Effective Leadership Steps for Strategy implementation in Islamic Organisations

By Rafik Beekun

Planning without implementation is useless. In some Islamic organisations, there is no defined concept of long-term planning. Others, who do so, are normally faced with the problem of "analysis-paralysis", spending too much time on fine tuning their business plans. The result is simple; there appears to be too much ado about nothing. Only few Islamic organisations are implementing their strategy effectively. In this article, the author highlights the generally accepted principles that he believes are necessary for effective strategy implementation in the context of Islamic organisations including Islamic financial Institutions.

Leadership can be defined as "a dynamic relationship based on mutual influence and common purpose between leaders and collaborators in which both are moved to higher levels of motivation and moral development as they affect real, intended change." (Rost, 1991). At the same time, Burns defines leadership as "leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations — the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations — of both *leaders and followers.*" (Burns, 1978).

Both definitions stress the *transformational* dimension of leadership whereby you, as the leader, and your followers enrich each other. Whereas *transactional* leaders approach followers with an eye to exchanging one thing for another (e.g., jobs for votes, board positions for donations), transformational leaders recognize the needs of potential followers and seek to fulfil their higher-order needs. They strive to engage the follower's full person in order to engender mutual inspiration and elevation.

The transformational dimension is very much a part of the Islamic paradigm of leadership, which stresses the reciprocal enrichment of the leaders and the followers. In fact, Islam demands that you, as a leader, pay attention to your followers' needs. In a hadith (no. 2942) reported in *Sunan Abu Dawud* by Abu Maryam al-Azdi, the Prophet (s) said:

> *If Allah puts anyone in the position of authority over the Muslims' affairs and he secludes himself (from them), not fulfilling their needs, wants, and poverty, Allah will keep Himself away from him, not fulfilling his need, want, and poverty.*

Concurrently, your followers must provide you with sincere and impartial feedback, support you, and help you orient yourself toward the good. Umar (r) said: "*May God have mercy upon anyone who points out my faults to me.*" In fact, your followers are responsible for following your directives as long as you behave Islamically, and

for disobeying you when you do not. According to a hadith reported by *Sahih al-Bukhari* (no. 5.629) and narrated by Ali (r), the Prophet (s) said: "*Obedience (to somebody) is required when he enjoins what is good.*"

Although you may behave in accordance with Islamic precepts and enjoin the good, you might also become too engrossed in your duties as a leader and thus make yourself inaccessible. Indeed, leaders of Islamic organisations are sometimes perceived as aloof and/or unapproachable once they reach a certain level of success. Collins (2003) analyzes the leadership style of some of the world's best corporate leaders and uncovers a dimension that he calls level 5 leadership. In contrast to those high-profile leaders who thrive on personality cults, Collins indicates that level 5 leaders are a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will (e.g., Umar (r) and the personal humility he displayed while travelling to Jerusalem to receive its keys). The degree of humility and access suggested by level 5 leadership are critical to the effective implementation of an Islamic organization's strategy.

One of the best integrative models of effective leadership is inextricably connected with transformational leadership, level 5 leadership, and innovation. This model consists of five basic practices that you, as a leader, can adopt. We will now discuss the leadership practices suggested by this model in the context of strategy implementation.

1. *Challenging the Process*

Leadership is an active and dynamic process. The founders of the Muslim Students' Association of the USA and Canada were true pioneers at a time when Islam was just beginning to spread in America. Malcolm X, after discovering true Islam during his pilgrimage to Makkah, did not hesitate to do a complete turnaround: He started rethinking his previous beliefs based on black superiority and then began to proclaim the universal message of Islam. He paid dearly — with his life, in fact — for speaking and living the truth.

While ineffectual leaders sit around and react to events, successful Muslim leaders seek Allah's help and challenge the status quo. In challenging the process, you have to be innovative. At times, you will need to redefine the process in a way that tears down the physical and mental barriers that others have imposed on the Muslim community. For example, dynamic Muslim leaders in India refuse to allow non-Muslims to label and classify Indian Muslims as "untouchables." When redefining the situation of Muslims, be careful not to overstep Islamic boundaries, as several people and groups have done recently.

While challenging the process, search for opportunities both inside and outside your organisation or business. Look for ways to change or improve the status quo. These new opportunities may include an innovative new

service or activity, reorganisation, or a realignment of the organisation's mission. To make this search fruitful, follow Allah's *shura* mandate, and consult with all manner of people, regardless of whether or not they belong to your organization. Even if you do not always agree with them, make it a point to listen to your most demanding critics. The most effective Islamic leaders that I work with use *shura* as part of their daily decision-making heuristics. Employing this process enables your followers to provide critical insights, since they are often the ones closest to the problem areas and know what does and does not work.

Experiment and take risks while challenging the process with the understanding that you may not always succeed. Each failure, however, can be viewed as a learning opportunity. For example, let's assume that you are learning how to play soccer. If you stand behind the ball but do not try to kick it, what have you learned? How can you improve your soccer skills? Similarly, if you have never opened your community's mosque up to members of other faith-based communities, how can you learn to work with them? You cannot shout for public help in times of need when you refuse to honour their request for your assistance. Go on; try, experiment, and fail if need be, but get up and improve.

While challenging the status quo, you, as a leader will often encounter many challenges. For example, you may be assailed by your fellow Muslims more viciously than by members of other faith-based communities. At times, your family may be harassed. You may even be asked to step down as president or CEO. You may pay dearly for seeking to make a positive difference, and may wonder why you are making such sacrifices when no one appreciates them. Before giving up and accepting the status quo, remember the following hadith of the Prophet (s) narrated by Abdullah ibn Umar and reported by Al-Tirmidhi (hadith no. 5087) and Ibn Majah:

> *He who mixes with people and endures the harm they do is better than he who does not mix with them or endure the harm they do.*

Leadership is about sacrifice and paradigm shifts. Muhammad (s) challenged the worldview of *jahiliyyah* and encountered many obstacles. Jesus, Noah, Moses, Lot, Abraham (peace be upon all of them) were beloved by Allah, but this did not make them immune to suffering. Syed Qutb and Malcolm X paid with their lives, but never backed down. Muhammad Ali lost his world boxing title, even though his conviction was eventually overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court. Anwar Ibrahim spent years in jail and paid with his reputation and health. Challenging the status quo is never easy, but reaching the vision outlined by your strategic plan may demand no less of you. In a hadith narrated by Abu Sa'id Al Khudri and Abu Hurayrah and reported in *Sahih al-Bukhari* (hadith no. 7.545), the Prophet said:

> *No fatigue or disease, no sorrow or sadness, no hurt or distress befalls a Muslim, even if it were the prick he*

receives from a thorn, but that Allah expiates some of his sins for that.

2.   *Inspiring a Shared Vision*

When challenging the status quo, you need to have a vision of what you want your organisation to accomplish. This is your main task. This vision is the source of your organisation's mission statement and long-term strategy. In addition, you must involve your followers and increase their commitment to the vision. Engaging in *shura* can help fine-tune the vision. You can also pray *salat al-istikhara* to ask Allah to validate the content and direction of the organisation's future direction. Once the vision is developed, effective leaders work to commit themselves to it and then to communicate it to others so that they can share it and align themselves with it. The general idea is to share your vision with your organisation's members in order to increase their commitment to its implementation. To help others share the vision, explain it to them using "simple images or symbols or metaphors that communicate powerfully without clogging **[…]** communication channels **[…]**."

3.   *Enabling Others To Act*

Followers do not succeed (or fail) by themselves. They need servant-leaders, namely, leaders who are not so preoccupied with their self-serving ambitions that they cannot place other people's interests above their own. If a person is using an Islamic organisation for self-promotion rather than to enable others to lead, he/she can cause serious damage. In a hadith reported in Al-Tirmidhi (hadith no. 1345), Prophet Muhammad (s) said: "Two hungry wolves let loose among sheep are not more destructive to them than a man's greed for property and self-aggrandizement are to his faith." Note that the follower can also be a "hungry wolf' in sheep's clothing. This is what Ali (r) was stressing when he wrote to Malik al-Ashtar:

Never take counsel of a miser, for he will vitiate your magnanimity and frighten you of poverty. Do not take counsel of a coward also, for, he will cheat you of your resolves. Do not take counsel of the greedy too: for he will instil greed in you and turn you into a tyrant. Miserliness, cowardice and greed deprive man of his trust in God. The worst of counsellors is he who has served as a counsellor to unjust rulers and shared their crimes.

As a Muslim leader, you need to have the right intention *(niyyah).* Are you truly leading this organization, or just holding on desperately to a leadership position because you are the founder? If you are the former, focus on helping those around you succeed without being concerned about your own personal gain or prestige. If you are the latter, step down; there are so many other opportunities to do good work for the cause of Allah. You will learn how good your followers are only when you give them the freedom to succeed and become a servant-leader.

Servant-leaders are transformational leaders who actively foster collaboration by serving. Your hard work, and the help provided by your followers, makes things happen. To build collaboration among your followers, promote frequent interaction. Hold a meeting every two weeks. If organisational participants are geographically dispersed, hold a conference call at least once a month. Kouzes and Posner (1995) point out that some organisations with superior leaders hold a staff meeting every morning, although this may not be feasible or even desirable in all situations. By stressing superordinate (organisational) long-term goals and payoffs over short-run objectives and benefits, seek to remove any kind of *strategic myopia* that causes your followers to emphasize their functional, departmental, or committee goals at the expense of the organisation's goals. Ensure that your organisation's reward system promotes teamwork over individualistic efforts. Finally, foster collaboration by nurturing trusting relationships between yourself and your followers, provided that you have selected them with care.

Trusting your followers to resolve problems will energise them and enable them to come up with solutions that you may never have imagined. Followers must be able to see their work as meaningful and significant, and must be encouraged to take ownership of a task or a responsibility. An excellent example of what followers can do when entrusted with responsibility comes from Motorola. From 1987-92, this global company trained its workers to focus on quality. Hosain Rasoli, a technician involved with power transformers, had often asked himself how the transformers performed in the field. As part of the program, he was entrusted with improving the transformers' quality. After gathering information about the weakest components, he convinced the development engineers to redesign the parts. This resulted in a 400 percent improvement in product reliability. Rasoli is now Motorola's Mr. Power Amplifier.

Besides fostering collaboration, you have to strengthen others through empowerment and delegation. Both concepts share the same idea: power is an expandable resource. The more power you share with your followers or employees, the more power you have and the more you have strengthened them. This is the core of transformational leadership. In strengthening others, you are placing yourself in their shoes and stepping into their reality. Consequently, any demand that you make of them is a demand that you make of the whole group or organisation. Muhammad (s) was a leader who joined others in doing what he asked them to do. For example, he helped to build his mosque in Madinah, helped out around the house, and participated in the digging of the ditch prior to the battle of Ahzab. By being willing to work with your subordinates of any aspect of a project or job, you demonstrate to your lower-level employees or workers that you do not feel that only they should perform the worst and/or most difficult tasks; rather, you make them feel empowered and energised through your leadership style.

While strengthening your followers, work at raising their level of commitment to the cause. Delegation is critical here, for the more responsible they feel for a course of action, the more committed they will become. Some leaders use a "signing up" ritual, whereby a person agrees to do his/her best. Another way of building up their commitment

level is by making choices visible to others. Just as at Aqaba, where the Muslims pledged their loyalty to the Prophet in public, have the Muslim brother or sister commit to performing a task in front of the group or committee. The more visible the choice, the more committed people will be to that course of action. On the other hand, guard against too much attachment to a previous course of action. Muslims who have committed themselves to a previous task may pursue it even if the project is not working out and they keep receiving negative feedback. If a follower becomes too attached to a continuously underperforming project, rotate him/her out and assign somebody else to it. This will pre-empt escalation of commitment to a previous course of action, a direction which may no longer be warranted in light of changing circumstances.

Once you have delegated a task, the follower may not be able to carry it out. You should make sure to provide him/her with feedback designed to improve his/her performance in the future. Fight your desire to reprimand your follower immediately, for according to Kouzes and Posner (1995), the best leaders allow their followers the space and time to learn from their mistakes, whenever feasible. Islam concurs with this approach, as indicated by the Qur'anic verse revealed after the near defeat of Uhud:

> *It is part of the Mercy of Allah that you do deal gently with them. Were you severe or harsh-hearted, they would have broken away from about you; so pass over (their faults) and ask for (Allah's) forgiveness for them; and consult them in affairs (of moment). Then when you have taken a decision put your trust in Allah. For Allah loves those who put their trust (in Him).* (Qur'an, 3:159)

Similarly, Aisha (ra) narrated and al-Tirmidhi reports, that Muhammad (s) stated

> *Avert the infliction of prescribed penalties on Muslims as much as you can, and if there is any way out let a man go, for it is better for a leader to make a mistake in forgiving than to make a mistake in punishing.*

4.   *Modelling the Way*

Your task is not done after developing a shared vision and empowering others, for now you must lead by modelling the way. First, be clear about your beliefs. By practicing what you preach, clarify to your followers what core values and behaviour should be emulated. The Prophet (s) did this, and all current Muslim leaders and followers should follow his example. By using the word khuluq (a derivative of akhlaq [ethics]) to characterise Muhammad (s) , Allah describes our beloved Prophet as a timeless, virtuous model for all:

> *And you stand an exalted standard of character.* (Qur'an, 68:4)

While modelling the way, remember that the level of your followers' maturity will affect the degree and speed at

which they follow your example. Given the different levels of follower maturity and the nature of the task, break goals down into small, manageable chunks so that you can achieve small wins. These wins are important, because they give your followers self-confidence and thus have a multiplier effect.

5. Encouraging the Heart

Succeeding in Allah's Path is difficult, and Muslims will be continuously tested. Sometimes, brothers and sisters may become discouraged because a strategic plan may look too hard or is taking too long to implement. An appropriate verse or hadith from you during tough times will help them refocus and strengthen their resolve. You, in your capacity as the leader, can never lose hope in Allah, because doing so is tantamount to disbelief. The following admonition from Prophet Ya'qub (p) illustrates this aspect of Islamic leadership:

0 my sons! Go and inquire about Joseph and his brother, and never give up hope of Allah's Soothing Mercy. Truly, no one despairs of Allah's Soothing Mercy except those who have no faith. (Qur'an, 12:87)

Another inspiring verse is:

So lose not heart or fall into despair, for you must gain mastery if you are true in faith. (Qur'an, 3:139)

A thank-you plaque (with the name of the person spelled correctly!), a dinner to thank everybody, or at the very least a nice card are all very simple but effective ways to thank your followers. People do not work in God's Cause with a desire to do a bad job or lose. It is up to you to show them that they can win with His help. No matter what, encourage your followers before the project is completely finished. One of the most important tenets of motivation is the "law of effect": Behaviour that is rewarded will be repeated; behaviour that is not rewarded will not be. Accordingly, establish targets along the path to a long-term objective. Whenever your followers achieve a target, make it a point to celebrate their accomplishment so that they will be energised to tackle the next segment of the objective or the strategic plan.

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will be available from the online bookstore at "The Islamic Workplace" in mid-December 2006, Insha Allah.

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