



POSITIVE DEVIANCE AND ISLAMIC LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates whether positive deviance can become a tool to promote leadership from an Islamic perspective. This study offers a brief review of the literature on leadership, the link between perception and leadership and leadership from an Islamic perspective. In particular, attention is drawn to the work of Beekun and Badawi (1999) in the area of leadership from an Islamic perspective. This author suggests that practitioners find it difficult to implement principles of Islamic leadership because they lack specific management tools. By reviewing the literature, this author has identified positive deviance as a management tool for leaders to challenge and change the collective perceptions of followers. Within this context, the positive deviance methodology fits in remarkably well with the framework proposed by Beekun and Badawi (1999). The suitability of positive deviance as a tool for Islamic leaders is explored.

JEL Classification: M10

Key words: Perception, Leadership, Islamic leadership, Training

1. BACKGROUND

The literature on Management from an Islamic perspective has grown by leaps and bounds. In particular, the area of Islamic leadership has received much attention. This author is particularly interested in the work of Beekun and Badawi (1999). They say that Islamic leadership is the “ability to see beyond assumed

boundaries and to come up with solutions that few can visualize. The leader must then project this vision for everyone to see and pursue.” Although the theoretical understanding of Islamic leadership has improved dramatically over the last three decades, the practice of Islamic leadership seems not to have made much progress. No systematic research has been undertaken to justify this statement but when this author discusses Islamic leadership with Muslim managers and leaders in Malaysia, they often say, “this work in Islamic leadership is interesting but too theoretical. Unless we have access to specific tools, we cannot put this into practice.” This author believes that these practitioners have a valid point that needs to be seriously addressed by Muslim scholars of management. If not, Islamic leadership – like any branch of management from an Islamic perspective – runs the risk of being perceived as a purely intellectual exercise that Muslim academics play in their ivory towers.

There exist many management tools that help leaders in many aspects of their work. These tools range from ‘personal tools’ – like setting goals and managing time – to ‘organizational tools’. Many organizational tools are well known – such as the balanced score card, quality improvement techniques and so forth – whereas other tools are less well known. One of these less known tools is a management tool called ‘positive deviance’. Positive deviance is a change management that is useful to challenge the collective perception that exists within a community or an organization. A successful positive deviance project leads to a change of the collective perception and a long lasting change to a specific part of the culture.

2. AIM OF THIS STUDY

This study builds on the work of Beekun and Badawi (1999) on Islamic leadership. As changing the collective perception and behavior of followers is arguably a critical issue in leadership, this study discusses on whether positive deviance is a practical tool for Muslim leaders in developing the practice of Islamic leadership.

3. THEORIES OF LEADERSHIP

There are many definitions and theories of leadership. Wren (1994, 387) notes that there have been “thousands of studies, with a disparity of approaches, a proliferation of confusing terms, a high percentage of irrelevant or trivial studies and the absence of an integrating conceptual framework.” Due to space limitation, much of the background literature on leadership will be

ignored, including the problem of defining leadership. Generally though, there is an agreement that

- a. Leaders have certain values that set them apart from others
- b. Leaders have an accurate and realistic perception of the present
- c. Leaders have an inspiring, optimistic vision of the future
- d. Leaders communicate that vision to others
- e. Leaders inspire others to change

The fact that leaders are individuals who inspire others to change is something that is well understood (Kotter, 1998). However, the link between perception and leadership is well less understood. Many existing theories of leadership do not explicitly address the role of perception in leadership. There are exceptions of course. For example, Lord and Maher (1993) build their theory of leadership around social perception. They even define leadership as “*the process of being perceived by others as a leader.*” Other scholars emphasize that errors of perceptions lead to a misunderstanding of cause and effect (Argyris, 1985, Senge, 1990, Ackoff, 1999). Another exception is Beekun and Badawi (1999) who define leadership as “*the ability to see beyond assumed boundaries and come up with solutions that few can visualize.*” They say that Muslim leaders should use “multiple frames” and that “*an effective leader adjusts his sense when what he perceives does not make sense*” (Beekun and Badawi, 1999, 105). Beekun and Badawi’s (1999) emphasis on perception is very important as the perceptual process is a core personal construct. Luthans (2011, 135), for example, writes,

“Another important cognitive, personal construct is one’s perceptual process. The key to understanding perception is to recognize that it is a unique interpretation of the situation, not an exact recording of it.”

In other words, a good leader has to make perceived reality accurately. Although it is tempting to say that some people perceive things rightly and others perceive things wrongly, it is probably more accurate to say that everybody has an incomplete perception of things. Reality is simply too complex for human beings to fully comprehend. Some people however make errors of perception that prevent them from solving their problems while others make errors of perception that does not prevent them from solving their problems. One fascinating area that has been extensively researched is the link between errors of perception and learned helplessness.

4. ERRORS OF PERCEPTION AND LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

Recent development in cognitive psychology has shown that individuals have “two minds working semi-independently of one another” (Gardner, 2008, 32) The first – referred to as System 1 – is fast, unconscious and often uses heuristics to make decisions and act. The second – System 2 – is slow, conscious and validates the initial decisions made by System 1. Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert Gardner (2008, 34) concludes,

“One of psychology’s fundamental insights is that judgments are generally the products of non-conscious systems that operate quickly, on the basis of scant evidence, and in a routine manner, and then passes the hurried approximation to consciousness which slowly and deliberately adjusts them.”

Thus, many decisions leaders make are based on heuristics. Heuristics are rules of thumb that are often useful but sometimes lead people to make mistakes (Schermerhorn, 2010). Common heuristics include availability bias, representative bias, anchoring, framing errors, halo effect, affect bias and confirmation errors (Gardner, 2008). Heuristics is one way in which people make errors of perception. Over time though, individuals develop explanatory styles of what happens to them and why (Seligman, 2006). In particular, when people perceive that they have no control over events, they learn to be helpless. Learned helplessness is a situation when individuals are put in a situation where they have no control over their environment. In laboratory experiments, subjects were put in a situation where they had no control (phase one) and then control was given back to them (phase two). In phase one, they try to change their environment and fail. In phase two, they don’t even try to change their environment as they expect more failure. Generally, 70% of subjects develop learned helplessness. However, 30% of subjects routinely fail to develop learned helplessness. After careful research, Seligman and his colleagues concluded that individuals with an optimistic explanatory style do not develop learned helplessness.

Optimistic people are thus individuals who perceive bad events as being temporary and non-pervasive. They see a problem as being linked to inappropriate behavior. As behavior can be changed, optimistic people generally focus on changing behavior. Pessimistic people are individuals who perceive bad situations as being permanent and pervasive (Seligman, 2006). They often use words like “never” and “always” when describing their situation. They see a problem as being linked to a personality problem. As they believe that personalities are virtually impossible to change, they feel hopeless and helpless.

5. THEORIES OF ISLAMIC LEADERSHIP

To summarize this author's argument so far, most theories of leadership do not explicitly deal with the problem of perception, even though perception is at the heart of individual behavior. Apart from errors of perceptions related to heuristics, this author briefly looked at the link between errors of perception and learned helplessness. This author would now like to review some of the various theories of Islamic leadership that are found in management from an Islamic perspective literature.

The biggest concern Muslim scholars have towards western-based theories of leadership is that they reflect secular values and are incompatible with the Islamic values found in the *Qur'ān* and *Sunnah* (Ahmad, 2006; Ahmad and Fontaine, 2011). Hence, the critical argument in favor of the Islamization of knowledge of 'secular' disciplines like management. For example, Ahmad (2006, 175-79) writes,

“The Islamic concept of leadership is derived from the doctrine of Tawheed. . . The following elements are included in Islamic leadership: knowledge and hikmah, taqwa, 'adl (justice) and rahmah (compassion), courage and bravery, shura (mutual consultation), decisiveness, eloquence, a spirit of self-sacrifice and sabr (patience).”

A number of research on Islamic leadership have recently been published (Ahmad, 2007; Beekun, 2007; Beik and Arsyanti, 2007; Ismail and Ibrahim, 2007; and Randeree, 2007, among others). Unfortunately, few authors have proposed a comprehensive theory of Islamic leadership. One exception is Beekun and Badawi (1999). Beekun and Badawi (1999) propose the model of the five-pointed star. In the middle lies *īmān*, *islām*, *taqwā* and *ihsān* while each point of the star contains the branch of *amānah* (trust), 'adl (justice), *birr* (goodness), *ahd* (keeping promises) and *mujāhadah* (striving to continuously develop oneself). Beekun and Badawi (1999) stress that Muslim leaders have two key roles: to be a guardian-leader and to be a servant-leader. Beekun and Badawi argue that Muslim leaders have to understand their own behavior, the behavior of their followers and the situation in order to come up with appropriate solutions. To do this, leaders must reach out to everybody, welcome sinners and try to improve them and use insights (Beekun, 2008).

The understanding that leaders see things differently is echoed by other Muslim scholars in other Islamic disciplines. Al-Qardhawi (1991, 1996), for example, argues that Muslims cannot be successful until they “*understand the reality of the Ummah.*” This is not surprising as Muslim legal jurists define *fiqh* (the application of the *Qur'ān* and *Sunnah* to a specific situation) as the outcome of human understanding (*fahm*), perception (*tasawwur*) and cognition (*idrak*) (Auda, 2010, 193)

This author would like to discuss the problem of misreading reality by referring to the life of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Al-Mubarakpuri (1996) divides the Prophet's mission into six phases. The key phases in his mission to spread Islam are captured in Table 1. Clearly, the scholars of Islam have discussed the life of the Prophet (peace be upon him) in much detail. This author is interested in the Prophet's optimism. In the organizational behavior literature, optimism should not be confused with simply having a good view of the future. It is not a kind of blind false hope. Optimism is normally associated with how to deal with existing problems. Do we see them as temporary, specific and linked to inappropriate behavior or do we see them as permanent, pervasive and linked to issues of personality?

TABLE 1
Summary of the Prophet's life

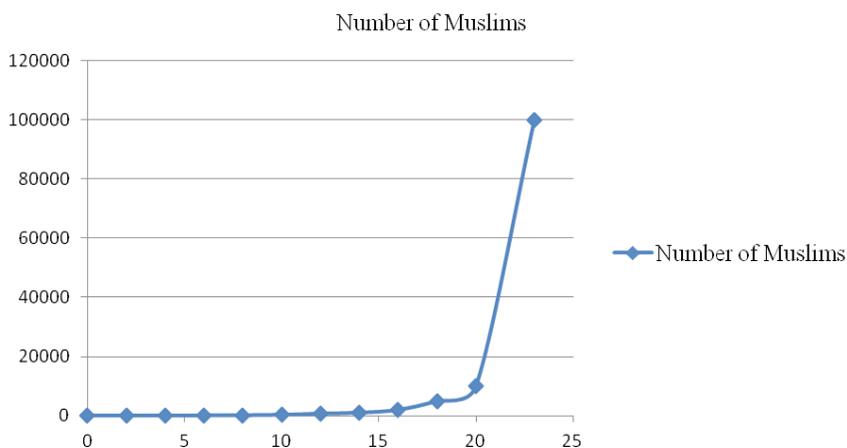
Periods	Situation
Meccan: Secret call (first 3 years)	Close friends accept the call easily. These new converts preach to others. The new religion cannot be kept secret.
Meccan: Open call in Makkah (4th year to 10th year)	The people of Mecca react by making life difficult for converts and by preventing him from preaching his message. Persecution starts. Some of the converts emigrate to Ethiopia. During the Hajj season, the Prophet preach to Arabs who arrive in Mecca but nobody responds.
Meccan: Open call beyond Makkah (10th year to 13th year)	During the Hajj in the 10 th year, some of the people of Medinah respond positively to Islam. First and second oath of 'Aqaba. The people from Medinah pledge to defend the prophet (peace be upon him) with their lives if necessary. Muslims start to emigrate to Medinah to establish an Islamic state. The Meccans will surely start a war and they are numerically superior.
Medinah: Internal and external hostility (14th year to 20th year)	A series of wars with the people of Mecca and some of the tribes of Medinah. The battle of Badr gives the Muslims credibility, which was threatened by the battle of Uhud. The hypocrites in Medinah and the Jews of Medinah secretly try to destroy Islam. Skirmishes continue throughout this period. The Treaty of Al-Hudaibiyah is signed.
Medinah: Truce with Makkah (20th year to 22nd year)	One by one, people from Mecca accept Islam. Eventually, Mecca is conquered by the Muslims with very little blood being shed. Muslims start to attract the attention of the Romans and the Persians.
Medinah: People from other parts of Arabia embrace Islam (final year)	For the Arabs outside of Mecca, the peaceful conquest of Makkah is a sign that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is a real Prophet. An estimated 100,000 people convert in the last 18 months.

Source: Al Mubarakpuri (1996)

As Table 1 shows, the Prophet (peace be upon him) did not have an easy time. Although he had some early successes, he had to deal with

very harsh and very stubborn people in Mecca. Yet, the Prophet (peace be upon him) did not make any significant errors of perception. Although the majority of people rejected his message, the number of his followers increased steadily year but year. He could focus on what he had achieved and build upon that, or he could focus on how many people had not yet accepted Islam and become discouraged. It is easy to say that one should focus on our successes and build from that, but the reality is that 90% of people converted to Islam in the last 18 months of the Prophet's mission (see Figure 1). How many people could have the patience to struggle for twenty-two years before seeing the fruits of his or her effort?

FIGURE 1
The Number of People Who Converted to Islam



Source: Al Mubarakpuri (1996)

Although Muslims often describe the Prophet (peace be upon him) as having an extremely high level of patience, Seligman (2006) would rather describe the Prophet (peace be upon him) as being an 'optimist'. That is to say that he saw problems as temporary. It should be noted that research shows that very optimistic people tend to develop an unrealistic perspective of their situation whereas people who are mildly pessimistic tend to be more realistic about what they can and cannot do. Seligman (2006, 208) writes,

“While optimism has many virtues, pessimism has one virtue: supporting a keener sense of reality. Does learning the skills of optimism mean sacrificing realism? [The goal of this book] is not to [develop] an absolute, unconditional optimism to apply blindly in

all situations. [This book] offers a ‘flexible optimism’ which aims to give you control over the way you think about adversity but without becoming a slave to blind optimism.”

Using Seligman’s terminology, the Prophet (peace be upon him) was not simply an optimist but, more importantly, a flexible optimist. His optimism did not lead him to make errors of perceptions when assessing the situation he was facing.

This author believes that Beekun and Badawi’s (1999) model is sound. The next logical step for scholars of Islamic leadership is to train people so that Muslim leaders can apply these principles in their daily life. To his credit, Professor Beekun is currently doing that. He has developed a two-day course comprising eight modules. This is a critical development. This author assumes that Islamic leadership requires a cognitive component. This is the critical contribution of Beekun and Badawi. There must be an affective component. It is assumed that any sincere Muslim would love to lead others according to Islamic principles. However, there must be a behavioral component. It is necessary to develop the specific skills that relate directly to Beekun and Badawi’s model. In the jargon of corporate training, one needs to give people the right ‘tools’. Going back to the definition of Islamic leadership proposed by Beekun and Badawi (1999), there are two inter-related but distinct issues:

- a. How to ‘see’ things without making errors of perception
- b. How to help other people ‘see’ things without making errors of perception

By reviewing the literature, this author has been very intrigued by a technique called “positive deviance”. In the rest of this study, this author will explore how this technique works.

6. POSITIVE DEVIANCE IN ISLAMIC THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Most of the information about positive deviance is taken from www.positivedeviance.org. For convenience, this website will not be mentioned throughout the text.

In the early 1990s, Jerry Sternin was working for a charity trying to alleviate child malnutrition in Vietnam. Sternin observed selected Vietnamese villages. Although everybody was poor and most children were

malnourished, Sternin identified some families that were able to nourish their children even though they were as poor as their neighbors. This led Sternin to conclude that poverty was not the cause of malnutrition. Sternin realized that they did things differently but with a positive impact so he called them “positive deviants” (PD). For example, these PDs would collect shrimps in the paddy fields and use them as a nutritional supplement. PDs would have the same amount of rice as their neighbors but they would have several small meals a day instead of only one meal. Having identified the PDs and identified the behavior that could be transferred to the rest of the community, Sternin got the PDs to teach their peers. This was crucial to the success of the program because the “teachers” were never perceived as ‘outsiders’ by the rest of the group. From this experience, Sternin developed the positive deviance methodology, namely:

- **Define** the problem by identifying a behavioral outcome
- **Determine** who in the community are PDs
- **Discover** how their behavior differs from their neighbors
- **Develop** a community of practice

In their presentations, Positive Deviance Initiative (PDI) experts always stress that, “*the solution lies in front of everybody’s eyes*”. Putting it another way, many people make errors of perception. They see a problem as being permanent and pervasive instead of seeing them as temporary and specific. People tend to over-generalize and learn to become helpless. The reality in the villages in Vietnam is that everybody is poor. That is true. But even though everybody is poor, not everybody has malnourished children. Sternin argues that it is important to focus on behavioral outcomes. For example, a leader might give a wonderful speech to his followers and say that they need to “change their perception.” This would probably have no effect. However, by teaching followers new behavior, followers will change their perception by themselves.

Since the 1990s, PDI has been used in more than 40 countries (including advanced economies) to help communities find ways out of their problems. It has been used by blue chip multinationals (Pascale and Sternin, 2005). Pascale and Sternin (2005) share an experience related to fighting malnutrition in a village in Mali. The villagers believed that child malnutrition was caused by the village sorcerer. The Save the Children facilitator asked if the sorcerer had cast a spell on *every* child. The villagers realized that some families did not have malnourished children. The villagers imitated their actions and their children became healthier. Pascale and Sternin (2005, 75) wrote,

“The villagers experienced a community-wide epiphany... Malnutrition was no longer beyond their control. A grandmother summed up the sense of triumph the villagers felt when she proclaimed, “we have vanquished the sorcerer.”

Generally though, once people understand the PDI methodology, community leaders find it a powerful tool to ‘see’ things differently and help their followers see things differently. As PDI focuses on the ‘best practices in the community’, community members are clear how what they need to do to get out of their existing problem. It should be noted that different PDI case studies yield different lessons. In Indonesia, for example, a positive deviance initiative focused on preventing the trafficking of young girls from poor villages. Typically, a broker would lend money to poor families. When these families are unable to pay their debts, the broker would suggest that the daughters could ‘work’ in the cities so as to reimburse the brokers. Invariably, the girls would find themselves working in the sex industry. Brokers would try to make sure that girls went without legal documents to make it virtually impossible for the family to ever find their daughter again. Although this practice was common in some villages, some families developed strategies to protect their daughters. The positive deviance initiative identified these ‘deviant’ families and identified what they did differently. They got PDs to share their practice with the rest of the village. Once the community realized that there was a better alternative, the community got itself organized with documented success. This Indonesian case is important because of the need for psychological safety. The fact that girls from the village ended up working in the sex industry was an embarrassment - a taboo subject - that nobody wanted to talk about. The charity workers introduce the concept of PDI by proposing to work on a less embarrassing issue (drop-out rates in schools). As the community learnt about the positive deviance methodology, the group switched from school drop out to what everybody was really worried about but dared not talk about: girl trafficking.

When discussing Positive Deviance Initiative, two issues are often raised. One is whether positive deviance is simply ‘benchmarking’ by another name. This author feels that there are certain things about positive deviance that are unique. Benchmarking implies that one looks for the ‘best practice’ outside one’s community or organization. Positive deviance focuses on the ‘best practices’ inside a community or an organization. However, there are certain technical aspects to positive deviance that differs from benchmarking. One of the principles of positive deviance is that, “all individuals who are part of the problem are involved in resolving the problem.” This is not necessarily the case with benchmarking. Positive deviance is more than identifying a

best practice, it is an inclusive effort at changing a specific part of a culture inside a community or an organization. It focuses on changing the culture of the followers, not simply introducing a best practice. A second point that is sometimes raised is that positive deviance is quiet difficult to implement because it requires very specific facilitation skills. In other words, one needs to be well trained before one can start implementing positive deviance as a methodology.

To put the potential usefulness of positive deviance into perspective, consider the findings of Ching (2004). Ching (2004) investigated organizational change among Malaysian manufacturing firms. He got responses from 61 senior managers. He found that the average success rate of organizational change initiatives was about 50%. Organizational change was driven by the desire to cut cost (84%), compete in the market more effectively (59%), deal with requests from major customers (57%) or adapt to new technologies (57%). The respondents reported reasonably high success with corporate restructuring (a success rate of 100%), changing work processes (a success rate of 76%) and managing business expansion (a success rate of 66%). The success rate to successfully changing behavior and changing the corporate culture was 0%. Changing the collective perception of followers and the way they behave is clearly a very important agenda for any business leader.

7. DEVELOPING MUSLIM LEADERS

This author has made several points. First, Muslim leaders need to have an accurate perception of their situation. Second, Muslim leaders need to be flexible optimists. They need to know clearly how problems can be resolved. When developing Muslim leaders, certain skills need to be taught.

Many skills are pre-requisite skills. Pre-requisite skills probably include goals setting skills, time management skills, communication skills, supervisory skills, coaching skills and problem-solving skills. These skills are important and cannot (and should not) be under-estimated or dismissed. Without these skills, there can be no Islamic leadership. However, these skills in themselves are probably not enough.

The problem of changing the perception of the followers remains. It is no coincidence that Ching (2004) found that many types of organizational change in Malaysia succeed except the problem of changing the behavior of followers. Yet, facilitators that have used positive deviance have established a remarkable track record in this area. Another problem is how to develop Muslim leaders to be flexible optimists like the Prophet (peace

be upon him)? This author assumes that people who are taught the skills related to positive deviance would naturally become flexible optimists. Positive deviance stresses observing people's behavior rather than assuming something is wrong with their personality and it helps people develop an accurate perception of the existing situation.

It is this author's inevitable conclusion that Muslim leaders wishing to apply the principles of Islamic leadership would benefit a lot by being exposed to positive deviance as a methodology for initiating cultural change. A positive deviance approach would seem consistent with the aims and objectives of Islamic leadership, namely;

- a. To develop an accurate perception of the problem
- b. To solve the problem
- c. To include everybody in the process

One option is that they can acquire the skills to facilitate positive deviance projects within Muslim communities. Another option is that they understand enough about positive deviance to call upon other positive deviance experts if there is a problem in their community or organization in which positive deviance might be useful. Certainly, positive deviance is not the only tool that Islamic leaders should rely on. As Beekun and Badawi have clearly demonstrated, Islamic leadership is rooted in the *Qur'ān* and *Sunnah*. That cognitive (knowing the *Qur'ān* and *Sunnah*) and affective (loving the *Qur'ān* and *Sunnah*) part of Islamic leadership is undisputable. However, when it comes to implementing Islamic leadership, it seems obvious that Islamic leaders need to have access to a variety of tools. They need to know the strengths and weaknesses of each tool, when it is appropriate to use them and when it is not. At this juncture, this author assumes that positive deviance is a very interesting tool to help Muslims become better leaders and better followers. This author is currently starting a series of research projects with a postgraduate student to apply positive deviance in selected Islamic organizations in Malaysia. Those experiments will be able, God willing, to test the suitability of positive deviance as tool for Islamic leaders.

8. CONCLUSION

This author has argued that Muslim leaders wishing to apply the principles of Islamic leadership need to become very sensitive to the problem of perception. Using Seligman's terminology, they need to become flexible optimists. Building on the work of Beekun and Badawi, this author has identified positive deviance as an interesting tool that might be used for

changing the culture within communities and organizations. This author does not suggest that positive deviance is the only tool and this author does not suggest that Muslim leaders cannot apply the principles of Islamic leadership without resorting to positive deviance. This is only one of the many tools that Islamic leaders can use but it is arguably a very important one because of the inherent difficulty in changing people's collective perception. Furthermore, the underpinning philosophy of positive deviance seems to be compatible with the philosophy underpinning Islamic law. Positive deviance seems thus a useful tool for Muslim practitioners.

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