



## **ISLAMIC LEADERSHIP AT THE INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA**

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is an empirical study related to Islamic leadership. The literature review of this paper focuses on transactional leadership, transformational leadership and servant leadership. The literature suggests that Islamic leadership most closely resembles servant leadership. A questionnaire was then used to assess how administrators at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) view the leadership approaches of their direct superiors and which leadership approach they prefer. The results of the survey clearly indicate that they prefer servant leadership followed by transformational leadership. Respondents dislike transactional leadership. The implications of the studies are discussed and the possibility of generalization is discussed.

JEL Classification: M10, M14, Z12

Key words: Islamic leadership, University, Malaysia

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is clear that Islam plays a very important role in the lives of Muslims all over the world (e.g. Deresky, 2006; Cavusgil, Knight and Riesenberger, 2008). Some scholars argue that Islam also influences the way management is applied in Muslim countries. In particular, much has been written about what is often called “management from an Islamic perspective” (Khaliq and Fontaine, 2011). Conferences in this area are organized from time to time in the Middle East and in Malaysia and often attract a strong international participation. In 2008, the Emerald Group Publishing Limited launched the *International Journal of Islamic and Middle Eastern Finance and Management* with the objective of enabling Muslim scholars to share their findings in this area in a quality academic journal. One of the ‘hottest’ topics has been the leadership principles that exist in the Islamic tradition (for example, Beekun and Badawi, 1999; Khaliq 2009). Unfortunately, there has been little empirical research to see how such principles are perceived by Muslim employees in real Muslim organizations today. This study is an exploratory study that aims to fill that gap. The population that has been chosen is the administrative staff at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM).

## 2. MANAGEMENT FROM AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

Many authors have explored the relation between management theory and religion. The possibility that alternative religious and cultural traditions might produce quite different pattern of organization and management style have been noted. Yet, the vast majority of Muslims both at managerial and non-managerial levels are still influenced by the western concept of management where religion is separated from public domain of organization. Such an approach clashes with the Islamic perspective that integrates religion and the practice of management. There is, thus, a need for an alternative and more comprehensive theory that is relevant for Muslims. This is known as Management from Islamic Perspective (MIP), which encompasses visionary leadership, strategic management thinking, management of change, fair treatment and social justice among employees, sincerity and commitment, and motivational issues (Jabnoun, 1994; Khaliq, 2003; Khaliq and

Fontaine, 2011). Under the Islamic theory of management, both individual Islamic belief as well as organizational management operates under the same revealed rules and directives. Fontaine (2008) highlights that Muslims are duty-bound to make sure their knowledge of management is based on evidence based management, not folklore. Muslim leaders that have a strong religious background but who have little understanding of management can never be considered 'good' Islamic leaders of organizations. Islamic management deals with management of organizations from the perspective of the knowledge acquired from revealed and other Islamic sources of knowledge and results in applications compatible with the Islamic belief and practices (Khaliq and Shamin, 1995; Kazmi, 2007).

### 3. CONVENTIONAL LEADERSHIP THEORIES REVISITED

This study focuses on leadership approaches. A leadership approach includes all practices, traits, behaviors, processes, roles, and styles that leaders have and do to lead the followers, emphasizing the importance of the situational factors. Muslim scholars of management have derived Islamic leadership principles. These principles are extracted primarily from the *Qur'an* and the biography of the Prophet Muḥammad (s.a.w.) and his companions for the orientation of governmental affairs and the construction of good and ethical leadership to guide the Islamic leaders in running Muslim organizations appropriately and effectively. It draws upon the noblest Islamic traditions of science, worship (*'ibādah*), justice (*'adālah*), and doing good (*ihsān*), and seeks to inculcate these values in Muslims (Khaliq 2009). Many theories of leadership, due to space constraint, will be ignored. However the key theories that interest us are:

- a. Transactional leadership: Transactional leadership is a leadership approach that stresses the exchange of rewards with subordinates for services rendered (Parolini, Patterson and Winston, 2009).
- b. Transformational leadership: Transformational leadership approach leads the change in the organization's vision, strategy, and culture, and it empowers people in the organization and increases the base of power and effectiveness rather than restricting it (James and Joseph, 2001).
- c. Servant leadership: This approach is based on Islamic leadership

principles. This is a moral leadership approach that leans toward values, ethics, principles, virtues, morality, spirituality, and authenticity. It advocates that leaders should serve those under them, protect them and help them to reach maximum effectiveness (Beekun, 2006; Khaliq, 2009).

#### 4. THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP IN ISLAM

As with the conventional practices, leadership in Islam also serves as a bridge used by leaders to influence their members' attitude and behaviors to achieving organizational objectives (Ali, 2007). It is the ability to see beyond assumed boundaries to come up with solutions or paths that few can visualize (Beekun and Badawi, 1999). The leader must then be a visionary leader to lead an organization into success (Khaliq, 2009). The *Qur'ān* is a continuing source of Guidance, and the Guidance it offers is in the context of what the reader is seeking. Learning from the *Qur'ān* is a dynamic process and that is why we keep reading it in all sorts of circumstances and need. In Islam, it is understood that everybody has some kind of leadership responsibility based on the statement of the Prophet (s.a.w.) who said, "Every one of you is a shepherd and every shepherd is responsible for what he is caretaker of," (*Saḥīḥ Muslim*).

Leadership in Islam is similar to conventional leadership except in its religious, moral, and human roots. Religious and moral spirit (fear and love of God) dominated leadership during the Prophet's (s.a.w.) and the Four Caliphs' reign. From an Islamic perspective, the Islamic roots of leadership generally exist in the primary sources of the *Qur'ān* and *Sunnah* in addition to the practices of the early Muslims. Complementarily, there is also a strand in conventional leadership thought that stresses the importance of spirituality, religious values, and human relationships. In essence, leadership is about offering oneself and one's spirit (Beekun and Badawi, 1999). It is believed that leadership fails when people have overemphasized bureaucratic, psychological, and technical-rational authority and have neglected professional, moral as well as spiritual authority. Rost (as cited in Beekun, 2006) viewed leadership as a dynamic relationship based on mutual influence and common purpose between leaders and followers in which both are moved to higher levels of motivation and moral development as they affect real intended change. In fact, Islam demands that leaders pay attention to

followers' needs. It is trusteeship of God, a responsibility given from Him and a service to mankind (Toor, 2007). The Prophet (s.a.w.) 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 being spared from poverty, Allah will keep Himself away from him, not fulfilling his need, want, and being spared from poverty," (*Sahīh Muslim*).

Concurrently, followers must provide leaders with sincere and impartial feedback. They should support and help their leaders towards doing good deeds. One of the earliest Muslims, 'Umar (r.a.) said: "May God have mercy upon anyone who points out my faults to me." The followers are also obliged to follow their leaders' directives as long as the leaders act according to commands of the Islamic revealed sources of knowledge. Leadership is a crucial concept because Muslims, known for their collectivism, are urged in most circumstances in life, to appoint someone as a leader. Management activities such as planning, organizing and controlling could be dormant cocoons until the leader triggers the power of motivation in people and guides them towards their goals (Khaliq, 2003). This is a philosophy reflected in Muslims, being God's vicegerent<sup>1</sup> on earth. The appointment of a leader then becomes imperative for Muslims in different walks of life and as God's vicegerents, they are gifted with the cognitive ability and qualities which, if properly deployed, could result in the achievement of the greatest objective (God's pleasure) both in mundane life and the Hereafter. Azzudin, as cited by Khaliq, (2009), referred to this achievement as *falāḥ* (striving for success). In Islam, leadership is a process of inspiring and coaching voluntary followers in an effort to achieve a clear and defined shared vision (Aabed, 2006). It is seen as human factors that bind a group together and motivates it toward desired goals (Beekun and Badawi, 1999). Hence, in Islam, a leader is not free to act as he or she chooses, nor must he submit to the wishes of any group, he or she must act only to implement God's commands on earth. In the *Qur'ān*, God says,

"And We made them leaders guiding men by Our command and We sent inspiration to do good deeds, to establish regular prayers, and to practice regular charity; and they constantly served Us only." (*Qur'ān*, 21:73)

It should be noted that Muslims believe that Islamic values are universal. In the Malaysian context, Muslims assume that non-Muslims would appreciate working with good Muslims as long as Islam is not forced upon them. Thus, leadership in Islam centres on trust (*amānah*). It represents a psychological and religious contract between leaders and their followers that they will try their best to guide, protect, and treat their followers justly (Khaliq, 2007). It revolves on doing good deeds for the sake of God, the Muslim community and humankind. Al-Buraey (as cited in Ali, 2007) stated that Islamic leadership assists the individual in attaining happiness in both worlds.

## 5. ISLAMIC LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES

Islamic leadership is one of the most popular research topics among scholars of management from an Islamic perspective. Muslims have always understood that a righteous leader will be able to positively influence a society whereas an evil ruler can destroy a society. The need to have Muslim leaders that reflect the belief system and ethical code of conduct of the teachings of Islam is obvious (Kazmi, 2007). Muslim scholars have therefore tried to better understand the leadership principles as practiced by the Prophet (s.a.w.) and the righteous successors. It is a concept whose principles are derivable from the doctrine of worshipping God Alone (*tawhīd*) as practiced by the Prophet (s.a.w.) (Khaliq, 2007). Hossain (2007) wrote that these principles are not “new” in the sense of being completely new, but they represent rather fresh application of certain basic assumptions that might not have been thought of as having an action element. This implies the reawakening of our thoughts and conscience towards the revealed sources of knowledge (*Qur’ān* and *Sunnah*). These principles promote the culture of God-consciousness and justice within the organization while guarding against tyranny and oppression (Khaliq, 2009).

The principles of Islamic leadership compiled by Muslim authors are numerous. For example, Kassem and Al-Buraey (as cited in Ismail, 2007) gave instances of leadership principles in Islam, they note that team building techniques could be seen in Friday sermons, congregational prayers and other religious activities. Khaliq (2007) highlighted some of the leadership qualities exemplified by the Prophet (s.a.w.). They include patience (*ṣabr*), eloquence (*faṣāḥah*),

enterprise (*iqdām*) and leniency (*līn*). Ismail (2007) noted two key principles practiced by the Prophet (s.a.w.) namely: (i) receiving the message (i.e., seeking guidance and knowledge in order to direct the affairs to the followers), and (ii) spreading the message (i.e., delegating tasks and ensuring that they are well accomplished). Abed (2006) identified ten personal qualities of a Muslim leader namely, conviction (*yaqīn*), mutual consultation (*shūrā*), knowledge (*‘ilm*), justice (*‘adl*), self-sacrifice (*taḍyah*), humility (*tawāḍdu‘*), eloquence (*faṣah*), patience (*ṣabr*), leniency (*līn*) and enterprise (*iqdām*). Lukman (1995) identified six general principles: sovereignty (*siyādah*), mutual consultation (*shūrā*), justice (*‘adālah*), equality (*musāwah*), freedom (*hurriyyah*) and enjoining the right and forbidding the evil (*‘amr bi al-ma‘rūf wa nahī munkar*). He regarded them as the modern terminology involved in setting up an Islamic organization. Ali (2009) concluded that there are two types of Islamic leadership model, the prophetic and the caliphate model.

Based on the Islamic leadership principles and the available literatures, the researchers developed and tested the following Islamic leadership principles through a questionnaire-based survey. The constructs tested include faith, knowledge and wisdom, courage and determination, mutual consultation, morality and piety, patience, express gratitude and endurance. They were considered as the principles through which the Prophet (s.a.w.) gained success and they have been recognized by scholars of Islam as the true principles to strive for success in this world (*falāh*). Leaders are enjoined to embrace these principles as their application will not only earn them the blessing of Allah but will also offer them an opportunity to fulfil their duties towards their followers and today’s society of organizations. The authors equally assessed three leadership approaches within the University academic administrators. They were; transformational, transactional and servant leadership approaches.

## 6. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions underlying this study are as follows:

- a. Which leadership approach is used by supervisors and managers at the IIUM?
- b. How do respondents perceive the principles of Islamic leadership at the IIUM?

## 7. METHODOLOGY

From the Islamic perspective, research methodology is the study of principles and guidelines that regulates the acquisition of knowledge and it involves the acceptance or rejection of proposition as part of the body of knowledge in a particular field (Faridi, 1991). Research design is the framework for controlling the collection of the required data accurately and economically. It is used for the purpose of obtaining data needed to test hypothesis or answer research questions (Sanders and Pinhey, 1983). The research questions underlying this study coupled with the purpose of the study both indicated that a descriptive research method was the most appropriate method for the present study. Emory (2003) explained that descriptive studies provide a useful guide when describing facts associated with certain population. Thus, the research tool of this study is simply a descriptive type. Descriptive analysis is the study of distribution of one variable (Emory, 2003). Descriptive method of classification and measurement is used because there are no independent variables to relate to dependent variables (Simon, 2003). Rather, the study includes variables whose relationship is not in question. A good descriptive analysis shows the important data in a form such that they will be clearly understood and their meaning grasped by the reader (Sanders and Pinhey, 1983).

The development of the research questionnaire was based on a review of literature encompassing principles, approaches, traits, roles, and practices of leadership in Islam (Aabed, 2006; Beekun 2006; Khaliq, 2007). Questions were asked on a five point Likert scale. Scaling is the term applied and used in the measurement of human responses to stimuli (Emory, 2003). Composite scales of five or more points do help in defining more accuracy, gradations of intensity and information on several dimensions of the stimulus or response (Simon, 2003). The population for the empirical study included a simple randomly selected sample of administrative staff from the University. The population sample selection is limited to the middle and first-line staff of the University.

Three hundred questionnaires were sent out to middle and first-line administrative staff in the University to gather quantitative data. The selected population represents approximately 25% of the entire University administrative staff. The researchers were able to get 277 questionnaires back out of which six were unusable due to



incomplete information. The researchers were left with 271 questionnaires representing 90% of the targeted population. About 68% of respondents were female aged between 26 and 30 years old. The rest were male with the majority being over 31 years old. The rationale for choosing this population was based on the vision and mission statement of the University. The University's mission is described as Integration, Islamization, Internationalization and Comprehensive Excellence (IIICE). Theoretically, the university employs Muslims imbued with Islamic principles and therefore represents an interesting study. As stated above, respondents were only middle and first-line administrative staff who were asked to assess their supervisor, team leader, coach, or other persons, to whom they are accountable, most of whom are either academics or administrators of IIUM.

## 8. DATA ANALYSIS

The data was analyzed so that the mean and the standard deviation could be obtained. Table 1 shows how the administrative staff perceived Islamic leadership principles.

TABLE 1  
Islamic Leadership Principles

Principles	Mean	Standard Deviation
Faith and belief in God	4.21	0.637
Mutual consultation	4.17	0.621
Knowledge and wisdom	4.11	0.598
Courage and determination	4.09	0.679
Endurance	4.02	0.771
Morality and piety	4.00	0.509
Express gratitude	3.91	0.632
Patience	3.88	0.718

Table 1 indicates that faith and mutual consultation are clearly the main issues as far as the staff is concerned. Comparatively, morality and piety and patience score quite low even though these principles are very important in the literature. The raw data for transformational leadership, transactional leadership and servant leadership are shown in Tables 2, 3 and 4.

TABLE 2  
Transformational Leadership Principles

Statements	Mean	Standard Deviation
Serves as a role model for me	4.12	0.650
Enhances his image of competence	4.06	0.669
Mobilizes collective sense of mission	4.03	0.721
Create awareness of shared vision	3.95	0.653
Loves being associated with	3.95	0.698
Articulates future opportunities	3.92	0.680
Can overcome obstacles	3.89	0.723
Talks optimistic about the future	3.83	0.715

TABLE 3  
Transactional Leadership Principles

Statements	Mean	Standard Deviation
Monitors errors needing corrections	3.82	0.675
Tells me what to do to get reward	3.68	0.755
Focused on irregularities and mistakes	3.65	0.681
Talk optimistic about special rewards	3.65	0.745
Keeps track of mistakes	3.59	0.718
Point out future reward for performance	3.58	0.725
Negotiate reward for performance	3.53	0.742
Alert of failure	3.39	0.730

TABLE 4  
Servant Leadership Principles

Statements	Mean	Standard Deviation
Guides towards outstanding behavior	4.23	0.682
Caring for subordinates	4.16	0.670
Trusting and listens to suggestions	4.08	0.623
Focuses on what is possible to achieve	4.01	0.591
Service before self interest	4.00	0.660
Allows constructive criticism	3.85	0.762
Mutual consultation	3.79	0.751
Cooperation towards tasks	3.75	0.689

TABLE 5  
Overall Findings

Rank	Statement	Mean	Source
1	Guides towards outstanding behavior	4.23	Servant leadership
2	Caring for subordinates	4.16	Servant leadership
3	Serves as a role model for me	4.12	Transformational leadership
4	Trust & listens to suggestions	4.08	Servant leadership
5	Enhance his image of competence	4.06	Transformational leadership
6	Mobilizes collective sense of mission	4.03	Transformational leadership
7	Focuses on what is possible to achieve	4.01	Servant leadership
8	Service before self interest	4.00	Servant leadership
9	Create awareness of shared vision	3.95	Transformational leadership
10	Loves being associated with	3.95	Transformational leadership

Table 5 looks at the top 10 statements that achieved the highest mean and their source. The fact that the top four include three statements (“guide towards outstanding behavior”, “caring for subordinates” and “trust and listens to suggestions”) that relate to servant leadership is very significant. This implies that, to a certain extent, servant leadership is thought to be practiced by the university’s supervisors and managers. The other implication is that transformational leadership, to a certain extent, complements servant leadership. This finding is in agreement with the conclusions of Beekun. The fact that no statement related to transactional leadership in the top 10 is obviously very significant. It implies that transactional leadership is not practiced in the university. It also suggests that, for cultural reasons, transactional leadership behavior is not acceptable when leading Muslim staff in Malaysia (this point will be discussed later). In fact, if one looks at the top score for the highest item that describes transactional leadership (a mean of 3.82 for “monitors errors needing corrections”), this score does not even match the lowest score for items describing transformational

leadership and it barely matches the two lowest items describing servant leadership.

Wanting to validate the data presented, we note that the idea that transactional leadership does not work in Malaysia “correlates” with Ng and Tan (2002),<sup>2</sup> who looked at transactional and transformational leadership in Malaysia, Hong Kong and Singapore. They found that respondents in Hong Kong and Singapore were almost equally inclined towards transactional leadership and transformational leadership. Malaysian respondents showed a clear preference for transformational leadership (average mean of 3.05) compared to transactional leadership (average mean of 2.60). Although no data was collected related to servant leadership, it implies that Malaysians tend towards transformational leadership.

## 9. DISCUSSION

The obvious question that this study raises is to what extent this case study can be generalized to other organizations and other countries? These authors would argue that in all Muslim countries, children are socialized to internalize the moral values found in the life of the Prophet (s.a.w.). On a regular basis, Muslim children are reminded that the Prophet (s.a.w.) would consult with others, help them transform themselves into better human beings and so forth. Compared to the lives of other prophets, the life of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) has been analyzed in a lot of detail. We believe that this shared knowledge probably suggests that transformational leadership is desired around the world and that transactional leadership is seen as a comparatively crude form of leadership in comparison. Clearly, there is little data yet to support this thesis but, hopefully, subsequent research would confirm or falsify this point. Like all studies, these authors end up with many answered questions. In particular, we discussed at some length the overlap between transformational theories and servant leadership theories. Are these the same thing? Provisionally, we believe that it is reasonable to see servant leadership as overlapping with transformational leadership but with certain components that are unique. For example, servant leadership implies that leaders also guide their subordinates in religious affairs<sup>3</sup> and remind them regularly of life after death.

## 10. CONCLUSION

This study has looked at how front-line administrative employees of the International Islamic University Malaysia rate their supervisors. On the whole, there is a very strong emphasis on servant leadership and transformational leadership. This indicates that servant leadership is not merely a theoretical construct. It is a construct that describes reality in at least one Muslim managed organization. Moving forward, it would be interesting if the same instrument could be used in other institutions in Malaysia and other Muslim countries to make further comparisons between samples. As this is an exploratory study, the authors recognize the limitations inherent in the study but we would argue that it serves as a useful start to empirically test theories and better understand how leadership in the Muslim world would likely differ from conventional leadership theories and their adherence.

## ENDNOTES

1. This refers to the concept of *khilāfah* which is difficult to translate into English. It is understood that God does not need vicegerents. The expression only suggests that a *khalīfah* is actively doing God's will on earth.
2. Readers may realize that validating data with only one other study is somewhat weak. Although there have been a few studies on leadership in Malaysia over the last twenty years but we only found one that compares the inclination of Malaysians towards transformational/transactional leadership. This is a great lacuna in the Malaysian management literature.
3. There is a lot of anecdotal evidence to support this claim although this has not been researched properly. When discussing their perception of what is ethical behavior in the workplace, Muslim MBA students generally say that they would be disappointed to work for a manager that does not pray. In many organizations, apart from 'personal' religious duties, there are collective religious events organized if the majority of employees are Muslims. There is no obligation on the non-Muslim staff while Muslim employees are free to attend (or not to attend).

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