



# HOW THE OMANI PUBLIC SECTOR DEVELOPS LEADERS

**By:**

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**Chapter Three Part 3 Literature Review**

**Dubai's experience in leading change**

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## **Chapter 3 : Literature Review**

### **Part 3: Dubai's experience in leading change**

#### **1.1. Dubai**

##### **1.1.1. Leadership concept and role**

Dubai has some similarities with Singapore, but is based on a completely different cultural, political and religious context. Both countries are small and have few natural resources, but are extremely successful economic zones. Dubai's dependency on oil is limited and contributes just a small percentage to the overall revenue. There may be a supposition that Dubai is following Singapore's example (Day, 2004) firstly they are both logistic centers for their region, and secondly, both are knowledge based economies, for example, both are strong financial centers.

Researchers refer the origins of the Singaporean experience back to the founder of new Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, whereas in Dubai's case, modern Dubai is referred back to Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. Therefore, the picture would not be complete without understanding the philosophy of Sheikh Mohammed, the ruler of Dubai. Research and academic publications on leadership development in the Dubai context are limited so a good starting point are publications by Sheikh Mohamed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. Sheikh Mohammed has published two books that describe his development journey. However analysing the history of Dubai Sheikh Mohammed is executing his father Sheikh Rashid's vision which not many research admitted directly. Mohammed In the 2012 book "My Vision - Challenges in the race for Excellence" (Maktoum, 2012) it is interesting to note a politician in his position diagnosing the Arab crisis as the concept and the practice of leadership or the lack thereof. This is an important factor in this thesis. Empowerment creates a positive environment for leadership development, which needs to emphasize seriously the Omani private and public sectors.

Revising the concept of government, realizing it is the era of e-government (using information and communication technologies to facilitate government transactions) and recently the smart government (using mobile technologies) (Management, Institute for Development Policy and, 2015), has led to many changes, including in leadership development and selection criteria for more young leaders. In one of the chapters Maktoum (2012) defines what leadership is, which is different to what we might find in leadership books, because it is a result of real experience and the first in a Gulf country. The concept of leadership to Gulf rulers is related to the ruler himself and no mention is usually made of any others being involved.

Sheikh Mohammed believes in challenging potential leaders and grooming them for this task. Delegation is a concept that he believes in with follow up and subsequent evaluation. He believes it is unfair to generalise when suggesting that the Arab culture does not value teamwork – history speaks for itself. Positivity is a great leadership skill, and it appears that Sheikh Mohammed has made tremendous change by believing in the power of positivity. Nothing can be achieved if you are not positive. “Minding the minds, looking for the potholes and rewarding achievers.” is a theme of Sheikh Mohammed’s leadership style. There is a team of “secret shoppers”, agents with a very interesting brief. Sheikh Mohammed sends his “secret shoppers” to tell him the good and bad happenings in the public sector. When he gets a phone call from an agent he visits either to reward or punish so that everyone is under the impression that they are being constantly watched. There is no research paper yet published on analysing the impact of these “secret shoppers” on the development and progress of potential leaders. This is not a compliment his leadership style, but for the purpose of clarifying the overall atmosphere in Dubai public sector.

The book by Sheik Mohammed discusses his view of how leadership should be practised in a way that suits the Arab culture. By leading by example, the roles of leadership in the public sector are changing, which not the usual case in the Arab culture. He has described the resistance to change in the public sector. Given the resistance to change in the Omani public service, the similarities between Oman and Dubai in culture and religion and the way of thinking, makes his experience worth learning from. There is emphasis in Dubai placed on the importance of developing youth, of empowering them and more importantly of them having the right mind-set.

Building Dubai to become the most enlightened city in the Arab world was a dream of Sheik Mohammed that was not free of criticism. An article by Worth and Timmons (2009) mentioned that Sheik Mohammed is relying on an army of low-wage foreign construction workers living in miserable conditions. This criticism has been levelled at many other Gulf countries too, and yet Dubai has exceeded them. He is also criticised for favouring the ruling family with shares in Dubai companies (Hari, 2009).

It is also important to note, that there are few research papers criticizing Sheik Mohammed's leadership style. Most of the criticism was in articles published in non-Arab countries. Arab countries generally reflect a low level of press freedom (Duffy, 2014). While there are number of research articles criticizing Lee Kuan Yew, perhaps it is easier to criticise a leader who is no longer in power.

### **1.1.2. Leading change in Dubai public sector**

The Dubai Government Excellence Program, a revolutionary idea introduced in 1997, makes Dubai the first government worldwide to use the Modified European Foundation for Quality Management according to Ahrens (2013)). This programme realised that there cannot be excellence in public sector without leadership skills development, and an environment was created to develop leaders and turn the public sector into an efficient, revenue generating entity. The Dubai Government Excellence Program is very good example of leading change and therefore leadership skills are essential.

An important objective for this programme is to create a learning culture. The argument of Ahrens (2013) research article is very important. When such a programme is introduced the political and social value contexts need to be understood and this is where leadership skills enter. It is necessary to know and understand the needs of the government employees where rewards and incentives are concerned. This dissertation concludes that despite the complexity of the ruling family of Dubai, this re-evaluation programme has had some successes in developing leaders. Studying and implementing similar successful programmes in Oman and the rest of the Gulf countries could assist as they share similar values. However there did not appear to be much emphasis in the Ahrens paper on the role of leadership as a vehicle to make this happen except that it mentioned training, awarding and coaching (Ahrens, 2013).

### **1.1.3. Knowledge sharing culture**

In contrast, a study conducted on the Dubai Police Force, demonstrated the importance of leadership in promoting knowledge culture and encouraging knowledge sharing (Seba, et al., 2012). It also emphasised the importance of building trust among employees to share knowledge, as a lack of emotional intelligence is a significant barrier to knowledge sharing. It is possible that the danger of not having a knowledge sharing culture has not been acknowledged in the Omani public sector. Not sharing knowledge can affect badly the decision making process which is controlled by leaders. The paper by Seba, Rowley and Delbridge (2012) gives an important perspective on connecting the working culture and the roles of leadership, and the effect of organisational structure as a barrier to not having a knowledge culture. The more vertical the structure the less communication because it is hierarchical. Although Seba, Rowley and Delbridge (2012) focus was on a police system which is a military rather than a civilian organisation, it raises many important points. One key point is that understanding the barriers which are against changing the culture is the most difficult part of leadership. It takes into consideration that the Arab culture puts a lot of emphasis on social relationships and it gives insight on how to change it to a knowledge creating culture. Whether military or civilian, experience as indicated in Seba, Rowley and Delbridge (2012) has provided realistic diagnoses and solid recommendations.

### **1.1.4. Dubai success factors**

Political willingness is critical in the public sector to ensure improvement. Best practice is essential, in addition to dedication from the leaders. There are a number of leadership guidelines in Sheikh Mohammed's second book (Maktoum, 2014) where he writes about his experiences leading Dubai, which are worth analysing. Dubai always wants to be 'ahead of the game,' and Sheikh Mohammed's vision for the future is to have a government that provides services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

There is little academic research available about the Dubai experience other than Hvidt's article on "The Dubai Model: An outline of key components of the development process in Dubai" (Hvidt, 2009). Key parameters have been identified from his article such as:

- Government confirmation of the importance of government led development of leadership roles within the government;
- Quick decision making due to a centralised government and not least because it is all in the hands of Sheikh Mohammed and
- Development in co-operation with international partners.

Dubai has taken shortcuts by importing the necessary human capital thus avoiding the time taken by Singapore using indigenous human capital (Hvidt, 2009). There is no indication of development through industrialization; however there is an important lesson in Dubai's unique development and that is a knowledge based economy is based on the number of educated people and creating a base for global competitive business co-operation.

Hvidt (2009) also clearly identifies the leadership role in building teams, putting trust in them and delegating authority to them. Sheikh Mohammed has a small executive team which means that it takes very little time for decisions to be made in any situation including commitment to spending on business expansion. Such decision making mechanism is needed in Oman's public sector to avoid missing business opportunities. Hvidt (2009) analyses the Dubai experience from the perspective of economic prosperity as the benchmark for human development and global competitiveness. Singapore and Dubai have been shown to be sustainable so far, criticism notwithstanding. The Dubai experience cannot be copied directly into the Omani public sector, however there are sections that can be implemented and amended accordingly to fit the Omani scenario.

## 1.2. Conclusions

1. There are many valuable lessons to learn from the Singapore and Dubai experiences. Critical thinking is essential to analysis these experience in order to adopt what is suitable for Omani public sector. Benchmarking was a useful tool to identify gaps in the Omani public sectors.
2. When studying a country experience in particular field such as leadership development in the public sector, the topic can't be covered without considering the complete picture and the political and social context.
3. In both countries leadership was the game changer. Lee Kuan's dictatorship father ship leadership style demonstrates a unique way of leading. Sheik Mohammed has also revolutionised Dubai and the service concept of the public sector by his leadership.
4. Research papers discussed the absence of an HR strategy in Oman, which requires a new fresh vision for the human development of the public service. However, none of the papers has diagnosed the root or the cause of such critical finding.
5. Adopting a leadership program is a partial solution that might be successful in preparing
6. good leaders for the public sector.
7. Excellence programs and competition are mechanisms for radical change within the public sector.
8. Centralizing or basing every strategic move in Singapore around and for human development is a deep lesson.
9. Society's complicity is not an excuse for not appointing competent people in leading positions within the Omani public sector. Some research has tried to understand the leadership development barriers arising from social issues. However Dubai has the same social context of a "tribal system" and has been successful.

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