

Identification of Islamic leadership principles and their applicability in construction project management

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Abstract: Islamic leadership principles are universal in nature. They are applicable in all branches of human activities including in construction project management. However, current theories and practices in construction project management seldom focus on aspects related to religion and faith; whereas in dealings with human aspects, religion and faith are inseparable. Consequently, there is a need to bring the aspects of religion and faith into the practices of construction project management. This paper reports on a study that attempts to bring religion and faith into the contemporary practice of construction project management. In this context, the aspects on religion and faith are represented by incorporating Islam and its principles on leadership. Through extensive literature review and interviews with Islamic experts a list of Islamic leadership principles has been developed. The developed leadership principles are then assessed on their applicability in construction project management through face to face interviews with project managers currently serving the Malaysian Public Works Department. The findings from the study suggest that Islamic leadership principles are relevant, appropriate and highly applicable to be practised in construction project management. In addition, the project managers interviewed believe that by incorporating Islamic leadership principles into construction project management the probability of achieving the desired project outcome is significantly enhanced. Furthermore, to the Muslim project managers the practice of bringing in Islamic leadership principles into practice in construction project management would significantly enhanced the fulfilment of their religious obligations and strengthen their Islamic faith.

Key words: Islam; Leadership; Construction; Project Management; Religion

1. Introduction

Leadership or *al-Qiyadah* means driving, steering or guiding. Leadership is centred on the premise that a person is capable of influencing others. It occurs when a person possesses particular characteristics that make him capable of exercising his influence effectively, thereby distinguishing himself as a leader (Yusef, 2011).

In Islam, leadership is a matter of concern, individually as well as in groups of individuals such as in an organizational setting. Leadership exists in man when he accepted the trust to manage the Earth placed upon him by Allah SWT i.e. "We did indeed offer the trust to the heavens, to the earth, to the mountains (to bear it), but they declined to bear it, and were afraid that they would not be able to fulfil it (for they do not have innate disposition to bear it). And (then) man (with the innate disposition in him) undertook to bear it" (Al-Qur'an, Al-Ahzab: 72). The position of trust and acting as *khalifah* or vicegerent to manage the Earth is reinforced onto man as he is bestowed by Allah SWT with *'aqal* i.e. "And He has made you vicegerents in the world, and exalted some of you above others in rank" (Al-Qur'an, Al-An'am: 165). The need for leadership among men is further

stressed by Allah SWT when Allah SWT says "...and we also raise some of them above others in rank (all these are done) so that some of them may take the others into their service..." (Al-Qur'an, Al-Zukhruf: 32).

However, having being placed with such a position of trust and leadership, man has to answer for what he did to Allah SWT, to his fellow man and to the environment as mentioned by the holy Prophet SAW; "All of you are guardians and are responsible for your wards..." (Reported by Ibn 'Umar in Sahih Bukhari; 7.128). Leadership therefore, must be carried out within the sphere of knowledge derived principally from the al-Qur'an and al-Sunnah.

In the context of Malaysia the practice of construction project management is best represented by the Public Works Department (PWD). PWD is Malaysia's oldest and premier technical department. It is entrusted by the government to implement all of Malaysia's public sector infrastructure and development projects. In the PWD, the practice of construction project management is as detailed in the department's Project Management Practitioner's Manual. In the manual the roles of project managers are identified to be spanning across five phases of a project's

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lifecycle namely project planning, design, procurement, construction and handing over.

Poor leadership in managing construction projects has been identified as among the key factors that led to project failures in terms of meeting the desired outcomes (Ibrahim et al., 2012; Ofori and Toor, 2012). For example, from the 342 on-going public sector construction projects commissioned under Malaysia's 10th Malaysia Plan (2011-2015) 261 projects or 76% are experiencing time overrun (SKALA, 2015).

One of the critiques of current construction project management theories and practices is that they seldom focus on aspects related to religion and faith; whereas in dealings with human aspects, religion and faith are inseparable. Consequently, there is a need to bring the aspects of religion and faith into the practices of construction project management (Ministry of the Prime Minister, 2015; Reave, 2005).

This paper reports on a study that attempts to bring religion and faith into the contemporary practice of construction project management. Specifically, the study's objectives are to identify and develop Islamic leadership principles and to assess their applicability in contemporary construction project management practices. The study combines desk research and face to face interviews with experts on Islam and construction project managers. The paper is presented as follows: Part 1 introduced the paper and provided context to the study being reported herein; Parts 2 and 3 reviews related literature on Islamic leadership principles and construction project management respectively; Part 4 describes the methodology used for the study; Parts 5 presents the results from the study and the ensuing discussions and finally Part 6 provides a conclusion to the paper.

2. Islamic leadership principles

In Islam, the daily practice of man in all aspects of his life, including leadership, is guided by the Al-Qur'an and al-Sunnah. In addition, the practices of the Companions of Prophet SAW also provided rich ideas of what is leadership in Islam and how leadership in Islam should be practised. For example, upon the occasion of his first sermon as Caliph, Abu Bakr (ra) stated: O people! I have been selected as your trustee although I am not better than anyone of you. If I am right, obey me. If I am misguided, set me right". Similarly, 'Umar (ra) was quoted as saying to the people: 'I have been appointed as a ruler over you although I am not the best among you. I have never sought this position nor have been a desire in my heart to have this in preference to anyone else. If I do right, you must help and obey me; if I go astray, set me right...Obey me so long as I obey Allah and His Messenger. If I disobey them, then you have no obligation to follow me' (Naceur Jabnoun, 2012).

Through detailed study of the Al-Quran, al-Sunnah and related literature five key principles of Islamic leadership have been identified. They are (i)

leadership is a manifestation of human role as *khalifah* on earth, (ii) leadership is concerned with acquiring and transferring knowledge, (iii) leadership is a responsibility coupled with accountability, (iv) leadership is about working as a team, and (v) leadership is leading by example.

2.1. Leadership is a manifestation of human role as *khalifah* on earth.

Among others, the Al-Qur'an describes the creation of mankind as a just community (Al-Baqarah: 143) upholding justice even if it is against self-interest (An-Nisa': 135). The Muslim community is entrusted by the Almighty to represent all that is good, enjoin the right and prohibit the bad (Ali-'Imran: 110). Clearly, human has been pre-destined to submit to Allah SWT in all their undertakings (Al-An'am:162). Having said that, the intention plays an important role in what a man does. This is as narrated by Abu Hafs 'Umar bin al-Khattab (ra) on the authority of Amirul Mu'minin; I heard the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) say: "Actions are (judged) by motives (*niyyah*), so each man will have what he intended..." (Bukhari & Muslim).

With regard to man as *khalifah*, the following are Islamic values that would lead to good leadership;

- i. A person is born as a leader ingrained with the basic leadership qualities.
- ii. Self-admission that leadership is an act of *'ibadah* (worshipping) is a pre-requisite.
- iii. *Niyyah* (intention) plays an important role in motivating action towards *mardhatillah* (Allah's pleasure).
- iv. The blending of effort, *tawakkul* (surrendering to Allah SWT) and *redha* (acceptance) would lead towards perseverant leaders.
- v. Efforts that invite goodness and forbid evil (*al-amrbi'l-ma'rufwa al-nahy 'and al-munkar*) are important in the practice of leadership.

2.2. Leadership is concerned with acquiring and transferring knowledge

Islam emphasizes the importance of knowledge and that man must seek knowledge. The first verse of the Al-Qur'an is talking about seeking knowledge through reading (al-'Alaq: 01 and in al-Zumar: 09). Islam prescribes the various ways of acquiring knowledge, for example, Mu'adh narrated that when the Prophet sent him to Yemen, he asked him: "What would you do if you were asked to judge? Mu'adh replied: "I judge by what is in God's Book". The Prophet said: "What if it is not in God's book? He said: "By referring to the Sunnah of the Messenger of God". The Prophet said: "What if it is not in the Sunnah of the Messenger of God? He said: "I will use my reasoning without hesitation". Mu'adh said: "The Prophet patted me on the chest and said: "Thank God for providing me a messenger to the Messenger of God who is agreeable to the Messenger of God" (Abu Dawood and Al-Tirmidhi).

From the above, it could be deduced that seeking knowledge could be done in a variety of ways but the key sources remained the Al-Quran and Al-Sunnah. The use of human reasoning or *ijtihad* is permitted. Consequently, Islamic values leading to good leadership include;

- i. Al-Qur'an and Al-Sunnah as the principal sources of knowledge.
- ii. Knowledge may be acquired through *ijtihad*.
- iii. A leader must be a competent person.
- iv. A leader must base his decision on knowledge.
- v. A leader should develop a kind of "knowledge culture" at the workplace.

2.3. Leadership is a responsibility coupled with accountability

Islam installs the idea of responsibility as an underlying principle of leadership. It should be a leader's first line of thinking instead of the pride, fame and gain.

This leadership principle of responsibility coupled with accountability could be implied from the Prophetic saying, "Do not ask for a position of authority, for if you are granted this position as a result of your asking for it, you will be left alone (without Allah's help to discharge the responsibilities involved in it), and if you are granted it without making any request for it, you will be helped (by Allah in the discharge of your duties) (Sahih Muslim: 1013).

The fourth Caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib wrote: "Do not nominate them (officers) on account of favouritism or egoism. These two attributes reflect injustice and treachery." Furthermore, it could be learned that "He who hires a person and knows that there is still one [available] who is more qualified, has betrayed Allah, His Prophet and the Muslims (At-Tabarani and al-Haythami; the grade for this hadith is acceptable).

In the context of leadership principles, Islam emphasizes the following values;

- i. A leader must be willing and able to serve others.
- ii. A leadership position is seen as a trust not an honour or privilege.
- iii. Leadership position is an obligation that will be questioned in the day of judgement.
- iv. A leader must execute his responsibility in the best possible manner.
- v. One should not seek to hold position except for the sake of Islam.

2.4. Leadership is about working as team

Leadership quality appears in oneself naturally, but structurally it requires followers. In an organization, leaders are attested in their ability to unite others as followers. In Islam, the six pillars of *iman* and the five pillars of *Islam* form a catalyst of unity. Everybody is heading towards one direction under the notion of religiosity.

Team working is very fundamental in succeeding the organisational vision and mission as understood in many Prophetic reports; "The believers are like

one body; if the head is in pain, the whole body suffers, and if the eye is in pain, the whole body suffers" (Bukhari); "None among you will believe until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself" (Bukhari); "Do not ask them to do such things [and jobs] which are beyond their strength and endurance, and if you do ask them to do such things [and jobs], then help them" (Bukhari).

In terms of leadership, the above principle may lead to the following values of leadership;

- i. Top-bottom relationship between a leader and followers, i.e. leader-followers interaction like supporting, delegating, coaching and directing.
- ii. Bottom-up relationship between a leader and followers, i.e. follower-leader interaction like obedient, cooperative, trust and respect.
- iii. There should be mutual consultations and constructive comments by both, leader and followers.
- iv. Mutual trust, respect and commitment are very important in organizations.
- v. Organizations should inspire a spirit of collective effort and culture among its members.

2.5. Leadership is leading by example

Being in the front line leaders must be those that possess charisma and ethics that are exemplary in quality. In Islam, the Prophet Muhammad SAW possesses all the qualities of such a leader. For example Allah SWT endorsed that "Indeed in the Messenger of Allah (Muhammad) you have a good example to follow for him who hopes for (the Meeting with) Allah and the Last Day, and remembers Allah much" (Al-Quran: Al-Ahzab: 21).

The Prophet himself ascertained his existence as to perfect good moral character. AbūHurayrah relates that Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: "I have only been sent to perfect good moral character" [Musnad Ahmad (8595)].

Thus in the context of leading by example, a leader should be one that is;

- i. Visionary
- ii. Able to instil confidence and trust from his followers
- iii. Ready to accept criticisms
- iv. Able to change from good to better, better to best
- v. Able to exhibit good moral conduct, is trustworthy, kind, transparent and fair.

3. Construction project management

Construction refers to the processes of building physical structures and related activities like commissioning, design, management and assembly of resources i.e. human, finance and materials over a period of time (Khairuddin, 2002). Construction Industry of Development Board Act (Amendment) 2011 defines construction as the construction, extension, installation, repair, maintenance, renewal, removal, renovation, alteration, dismantling, or demolition of-

- (a) any building, erection, edifice, structure, wall, fence or chimney, whether constructed wholly or partly above or below ground level;
 - (b) any road, harbour works, railway, cable way, canal or aerodrome;
 - (c) any drainage, irrigation or river control works;
 - (d) any electrical, mechanical, water, gas, petrochemical or telecommunication works; or
 - (e) any bridge, viaduct, dam, reservoir, earthworks, pipeline, sewer, aqueduct, culvert, drive, shaft, tunnel or reclamation works,
- and includes any works which form an integral part of, or are preparatory to or temporary for the works described in paragraphs (a) to (e), including site clearance, soil investigation and improvement, earth-moving, excavation, laying of foundation, site restoration and landscaping.

Project management is a formalised and structured method of managing change focusing on achieving specifically defined outputs within agreed time, quality and with the given level of resources so that planned outcomes are met (PWD's Strategic Framework 2012-2015).

Construction project management therefore refers to the application of project management method in managing construction works so that the outcome of the works would meet the project proponent's desired objectives in terms of time, quality and budget (David and Lewis, 2002).

In the context of Malaysia the practice of construction project management is better represented by the Public Works Department's Project Management Practitioner's Manual. In the manual the roles of project managers are identified to be spanning across five phases of a project's lifecycle namely project planning, design, procurement, construction and handing over.

Consequently, a construction project manager has to perform a variety of tasks and as such a project manager must possess the right kind of skills, knowledge and experience as well as one that is in possession of high self-resilience (Flannels & Levin, 2005; PWD, 2010). In this instance, the Prophet's saying as reported by Mu'awiyah (ra) is most befitting; "When Allah wishes good for someone, He bestows upon him the understanding of Deen" (Al-Bukhari and Muslim).

However, poor leadership in managing construction projects has been identified as among the key factors that led to project failures in terms of meeting the desired outcomes. In addition, among the critiques of current construction project management theories and practices is that they seldom focus on aspects related to religion and faith; whereas in dealings with human aspects, religion and faith are inseparable. Consequently, there is a need to bring the aspects of religion and faith into the practices of construction project management.

4. Methodology

The aim of the study reported herein is to attempt to bring religion and faith into the

contemporary practice of construction project management. Specifically, the study's objectives are to identify and develop Islamic leadership principles and to assess their applicability in contemporary construction project management practices.

The study combines desk research and face to face interviews with experts on Islam and construction project managers. The following is a summary of the steps taken in conducting the study;

1. From the desk research a set of 5 key Islamic leadership principles and their corresponding value propositions were identified and developed.
2. The above was presented to Islamic experts for their comments and validation.
3. The validated leadership principles were then synchronized with current PWD construction project management practice. The outcome represents what is deemed to be an attempt to bring religion and faith into contemporary construction project management practice.
4. Thereafter a set of questionnaire was developed and piloted.
5. Fieldwork was carried out involving face to face interviews with 7 qualified and experienced project managers. All project managers, volunteered to be involved with the study, are currently serving the PWD. During the interviews they were asked to study the Islamic leadership principles and assess their applicability in construction project management.

5. Results

Table 1 presents a summary of the outcome from the interviews.

The study reported herein is preliminary in nature, further and in-depth study is currently on-going.

The results show that all seven project managers agree with the 5 key Islamic leadership principles. In addition, they also confirmed that these principles are applicable in the practice of construction project management. Furthermore, having religion and faith brought into the equation, all seven project managers believe the probability is higher for projects to be meeting their desired outcome as people involved therein would be more committed to give their best effort.

6. Conclusion

The results from the study suggest that Islamic leadership principles are highly relevant and applicable in the practice of construction project management. In addition, there is a perceived view that with religion and faith brought into the practice of construction project management the probability is higher for projects to be meeting their desired outcome as people involved would be more committed to give their best effort.

Table 1: Applicability of Islamic leadership principles in construction project management
(Total no of respondents = 7 project managers)

ISLAMIC LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES			
Principles	Agree	Applicable in construction project management	Perceived project outcome in terms of time, cost and quality
Leadership is a manifestation of human role as <i>khalifah</i>	Yes	Yes	High
Leadership is concerned with acquiring and transferring knowledge	Yes	Yes	High
Leadership is responsibility with accountability	Yes	Yes	High
Leadership is about working as a team	Yes	Yes	High
Leadership is leading by example	Yes	Yes	High

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