



BARRIERS TO DEVELOPING ‘LEADERSHIP’ IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN

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Very little is understood about the applicability of the concept of leadership in the Arab Gulf States in general, and the Sultanate of Oman in particular. This article considers the unique context of Oman to produce an interpretation of leadership which stands outside mainstream leadership epistemologies. Thus, there is no explicit model or theory that could be usefully tested in the Omani context. As the article explains, the cultural and institutional dominance of political leadership in the Sultanate extends to organizational behavior. This very rich and embedded context thus provides a considerable challenge to Western based interpretations of and normative approaches to leadership. This article is intended to provide a basis for how leadership may be developed and adapted in the Arab Gulf region in particular and in diverse managerial environments in general.

Along with its Middle East neighbours, the amount of research on the topic of leadership in the Sultanate of Oman is scarce. Furthermore, “leadership studies in the Middle East are almost nonexistent due to the inherent difficulty of conducting organizational research there” (Dorfman & House, 2004, p. 64). It will also come as no surprise to anyone who is familiar with the Middle East in general that the context of Oman is such that it is difficult to conceptualize leadership as developed by theorists and practitioners in the United States, where the bulk of popular leadership theory is derived. However, as countries such as Oman are important in challenging universal conceptions of organizational behavior, the article begins by analyzing the organizational context in Oman. Crucial to understanding this context is the political development of the country; when compared to its immediate Gulf neighbours such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, Oman’s development over the last 40 years has been swift and remarkable. A discussion of societal culture follows an analysis of the political context, identifying facets unique to Oman (as opposed to generic Arab characteristics). In addition, the article outlines the key institutional factors that shape leadership in Oman. The point that is emphasised here is that in line with developing countries, the public sector remains the prime driver of the economy. It becomes clear from the article that the scope for the exercise of leadership is tightly constrained in Omani organizations. The context also presents considerable limitations for the application of

theorists, such as Fiedler (1967) for instance, who argued that leaders should and can shape their context. In fact, due to the richness of the organizational environment in Oman, any manifestation of leadership behaviour, as construed by Western theorists, is highly adapted to it. This is not to say Oman lacks leadership; rather, it is practiced beyond the modern organizational structures that have developed rapidly within the country and exhibits behaviours that appear to be inconsistent with contemporary interpretations. The following section describes and elaborates upon the unique institutional and cultural context of Oman.

The Context of the Sultanate of Oman

Oman is a relatively small country in terms of population. In fact, Oman's population of nearly 3.5 million is spread over the third largest land area on the Arabian peninsular (exceeded only by Saudi Arabia and Yemen) (CIA, 2009). Outwardly, Oman shares many of the cultural characteristics of its Arab neighbours, along with rapid economic development, particularly those in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Despite some superficial similarities, the important contextual factors that make Oman unique in the Middle East are as much a product of geography and history as of culture and economic change. To examine all possible factors that shape leadership in Oman would be beyond the scope of this article, but we turn first to the political context of Oman, which shapes the conception of leadership in the country.

Political Context of Oman

Oman's historical development is more closely associated with overseas trade when compared to its Arab neighbors, principally with East Africa. This was largely due to the geography of its interior, which isolated it from other countries on the Arab peninsular (Rippenburg, 1998, p. 3). Trade aside, relative isolation meant that Oman originally managed its own affairs, at least until the 19th century when the British started to exert their influence in the region. Divisions between the interior (Oman) and Muscat (the coastal region) also deepened in the early part of the 20th century. During this period, Oman (both the coast and the interior) was particularly insular. Although its geographical isolation ensured Oman's independence long before its Gulf neighbours were created, the interior of Oman (the Imamate) and Muscat (the Sultanate) on the coast were politically divided until 1955 when the Sultanate prevailed with the assistance of British forces (Cottrell, 1980). However, the unification of Oman was only completed when, following a coup against his father, the present ruler, Sultan Qaboos, came to power in 1970.

Halliday (2000) described Oman as a 'traditional sultanate' transformed into a state by British support. Although the British influence in Oman and the wider Gulf has been considerable, contrary to some opinion, the British made no direct contribution to government or administrative rule in Oman (Rippenburg 1998; Kechichian, 2000). Rather, Oman was subjected to the British 'informal empire' in the region, which effectively ended following Britain's withdrawal from Bahrain in 1971 (Smith, 2004). However, the year 1970 is seen as pivotal in the eyes of Omanis, as the accession of Sultan Qaboos marked the point at which the modernization of the country began.

The political situation of Oman is extremely important when interpreting and understanding organizational leadership. As the country is a monarchical regime, where "monarchs not only reign but rule" (Lucas, 2004, p. 104), the term leadership is directly

associated with the Sultan, rather than business or organizational leaders. Not surprisingly, Oman is also classified as a 'sultanistic' regime, with its governance traditionally marked by a form of exclusionary politics derived from clan-based systems. Along with its Gulf neighbours, the Sultan has no "popularly based legitimacy" (Sadiki, 2004; see also Kamrava, 2005; Brownlee, 2002). Instead, the governance of Oman relies on clan or tribal loyalties as a source of legitimation. Tradition also dictates that executive power is responsive to the monarch rather than legislative power (Lucas, 2004). Political leadership is almost exclusively concentrated in the Sultan and extends to all social and economic life.

An outcome of this political context is that when one discusses leadership in Oman, it is assumed reference is being made to the Sultan. The personal authority of the monarch is such that any delegation of power, such as to Ministers, may diminish the ruler's position (Ayubi, 1991). If we accept Oman as an authoritarian state, the Sultan has "an enormous degree of discretionary power" (Lucas, 2004, p. 104) over state and society. Personal rule by the monarch also overrides any wider formal policy inputs from society to the extent that power is centralised above ministerial level. In addition, the dominance of the royal family in Oman, as well as their Gulf neighbours, mean that they also monopolize the state and control the bureaucracy, primarily through the distribution of family members (Lucas, p. 108). Tribalism is also incorporated into the state, characterized by clientelistic relationships with the royal family. Within this type of authoritarian regime, there is little social or political pluralism and political parties are banned. The result is that Oman belongs to a group of relatively stable regimes in the Gulf within a wider Middle East marked by instability (Common, 2008). The authoritarian nature of the state, where ruling families populate government institutions and the bureaucracy, helps to shore up stability; Brownlee (2002) observed that by doing so leaders are able to mould institutions "to support their own aims, while further restricting popular political space" (p. 496). This statement holds true for Oman in addition to other GCC countries.

Arguably, authoritarianism in the states of the Gulf region has been supported by the wealth accrued from oil. In line with other countries in the Gulf Region that began oil production during the last century, political leadership in Oman was further consolidated by "the possibilities of oil revenue which allowed the centralization of state power" (Gause, 1994, as cited in Owtram, 2004, p. 198). To some extent, oil wealth has helped to immunize the Gulf States from international economic pressure. Yet, the need for economic diversification will become even more pressing for Oman with its oil reserves expected to diminish over the next two decades (Ministry of National Economy, 1999). Oil wealth also encouraged the rapid expansion of the public sector from the 1970s. It is government which remains the dominant focus of economic activity and an attractive employment for nationals (Ayubi, 1992; Sick, 1998). Oil revenue also provides or subsidizes the vast majority of public services and utilities (Gause, 2000, p. 172). The dominance of the state sector in the economy and the resulting high level of public sector employment for nationals constitute a form of social obligation and allow the distribution of wealth across society. In Oman, as in its Gulf neighbours, this further adds to the concentration of political power in the hands of the ruling families (Winckler, 2000).

The result of Oman's centralization of political power, inclined to authoritarianism and supported by oil rents, poses an immediate dilemma for the analysis of leadership in such a context. Oman's development placed extraordinary power in the hands of the Sultan to the extent that leadership is synonymous with the office. Any initiative relating to public policy, business enterprise, economic direction emanates, or is attributed to the leadership of the Sultan. Oman's political context also circumscribes the scope for leadership in the public domain beyond the

office of the Sultan. Yet, this is a limited view: cultural factors in Oman also suggest that the exercise of leadership is much wider and ingrained in tradition than the rapid centralization of political power through a phase of rapid economic modernization seems to suggest.

Religion and Culture

Other contextual factors in shaping organizational behaviour are as important in Oman as the political context. The relatively recent and artificial nature of the state in Oman means that it is difficult to describe a national culture when analyzing management and organizational behaviour. Furthermore, Al-Hajj (1996) argued that in the West, nationality determines identity and loyalty, whereas in the Muslim world it is defined by faith. Therefore, Oman is more conveniently classified as part of an Arab attitudinal cluster (Ronen & Shenkar, 1985), and consequently Oman's culture is subsumed in assumptions about regional culture. While writers following Hofstede (2001) tend to group the Middle East within Arab culture, there is sufficient cultural heterogeneity within its national boundaries to consider Oman differently from other Arab Gulf states. In addition, Omanis along with Saudis "tend to hold onto their deeply seated values throughout the transformation of their economy and lifestyles" (Al-Khatib et al., 2004, p. 311). Furthermore, Omanis themselves are more ethnically diverse with many originating from East Africa or Baluchistan (a region that now straddles Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan). Thus, it is also claimed that Oman's cultural diversity is much greater than that of its Arab neighbours given its historical expansion to East Africa and the Indian Ocean (Al-Lamky, 2007).

Islam is the official religion, although its society is diversified among different Islamic sects and ethnicities. Omanis practice two forms of Sunnism (Ibadhism in the interior; mainstream Sunnism on the coast). Unlike the other Gulf States, Ibadhism is the dominant sect and is a form of Islam distinct from other sects, which is only found elsewhere outside Oman in parts of North Africa (Risso, 1986). Rippenburg (1998) argued that Ibadhism has shaped Oman's context significantly and has provided further insulation from the influence of other Arab states. However, Ibhadhism declined in the 19th century following the accession to power of the Al Bu Said dynasty, which led to the division of the country in 1869 between Muscat and the Ibadhi Imamate in the interior based at Nizwa (Wilkinson, 1987). As noted earlier, this situation persisted until 1955. In addition, Shiites have representation in Oman (in addition to Ibadhis and Sunnis).¹ The Basic Law, Oman's constitution, promulgated in 1996, does not ascribe any ascendancy to any particular sect, while at the same time providing for Islam as the foundation of the state. Despite its influence over the governance of society in Oman, Ibadhis only comprise around 45% of the population, with Sunnis in the slight majority (Rippenburg, 1998, p. 61).

In some ways, the tenets of Ibadhism contradict the centralisation of politics in Oman around the Sultan. Al-Ghailani (2005) noted that Ibadhi leaders considered that power should not be in the hands of a single person and that tribal balance was considered more important. Ibadhis believe that leaders should be chosen by religious scholars and tribal leaders, and then presented to the public for acceptance. Al-Ghailani's argument is that although the merit principle is strongly established in Omani culture, it also served as an obstacle to the establishment of a modern state in Oman. However, the rapid modernisation of the country from 1970 onward appeared to require the kind of power vested in the leadership of Sultan. As Kechichian (1995)

¹ See Rippenburg (1998) for a fuller discussion.

noted, “the Ibadhi political-religious ideology proved to be an impractical basis for the permanent development of a state in Oman” (p. 25).

Leadership in Omani Culture

While 40 years of development have centralized political leadership in the country, Oman appears to have a culture that is potentially supportive of participative leadership. For instance, although the above discussion of Ibadhism in relation to leadership appears to be a narrow religious aspect of the cultural context of Oman, it is clear that the “people of consultation,” to which the Ibadis refer to themselves, does have consequences for conceptualizing leadership in modern Oman (Eickelman, 1987). Although a full discussion of the influence of Ibadhism in Oman is beyond the remit of this article, it is worth reiterating that Ibadhism supports the notion of leadership by merit rather than succession. The selection of leaders by priests and tribal representatives, rather than inheritance, remains influential when addressing organizational behaviour in Oman. Culturally, the persistence of tribal allegiances also continues to have an important influence. The use of social criteria for selection, recruitment, and promotion is still widespread in apparently modernizing institutions such as the civil service, which at the same time are attempting to operate good human resource management practice (Al-Ghailani, 2005). For instance, tribal members will personally petition public officials in an effort to obtain employment for family members; nepotism remains a common practice. In effect, two systems work in parallel: there are formal systems based on the merit principle, while it is clear that ascriptive or social criteria is still used when making judgements about selection, recruitment, and promotion.

If leadership is conceptualized as situational, (in other words, the environment in which it is exercised determines leadership), then the evidence so far appears to demonstrate that Oman, like other countries in the Gulf States, appears to offer an unpromising context for the development of contemporary interpretations of leadership. For instance, situational leadership models such as Hersey and Blanchard’s (1998) would suggest a high emphasis on participation in Oman, given the emphasis placed on social relations. However, such relationship behaviour is likely to be very different from that experienced in a British or American company. There is an exploration of this aspect of Arab management culture below in relation to the characteristics of “in groups.” Of course, the exercise of leadership depends on the interpretation of leadership on offer, but the implicit assumption here is that it is the heroic version of leadership, found in the mainstream management literature and which dominates thinking about leadership development, that is under discussion. Schieffer et al. (2008) emphasized the human-social dimensions of management in what they referred to as the “Arabic-Muslim” region, which they present as having the potential to complement Western concepts rather than simply adapt.

As Western commentators and practitioners have come to acknowledge how the concept of leadership is culture bound, an alternative way of conceptualising leadership is in terms of competing elites or social groups (House & Javidan, 2004). Therefore, to be able to analyze leadership in Oman, one needs to understand the nature of its elite. As we interpret narrowly Oman’s elite as the leading commercial families, even here Oman sharply differs from its Gulf neighbours in that its prominent families have benefited from other commercial deals rather than the oil market. In addition, the size of the royal family is relatively small when compared to others in the Gulf region (Quilliam, 2003). Thus, in the case of Oman, the centralization of leadership is such that the Sultan will act with the tacit approval of social and business elite.

Given the cultural context of Oman, it is possible to emphasize the features of Omani (rather than a generic Arabic) culture in relation to leadership. The extent to which cultural diversity in Oman is important in relation to leadership development in the face of universal Arab cultural values and Islam is debatable and inconclusive. Neal et al. (2005) argued that the similarities were more important than the differences for explaining attitudes to leadership in the Gulf countries. However, Schieffer et al. (2008, p. 340) explained that Oman's history as a trading nation along with the model of leadership, based on the high visibility of the Sultan's form of participative consultation and rooted in local tradition, has also contributed to the relative success of the country. Ibadhism partly accounts for Oman's distinctive character within the Arab Gulf, and despite the emphasis this sect of Islam places on communal consensus when ascribing leadership roles, this collectivist approach became increasingly subsumed by rapid economic modernization and development. Consequently, leadership remains synonymous with the Sultan.

What are the implications of culture for leadership and its development in Oman? As noted earlier, organizational culture in Oman tends to be subsumed within wider Arab management studies. Earlier, the concept of the in group was mentioned in relation to Arab cultural characteristics. The "in group" consists of the extended family and friends, further embedded by a shared place of origin, such as a village. According to Tayeb (2005), the importance of the "in group" is emphasised by reinforcing "consultation, obedience to seniors, loyalty, face-to-face interaction and networks of personal connections" (p. 76). An "out group" consists of any group outside this extended social group. The modification of leadership behaviour is dependent on the status of the group. Thus, managers tend to emphasize tasks over relationships with "out groups" (non kin and guest workers); but within the "in group," while relationships are more directive, they are also welfare-oriented or paternalistic (Mellahi & Wood, as cited in Al-Hamadi et al., 2007, p. 111). This dichotomization between in and out groups has enormous ramifications for the potential of leadership development in the country, particularly where the use of expatriate labor is prevalent.

Hence leadership in Oman will appear more traditional through the use of power or coercion by senior managers, supported by the high power distance of Hofstede's classification of cultural dimensions ascribed to Arab countries (Carl et al., 2004). However, this is a rather narrow interpretation of the effect of culture on leadership in Oman. In a rare study of leadership in Omani culture by Neal et al. (2005), (who also looked at Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates), it was found that Omani leadership values are based on a combination of charismatic, interactive, and rational legal authority. Charismatic and rational legal authority is based on Weber's ideal types (Weber, 1978). Interactive authority is a fourth category (in addition to traditional authority) added by Neal et al., "to capture those residual non-Weberian ideas about authority centered primarily on embedded contingent social interactive processes such as participation and consultation" (2005, p. 482). Neal et al. were unsurprised at the approval for charismatic authority in Oman. In relation to interactive authority, the study showed "that an effective leader in Oman considers the personal welfare of all employees" (p. 489), which suggests that Oman is closer to Western-style participative leadership than is often assumed. The value placed on rational legal authority also came as no surprise given the dominance of the bureaucracy in Omani society, although Neal et al. wrongly attributed this facet to British administration, which was never direct in Oman (see above). This aspect also supports the cultural dimension of high power distance as a contextual influence (Quigley et al., 2005). Neal

et al. expected traditional authority to be given a higher value in Oman. While they found that religiosity was important in Oman, the emphasis was only moderate.

The cultural context in Oman appears to make it difficult to conceptualize leadership within organizations. For instance, in Western theory, great emphasis is placed on leadership and team management in relation to transformational leadership (e.g., Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe, 2004). However, a British consultant in Oman made the observation that “people do not work in teams” (Plummer, 2005, p. 69). This was due to rigid hierarchical structures; thus, employees showing leadership “were targets for disapproval” (p.70). It is possible that this is a slightly dated perspective given the attention to leadership and team working in Oman’s corporate sector, within a wider approach to competency development. For example, Omantel, Oman’s national telecommunications provider, is a leading public enterprise that addressed the development of leadership competencies. This was the result in 2004 of market restructuring and the introduction of competition into the market. However, it remains a bureaucratic organization where traditional approaches to compensation are still practiced (Tremmel, 2007). The idea that teams and leaders can operate across horizontal layers of management is also difficult in a context where there is more reliance on superiors rather than on subordinates (Smith et al., 2006).

Although leadership in Oman is not readily associated with organizational status, but determined by tribal or group affiliation rather than individual merits (Kazan, 1993, p. 190), it would also be wrong to suggest that this is prevalent. In addition to assumptions of authoritarian styles of leadership, leadership in Oman is also a function of intuitive decision-making, which clashes with the rational assumptions of Western management. There is an aversion to professional management and organization reinforced by group loyalties (Tayeb, 2005) and face-to-face interaction is valued above written documentation and consultation. In their study of HRM in Oman, Al-Hamadi et al. (2007, p. 102) concluded, “the tribe and the family are second top authorities after Islam in formulating the culture of the country and organizations to a great extent.” Omani culture thus produces a combination of extremes: authoritarian leadership styles within hierarchical settings and with “out groups,” and democratic group consensus making with the in-groups of tribe and family.

The Public Sector and Leadership in Oman

Oman’s relative isolation until very recently has also had a lasting influence on the organizational culture of the country. Despite rapid modernization, Oman is part of a wider group of Gulf States where the public sector has driven economic development. Thus, the public bureaucracy may prove resistant to the types of change demanded by human resource theorists. For instance, despite the conscious adoption of Western management techniques in general, Jabbra and Jabbra (2005) argued that this has been unsuccessful in the Gulf region because of the “pervasive and powerful traditional administration culture.” This is supported by the centralized nature of the state, which assumes that the top leadership has full knowledge of governance and “therefore knows the problems and the changes required to solve them.” Authority to reform and make changes is vested in them, plus having the financial capacity to fund and implement the necessary changes (Farazmand, 2006).

Another key constraint on organizational leadership in the Gulf is extensive government regulations. Within a renter state, such as Oman, the regulatory environment may be a limiting factor on business leadership and entrepreneurial behavior (Yusuf, 2002). In addition, in line

with other countries in the region, Oman is attempting to diversify and privatize much of its economy, which presents both challenges and opportunities for leadership. Fundamental to developing its human resources is the long-term development plan, “Vision 2020.” Apparently modelled after similar plans in Malaysia (also a source of policy inspiration to other Arab Gulf states), human resource development in Oman is very much public sector led. Moreover, in line with other Arab Gulf states, public sector employment for nationals is preferable to private sector employment. An indigenization policy, known as “Omanization,” is aimed at eradicating this through human resource development; although Oman does not have a significant private sector, its economy is dominated either by public sector organizations or state owned enterprises (Budhwar et al., 2002, p. 200).

Given the pervasive influence of the public sector on Oman’s economy accompanied by rapid expansion, the result is a formal system of public administration that operates side-by-side with traditional forms of governance. The traditional system continues with the Sultan, whose leadership influences the corporate sector. More specifically, within the wider sheikhdom (or tribal leaders), leadership depends on loyalty and support. This is conditional on the accessibility of the leader, particularly through the *majlis* or council, which provides a forum for people to air their opinions. This remains an important part of the political life of Oman. Traditional channels of participation have allowed stability and continuity during a period of rapid economic growth.

However, if we consider public sector perspectives on leadership, such as the politics/administration dichotomy and bureaucratic leadership, these are also difficult to apply in the Omani context. The dichotomy between politics and administration firmly vests power with political leadership, and this view has a long tradition in European administrative thought (Rugge, 2007). In Oman, it can be argued that the Sultan stands on one side of the dichotomy and the rest of the government on the other! Political power in Oman is heavily concentrated in one person, more so compared to other Gulf States such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia (Common, 2008). However, early administrative theory also maintains that leadership was concerned with organizational efficiency and effectiveness, although management in the Middle East does not lend itself readily to the assumptions of classical management. Such classical notions of public leadership, developed within the context of Western democratic administration, are also difficult to apply.

More recent models of public leadership follow the work of Terry (1995) and Denhardt (1993). Terry’s leadership role is to protect the integrity of the organization, and the leader is guided by constitutional principles. The role requires professionalism, political skills, and an understanding of participating in governance. Denhardt discussed how leaders meet the needs of users, ensure quality, and reduce waste and inefficiency. The emphasis is on public service and employee empowerment. Of course, both perspectives were developed in the context of American-style democratic administration and are unlikely to be adapted in the Omani context. The bureaucratic nature of Oman’s public sector is such that it is difficult to equate leadership with organizational position, although this was done in a rare study of women and leadership in Oman (Al-Lamky, 2007). Hence, leadership is likely to be directive and authoritarian and to accept hierarchy and structure. For instance, Budhwar et al. (2002, p. 209) found that the main method of communication for Omani managers was through their immediate superior. Employees expect managers to lead and are uncomfortable if discretion or decision-making is devolved to them. Yet, more traditional forms of leadership, beyond the formal structures of government, continue to rely on participation.

Given that leadership in Oman is essentially public service driven, how can leadership be developed? According to Halligan (2007, p. 68), the significance of leadership development “depends on state traditions, institutional structures and the extent of reform.” Furthermore, citing an OECD (2001) report, Halligan also noted leadership development is more important in a diversified society, a decentralized government, where public administration is less traditional, and where comprehensive reform has succeeded incremental change. Given these parameters, it is unlikely that leadership development is on the agenda of the Omani government. However, human resource development (HRD) has been identified as a main component of economic development in Oman for over ten years, yet the reality is that Oman’s traditional (or highly centralized) bureaucracy identifies members of the country’s elite for development despite the outwardly rational process in terms of selection. In short, the scope for leadership in Oman’s public sector remains constrained unless it is exposed to the kind of managerialist reforms that reorganize the public sector, expose it to the market, and emphasise the delivery of outcomes. Of course, the introduction and acceptability of managerialism in general is questionable within the administrative culture and context of Oman.

Challenges and Prospects for Leadership Development in Oman

The concept of leadership in an organizational sense is relatively new in Oman. The lack of a developed market sector, in addition to the dominance of the private sector by expatriates, inhibits young Omanis from developing leadership skills in a business and administrative context. Politics, culture, and institutional factors continue to inhibit the scope for leadership. This may change in the near future for a number of reasons, including pressure for economic diversification, which includes encouraging a market-led economy, and cultural changes to reduce the reliance on public sector employment. Politically, the succession of the present Sultan is still unresolved, which may force a constitutional review or even political instability in years to come.

Oman’s clientelistic business culture, which also allows civil servants to undertake private business within certain legal parameters, hinders the scope for organizational leadership. The result is that the relationship between government and contractors is extremely close and comfortable for both parties (Skeet, 1992). Accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2000 is likely to have challenged tradition in this sense and will expose Oman to standards supportive of trade and investment more in line with the West. In the case of Omantel mentioned earlier, the change in its business environment four years ago was to meet WTO requirements regarding deregulation, moving leadership onto its corporate agenda to meet the change agenda.

Leadership is in fashion and in turn reflects management thinking, so the question for Oman is: what sort of leadership is appropriate to its unique context? Given the challenges that the country will face in the near future, it is clear that meeting economic goals determined by the political leadership will be one way of directing leadership development. However, abandoning the larger formal systems of government, an extension of the very socio-cultural barriers to leadership, is unlikely in the near future in Oman (and in most other neighbouring countries). Adoption of US or European development packages will lack the cultural sensitivity to make any difference, although it is clear that Arab executives are keen to learn from expatriate managers. Given that leadership is the result of human activity and not dependent on applied techniques, harnessing and making explicit the cultural attributes of leaders in Omani society is an alternative to adoption of Western techniques. For instance, Omani organizational culture is

more participative and consultative than it first appears, taking it closer to Western theorization; whereas, at the same time, social connections are valued over loyalty to the firm, which conflicts with Western assumptions that leadership will improve organizational performance.

At present, it is not surprising that the overall drive to develop its human resources in Oman does not explicitly address leadership. However, attempts to diversify its economy given dwindling oil reserves, to reduce the social reliance on public sector employment, and to stimulate a genuine private economy will increase the demand for leadership skills within Omani organizations. Within high-power distance cultures, such as Oman, there is high uncertainty avoidance, which means security is more likely to motivate than the potential for the type of self-actualization implicit in Western derived leadership theory. This will continue to reinforce the preference for public sector employment. Limited evidence is emerging that Omani organizations (both public and private) are taking HRD seriously (Budhwar et al., 2002), which will encourage organizational leadership and development. Yet, the gradualist and cautious mode of reform favoured by Oman is unlikely to predicate the type of continuous and transformational change typified by the dynamic, market-driven environments of the West that produce organizational leaders.

Conclusion

It is clear that considerable barriers remain to leadership development in countries such as Oman. Although leading international leadership studies such as the GLOBE study (House et al., 2004) do not include Oman in their range of societies, other findings from the Arab Middle East in the study are largely consistent with the findings of this article. Dorfman and House (2004, p. 63) referred to the heroic status accorded to leadership in Arab countries and support the importance of other traditional influences discussed in this article. The sum total of these influences on the leadership style is characterized as “sheikocracy,” which is consistent with hierarchical authority, an emphasis on interpersonal relations, and low observance of formal rules and regulations (Dorfman & House, pp. 62-63). Thus, the conceptualization of leadership in countries such as Oman appears to reveal some awkward contradictions.

As far as leadership development from a Western cultural perspective is concerned, the main barriers in Oman appear to be that tribal and familial interdependence remains deeply rooted and this extends into organizations, both public and private. The classical management preoccupation with efficiency remains compromised by traditional attitudes that place kin and tribal allegiances above all else. Initiative, organizational transformation, and teamwork are stifled by the richness and the enduring nature of these attitudes. Strong political centralization in the office of the Sultan acts as a further check on the development of leadership attributes. The centralization of personal power in the monarch reinforces elite dominance in both corporations and the public sector. Leadership development continues to be checked by high power distance, leading to a lack of genuine team management and intuitive decision-making.

Despite the rapid economic transformation of Oman since the discovery of oil, cultural change has occurred much more slowly. Such change will require time; as Foster (1983) argued, a “reconciliation period” is necessary before real change occurs. As a developing country, Oman is in a state of transition between material and non-material change. The following is a quote from the Omani government, which emphasizes the continued importance of cultural values in the face of demands for modernization:

For the leader of any developing nation there is always the problem of combining progress with conservatism. His Majesty maintains a delicate balance between preserving the traditions and culture of his country and introducing the modernisation needed to keep pace with the changes taking place in the rest of the world. (Ministry of Information, 2000, p. 15)

Given the determination to hold on to traditional values in the face of rapid modernization, a synthesis of traditional conceptions of leadership rooted in Omani culture can be encouraged. This will defy Western management consultant strategies, but traditional approaches to leadership based on a contemporaneous interpretation of the merit principle may be more suited to Omani organizations. At the same time, the persistence of social criteria (based on tribe, etc.) and authoritarian leadership styles related to out groups has continued to act as a brake on genuine leadership development. Although leadership will still differ from the prescriptions of Western commentators, the emphasis on what Schieffer et al. (2008) termed the “human-social dimensions” of management may have some complementarity with participatory styles of leadership. While such adaption may look feasible, in high power distance cultures such as Oman, the expectation that managers “lead from the front” may continue to frustrate leadership development.

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