

LEADERSHIP AS SERVICE AND RESPONSIBILITY – INSIGHTS FROM A MODERN MUSLIM PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This article is an interview with Associate Dean Khalfan Al Asmi of the Modern College of Business and Science in Muscat, Oman. It reflects the perspective of a highly regarded Muslim academic leader from a modern leadership perspective and has unique value as an indicator of the evolving perspectives of leadership.

Keywords: Muslim leadership, leadership as service, modern leadership, academic leadership, leadership effectiveness.

Introduction

In this edition, Dr. Khalfan Al Asmi, (**KAA**) a highly-respected scholar, practitioner, and Associate Dean of Academic Affairs at the Modern College of Business and Science in Muscat, Oman, is interviewed by Cam Caldwell (**CC**) about leadership from Dr. Al Asmi's perspective. Dr. Al Asmi has been recognized by his peers for his interpersonal effectiveness, his wisdom, and his ability to achieve challenging goals in a long and successful career in academia and in the business world. This interview provides valuable insights about leadership from the perspective of a widely respected Muslim leader.

CC – Dr. Al Asmi, leadership is often described as requiring the integration of achieving specific goals and maintaining relationships with people. How does your leadership approach combine those two priorities?

KAA - Goals that are instrumental, or focused on achieving specific results, are necessary and important for every organization. When we create relationships with others that treat them as valued partners, we create commitment that extends far beyond short-term goal attainment. This normative, or behavioral commitment to relationships and people, establishes the basis for cooperation and empowers others. Clearly, both goal achievement and maintaining relationships are vital for long-term organization success and are the responsibility of every effective leader.

CC - What is your view of the ideal leadership style and how does that style fit within traditional “command and control” leadership approaches?

KAA - The new economy is based upon knowledge, wisdom, and the application of information – at the lowest level of organizations where customers are served. Creating an organizational environment that engages and empowers employees to make decisions that best meet customer needs is the foundation for winning customer loyalty. Leading by commitment – and building a passion for excellence in serving the customer -- is far more effective than a “command and control” model that emphasizes establishing inflexible rule and policies that often fail to meet an organization's ability to meet customer needs.

CC - As you contemplate the robust economic health of Oman and its opportunities in the world economy in the years ahead, what leadership approaches do you think may need to evolve for Oman to achieve its highest and best potential?

KAA - It's clear to me that we live in a world of constant innovation and improvement. Oman has the opportunity to achieve its highest and best potential if we forge a positive revolution in the quality of our educational systems – particularly in areas of technology development and, perhaps most importantly, in unleashing the untapped power and capacity of individuals. The evidence I have seen suggests that employees are not fully engaged because they are not fully empowered and supported by aligned systems and practices that bring out the best in people. Oman has an outstanding opportunity to take advantage of the high integrity of the people in our country if we utilize their capabilities by improving our educational systems and empowering employees to empower them.

CC - How do you view the role of education in enabling Oman leaders to become more effective in leading the country's economic success and its future role in the Middle East?

KAA - Without question, we must raise the bar in the quality of education that we provide throughout Oman. We need more doctoral programs to train and educate Omani residents here in our country. We need to expand our understanding of untapped opportunities and resources. We need to train our people to be constantly engaged in learning and in applying what they learn to add value to society. People will be the key resource in the future and we must create a competitive advantage and achieved economic success by improving the knowledge, skills, and abilities of our people at all levels of organizations and in all areas of life.

CC - What is your leadership vision for Oman and what do you think Omani leaders should emphasize today in leaving a legacy to pave the way for the country's future?

KAA - We have made great strides. We have a strong economy. We are a nation of good people who seek to be great by honoring God and by serving others. We need to build on our strengths – which I believe is the character of our people and their pursuit of excellence. If we constantly create policies and programs that empower, educate, and engage people, we can create a legacy that will be an example for the world – and it will be an example of the importance of living a life of integrity. That is a legacy that every person in Oman can be proud of achieving.

CC - What world leaders do you personally admire and what qualities do you think define them as outstanding leaders?

KAA - Justin Trudeau of Canada has impressed me by his openness, his inclusiveness, and his ability to listen. Great leaders possess those qualities. Unfortunately, many world leaders struggle to earn the trust of those whom they ought to serve. His Majesty Sultan Qaboos here in Oman has done an outstanding job as a leader and we have benefited immensely from his by that leadership. He is loved and admired by many people in Oman and abroad and he has served Oman well for nearly fifty years. That is a major accomplishment and evidence of his leadership skills.

CC - You have the reputation in Oman of being an extremely effective empowering leader and an individual who involves others in developing practical solutions. How have you personally developed your own leadership philosophy and upon what fundamental principles is that philosophy based?

KAA - The principles of the Islamic faith emphasize the importance of treating others with great regard and with a commitment to their welfare. I believe in those principles and my personal leadership philosophy reflects my belief in the untapped potential in each one of us. Our purpose in life is to become the best possible version of ourselves – and it is by becoming our best selves we not only serve society but we glorify God thereby.

CC - In describing the leaders' role and in working effectively with others, you have been known to use the phrase, "Soft Landings." Would you please elaborate on what you mean by that phrase as it applies to leaders and how you incorporate the underlying principle in your leadership relationships?

KAA - "Soft Landings" refers to the need to assist others to make a change in their thinking, not by confrontation but by assisting them to recognize other options besides their initial thinking about an issue. "Soft Landings" demonstrates an individual's respect for others with whom they work and a desire to maintain a positive relationship as a first order priority. When we think in terms of helping others to reframe their thinking paradigms in a positive way, we focus on the importance of maintaining successful long-term relationships. Inevitably, when an individual takes a

firm position on an issue – but then acknowledges that there may be better options – then the entire organization benefits. The key to this principle is that building relationships and establishing trust is worth a kind response, as opposed to being critical or argumentative with another person. When we genuinely respect and care about others, we recognize the value of building partnerships – which is critical to long-term success. – and we discover that “being right” is sometimes achieved at the cost of a relationship.

CC - What advice would you give to young men and women who wish to truly make a difference in the world as the leaders of tomorrow?

KAA - I would encourage young men and women to look within themselves to discover their greatness. Young men and women need to find their voice – identifying what they love to do, what they can do with excellence, what they can do that adds value to the world, and by listening to and following their inner conscience and aspirations. I would encourage young men and women to obtain an education, to invest in themselves, to become lifelong learners, and to pursue great dreams. The world needs those young men and women to never be satisfied with “good” when “great” is possible. If our young men and women constantly pursue excellence, they can and will make a difference in a world that desperately needs them to become their best version of themselves.