Constructing work identity through accommodation, assimilation or rejection? Emerging leadership narratives of Senior Emiratis working alongside Western Expatriates

Dr Liz Wiggins and Manal Al Ahdad, Ashridge Business School, UK   June 2014

In a conference that physically and conceptually juxtaposes the rural and the industrial, and calls for an exploration of leadership as purpose, idealism and calling, this paper brings in another juxtaposition – that of the Western traditions of leadership with those emerging in one Middle Eastern country. Initial findings from the narratives of Senior Emirati leaders suggests that many are driven by beliefs about building and benefitting the nation which offers a different perspective from the dominant Western leadership orthodoxy. The authors speculate on the potential sources of such beliefs. The research also revealed an attraction towards, and in many cases, adoption of, leadership practices that these Emirati leaders associated with Western practice, namely explaining decisions, engaging others and planning. The research also reveals some intriguing nuances and Emirati explanations around aspects of Emirati leadership practice that can frustrate Westerners, namely timekeeping and deference to seniority.

Academic interest in cultural differences has a long tradition (Hofstede, 2005; Trompenaars and Woollimas, 2003) and the literature on leadership is extensive (Myers, Hulks and Wiggins, 2012). However, much of the latter is written from a Western perspective on Western practice. As other regions become economically dominant, there is an emerging discourse into how leadership is practiced where the social, religious, political and economic context is different. Concepts such as paternalistic leadership, reviewed by Pellegrini and Scandura (2010), have been offered to describe styles which combine 'strong discipline and authority with fatherly benevolence' (ibid.), prevalent in the Middle East, Pacific Asian and Latin America.

The Executive Council of the United Arab Emirates, like other States in the region, has identified localisation as a key strategic imperative to ensure the ongoing success of the UAE. The intent is to develop the leadership capability and capacity of native Emiratis so that nationals are able to take on key leadership roles in all major organisations, roles which are currently held largely by Western expatriates. Embryonic research focussed specifically on Emiratisation tends to be from a macroeconomic perspective (Jones, 2013) or to focus specifically on the attitudes of graduates or youth (Forstenlechner and Madi, 2008). A few autobiographical works such as Al Fahim (1995) seek to capture the extraordinary transformation from dessert poverty to a country with one of the world's highest per capita income in 40 years.

This qualitative research explores how senior Emirati leaders working in a large quasi governmental organisation are constructing their understanding of leadership. The research grew out of various leadership development interventions undertaken by the authors. We were intrigued to understand how Emirati leaders make sense of their role? What do they seek to emulate from Western expatriates that currently still hold many of the top jobs? What areas of Western leadership practice do they reject? How do they seek to integrate more traditional and religious practices and beliefs?

We would agree with Scott -Jackson (2012) who states that 'Gulf management style has not been properly defined. Without a clear understanding of it, there is a risk that this style will become

dissipated and a source of unique competitive advantage lost (p4)'. However, rather than seeking to define Gulf leadership, this research adopts a social constructivist perspective (Weick, 1995) and views leadership identity as an ongoing process of self-narrative. Social constructivism also encourages researchers to gather stories, a method which feels congruent with the oral tradition in the region. From thematic analysis of their stories, this paper explores how Emirati leaders take up their role and make sense of the many influences upon their identity, building on the traditions of Bedouin society whilst also exposed to ideas, structures and role models of Westerner leadership practice.

References

Al Fahim, M.A.J. (1995) From Rags to Riches: The Story of Abu Dhabi. Makazem Books

Forstenlechner, I. Madi, M.T. and Selim, H.M. (2008) Factors Influencing National Graduates ' Employability in transitional Gulf Economies. Emirates Foundation Grant 034

Hofstede, G. and Hofstede, G. J. (2005) Cultures and organisations: Software of the Mind. 2nd edition. McGraw Hill. USA

Myers, P., Hulks, S. and Wiggins, L. (2012) Organizational Change: Perspectives on Theory and Practice. Oxford University Press

Pellegrini, E. K. and Sandura, T.A. () Paternalistic Leadership: A Review and agenda for future research.

Randeree, K. (2009) Strategy, policy and practice in the Nationalisation of Human Capital; Project Emiritasation in Research and Practice In Human Resource Management 17 (1) 71 -91

Trompenaars, F. and Woollimas, P. (2003) Business Across Cultures. Capstone. Chichester.

Scott-Jackson, W. (2012) The Gulf Arab Management Style as a source of strategic advantage: Building Global Strategic Capabilities On the Foundations of Local Culture. Academy of Management

Weick, K. (1995) Sensemaking in organisations. Sage