of Eloquence”), Imam Ali wrote to his governor in Azerbaijan:

Your job is not a juicy morsel provided to you. It is only a trust committed to your care. You have been appointed by your superior a shepherd (to look after the flock of people placed under you). As such you have no right to deal with the people in a despotic manner. (see *Nahjul Balagha*, Letter 5)

Imam Ali rules out the autocratic style of leadership when dealing with those placed under one’s command. The clear justification is explained in a further saying, No. 112, where Imam Ali clarifies:

No leader is superior to Divine Guidance.

Through this final chapter, we are weaving pieces together though the law of accountability and the belief in Allah (SWT). The leader’s actions and behavior are expected to be moral and ethical in treating the subordinates, making decisions, delegating tasks, and carrying any mission forward. Islamic leadership principles are well-defined and the fact that public and private lives are not separate entities in the Islamic belief system, imply that, if anything, Islamic leadership principles are based on morality as explained in the belief system.

Islamic leaders are required to be thoughtful, empathetic, and compassionate and loving leaders; the expected outcome of this behavior is that leaders would then be fair and just.

In the corporate world today, where fresh scandals are uncovered every now and then, there is an evident crisis as seen in organizational leadership; moral leadership is the savior. However, the western/contemporary

school gets stuck into deciding what is right and wrong, permissible or not, legal or otherwise, and who decides. The set of moral principles used is developed by a sound conscience; the question remains, what is a sound conscience? From the Islamic perspective, this is straightforwardly achievable. The law of permissibility defines the allowable actions; hence Islamic leadership principles are grounded in morality as defined in the religious premise. Also recall from Chapter 1 that, business aims in the Islamic lens are not to do with profit maximization and therefore Islamic leadership is not concerned about reporting to stakeholders on delivering the best results in terms of numbers; it is all about the ability to look at oneself in the mirror and being able to tell oneself that as a leader he or she has accomplished the right thing.

Learning Check: Be Sure You Can

- Explain Imam Ali's call of a loving leader and his understanding to kinds of human beings.
- Understand in what context Islam does not approve of the autocratic leadership style.

Study Question

How can you relate moral leadership from the western school of thought to leadership as explained from the Islamic perspective?

Summary

In the premise of this chapter, we have looked at Islamic leadership principles. We began by emphasizing through a saying of Imam Ali, that leadership is very much an art and therefore can be taught and learned. We then extracted principles from the holy prophet's character and behavior, which like his sayings and his religion are comprehensive and all-sided. We took stock of these as guidelines because the Holy Quran, the book of Allah (SWT), defined him as an example to follow. As he possessed the necessary qualities of leadership, we have extracted some of these within the text as follows:

Morality in actions as an example from the life of the holy prophet (pbuh) even before he announced prophethood, pointing toward the fact that good conduct and high morals are at the heart of Islamic leadership principles.

The inspirational principles of leadership from the life of the holy prophet (pbuh) can be summarized as follows:

- Leaders need to be approachable, thoughtful, kind, tolerant, and forgiving.
- Leaders ought to be consultative, and during consultations in a multicultural environment must embrace diversity.
- Leaders must lead by example and need to display proactive interest in any assigned undertaking.
- Leaders must exercise a combination of strategic and visionary skills, where being a strategic leader implies one is focused toward envisioning a future, considering the present set of affairs and in parallel paying attention to short-term stability. A combination of visionary leadership skills implies a leader with an understanding of what is to be achieved in the long term.
- Leaders must be simplistic in their communications.
- Leaders must be considerate to the weakest among the subordinates (this weakness may be physical, old age, or any learning special needs workers may require).
- Leaders must encourage education in workers and they continuously strive to learn themselves.
- Leaders must be compassionate when dealing with their followers or workers.
- Leaders must lead an orderly and disciplined life.
- Leaders must possess perseverance and willpower.
- Leaders must be able to delegate.
- A true charismatic leader from the Islamic perspective is one with an excellent conduct.

The holy prophet emphasized the importance of leadership and he used to say: “If three persons of you travel together, choose one of you as your leader and commander.”

Discussion Questions

1. List down five principles of Islamic leadership and compare these with the western school of thought.
2. If leadership can be learned, then what are the two most important steps that form the initial part of learning leadership from an Islamic perspective?
3. What are the characteristics of true charismatic leadership in Islam?

Suggestions for Further Reading

1. Abbasi, A. S., Rehman, K. U., & Abbasi, O. H. (2010). Role of Islamic leadership in value based corporate management: The case of Pakistan. *African Journal of Business Management* 4(18), 4003–4020.
2. Ali, A. J., & Weir, D. (2005). *Islamic perspectives on management and organization*.
3. Safi, L. (1995). Leadership and subordination: An Islamic perspective. *The American Journal of Islamic Social Science* 12(2).