



HOW THE OMANI PUBLIC SECTOR DEVELOPS LEADERS

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Chapter Three Part One

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CHAPTER THREE

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. Introduction

This dissertation proposes the importance of developing leaders in the public sector as a crucial requisite of a strong government. Quite simply, no economic or social growth can be achieved without having a reliable and accountable public sector. The role of government is strategic, incorporating such things as policy making, regulatory and above all strategic planning for the country. In order to perform such roles, a government must build a pool of talent. In reviewing the literature associated with developing leadership in the public sector, this literature review explores the topic from three country perspectives: Oman, Singapore, and Dubai.

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight relevant prior research about leadership in the public sector in these three countries. As part of this an in-depth study of the Singaporean experience in developing public sector leaders, with the purpose of being able to benchmark the Omani public sector development, has been undertaken in order to identify gaps and to be in a position to identify suitable recommendations.

The unique Omani situation required accurate assessment to identify gaps in the process of developing Omani public sector leaders. This is not a copy of the Singaporean experience but more an analysis of the lessons learned. Excellent lessons have been learned (Andrews & Cunningham, 2015) at conferences held by the Supreme Council for Planning. In adaptation there is no copy/paste solution; each country has its own challenges and unique circumstances, therefore the ideal is to learn from other countries' experiences and utilise appropriate examples.

Dubai is an outstanding example of an economic success story in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). There is much debate, both regionally and internationally, as to whether Dubai is a sustainable developmental experience. The debate usually increases after each global financial crisis, the last one being in 2008. Some other country senior public sector leaders within the Gulf Countries Council (GCC) have questioned rather than benefited from the lessons from the success of Dubai. The media constantly refers to Dubai as a 'boom or bust' economy, doubting its sustainability; examples being a BBC article (Lobel, 2015), and comments by the Guardian Newspaper on a debate led by Tim Sebastian, the founder of the Hard Talk programme on the

BBC (Kaye, 2012), “Can Dubai ever be sustainable?” Nevertheless, Dubai was a safe haven for many Arabs who suffered during the Arab Spring in 2011. It may be political unwillingness on the part of some senior Arab public sector leaders that has led to the Dubai success story being subjected to denial, and why the benefits not accepted and learnt from.

1.2. Searching mechanism

There were varieties of resources about the Singaporean experience, including Singaporean or international sources. To search on leadership development in the Singaporean and Omani public sector, similar wording was used in web searches such as:

- Public sector leadership in Oman.
- Leadership development in public sector.
- Pool of talent in the government.
- Leadership training program.
- Human capital development.
- Governance in Oman and Singapore.
- Learning lessons from Singapore.

For literature research for the Dubai experience, there was not much research published on their leadership development program, and this required further searches. The key phrases that were used were:

- What did Dubai learn from Singapore: (no results).
- Similarities between Singapore and Dubai experience.
- Criticism of Lee Kuan Yew.
- Criticism of Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid.

In searching, the University of Glasgow online library was the first choice (Services, University of Glasgow Library, 2015), Emerald Publications were a very useful second choice (Emerald Publishing, 2015), and the third tool was the Google search engine. A subscription to the research think tank “Foreign Affairs” was also useful (Magazine, Foreign Affairs, 2015). Social media such as twitter were also useful searching tools, as many articles and research papers have being

posted or discussed, such as World Economic Forum articles about leadership (Shahid, 2014), and the coverage of Lee Kuan's death (Jazeera, 2015; CNN, 2015).

1.3. Oman

In order to acquire insight into leadership development challenges in the Omani public sector, in-depth research was required to achieve an accurate assessment of where the root of the problem lies. Based on my professional experience as a member of the public sector for 15 years the concept of leadership in the Omani public sector has not developed to reflect the technological revolution and globalization. There appears to be no clear understanding of the relationship between leadership styles and organisational structures. Organisational structure and design can be a major obstacle for human development and in developing leaders. It can be said that the Omani governmental structure is too centralised, therefore it has a major effect on the decision tacking process, organisational culture and communication (Jones, 2009). All of these have a direct and indirect impact on leadership development, as a rigid structure gives little opportunities for climbing the leadership ladder (Benko & Anderson, 2011).

Since there is a scarceness of research in leadership development in Omani government circles and in leadership in general (Common, 2011), other perspectives can be considered as alternatives to help understand the situation. A major part of leadership development is developing soft skills, i.e. "attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people" (Dictionary, 2015). Examples of soft skills include empathy, communication, teamwork, good manners, ability to teach, self-confidence, self-control, conflict management (University, 2011).

1.4. Human development in general and training needs

The root of the problem is the education system in Oman and whether the education system is designed to build soft skills into the curriculum or if it is biased towards hard skills (technical skills). A research paper by the Dean of Gulf College in Oman (Abduwani, 2012) admits that there is a distinct lack of soft skills in the banking and oil and gas sectors. If this is the case in the private sector it may not be any better in the public sector. Though the purpose of this paper by Abduwani is to evaluate the strategy of higher education in achieving the long term objectives of soft skill development in Oman, graduates of higher education end up in both private and public sectors. Abduwani's (2012) main finding is that there is an absence of a clear, comprehensive

educational philosophy in the education sector regarding the importance of soft skills, and the education system has failed to introduce them.

Rajasekar and Akhan (2013) offer further analysis of the human development situation in the Omani public sector in general and the absence of emphasis on the leadership concept in particular. A relevant finding of the Rajasekar and Akhan paper is that there is a need for an integrated Human Resource Development Strategy for government departments. Rajasekar and Akhan (2013) analysed in depth the training needs of the Omani public sector and found there is an absence of a long-term training strategy in the public sector. This lack of vision may well have resulted in the development of leaders not being considered a priority. In 2015, most Omani ministries under the civil services banner call their Human Resources departments “Employees Affairs Departments”, which reflects a limited understanding of the need for Human Resource strategies that include development of leaders.

Leadership development in Omani public sector, should cover all positions on the leadership ladders. The middle level managerial level is very critical as they provide advice to the higher up and some of them are the future first level leaders. Research on the measurement of managerial effectiveness was done on Muscat Municipality (Ahmed, 2010). This research found that these senior managers know what skills should be improved, and has identified number of blockages to their development, yet it missed the root causes, such as the lack of human resources strategy in the Omani public sector. The research by Ahmed did not identify whether this lack was due to lack of awareness, absence of political willingness, or the wrong choice of public sector leaders who were not effective themselves, so they did not pay attention to effectiveness. It is worth investigating, and analysing or mistakes keep repeating themselves. A recommendation to have a public sector HR strategy will not lead to the changes being applied, if the same reasons remain why it did not exist in the first place.

Oman’s international ranking by the World Economic Forum at number 46 out of 144 countries, is indicative of Oman’s competitiveness on an international scale. However this has fallen 13 points since last year (Forum, 2014), the fall being mainly due to weaker higher education and training outcomes.

Gulf countries in general need to bridge the skills gaps for their citizens. A study done by Ernst and Young, showed that students are not very confident about the quality of training to enable

them in the work field (Young, 2015) . In Oman 68% of the students believe in the quality of the training (Young, 2015), but 0% believe in the leadership qualities of Omani nationals. This is a harsh statement about the leadership qualities within the Omani nationals. Ernst and Young's study showed that companies in the GCC have relied on foreigners, who are afraid to lose their jobs, heading the private sector. The leadership quality of Omanis should be measured by third parties in order to have a fair assessment. The conclusion to be drawn from the Ernst and Young study is that Oman hasn't paid enough attention to proper human resource development.

1.5. Concepts of leadership in Oman and the influence of culture

Common (2011), suggests that in the Omani context, the word “leadership” is generally associated with His Majesty Sultan Qaboos and not with business or corporations. This is felt more in the military and public sectors than in the private sector where the mixture of other cultures gives another perspective. However this may be an incorrect conclusion to make as it means that some officials in the public sector are managing only and not leading. Also it seems that there is no differentiation between leadership and management.

Having a merit system is the basis for human resource development in any system (Drucker, 1994). If there are not equal opportunities and appreciation of skills then this may lead to a waste of time and resources. From this perspective (Common, 2011) it can be argued that due to the ingrained tribal system in Oman it is difficult to have a merit-based system. It is understood that in the first 20 years of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos' reign, in order to ensure loyalty of the tribes, most senior positions were given to the Sheikh (head of the tribe) of the tribe (Rajasekar, et al., 2013). In a meritocratic system however in the consideration of performance management skills those nominated for leadership positions should be from within the tribes and based on merit rather automatically being given to the Sheikh.

This selection policy for senior positions has resulted in the lack of government sustainable development as indicated by the World Economic Forum report figures (2014). The absence of clear selection criteria has created the dilemma of the wrong person being in the wrong position of leadership (Chanda & Shen, 2009). It would be foolish to deny the effect of the tribal system in Oman, however with time it can change.

Common notes that “the exercise of leadership depends on the interpretation of leadership” (Common, 2011). To all intents and purposes Common has diagnosed the situation in the Omani public sector. Although there is a civil service law which in theory is the formal system on which to base merit, it works in parallel with the tribal system, thus the family background will dictate the chances of promotion or even recruitment. Common is observing Omani culture from a Western perspective and appears to be searching for an accurate description of the Oman leadership style (Common, 2011). As he notes, western styles and thinking cannot be copied and pasted into the Omani system without adaptation. Any western development package would lack cultural sensitivity and in order to overcome this and other barriers, there should be decentralization and with a less traditional form of government (Common, 2011). This is only achievable through governmental reform (Common, 2011). Rajasekar, Abri and Tabrouk (2013) are in agreement that the working environment in Oman is very rigid and bureaucratic and little leadership development can be found in such an environment.

Human resource development cannot be mentioned without including Omanisation. Omanisation is simply a mechanism for ensuring the employment of Omanis in the private sector, thus building a pool of talent. Measurement of Omanisation is Omanis employed as a % of total employees. Since the launch of Omanisation in 1996 the percentage of Omanisation achieved in the country was 14% in 2013, according to official statistics (Information, 2014). 198,000 Omanis are registered with the Public Authority for Social Insurance and of these 118,000 are receiving salaries of less than 300 Omani Rials per month which indicates that Omanisation has occurred predominantly been in lower level jobs, such as drivers and cashiers. This suggests that public sector leadership has failed to provide a pool of senior talent that could be utilised in the public sector or the private sectors. Swales; Al Said and Al Fahdi (2011) have shown in their study of the details of the Omanisation statistics that Omanisation is a purely numeric target without a human development strategy and with no consideration being given to training quality or to building management or leadership skills. While not directly related to developing leaders for the Omani public sector, failure in Omanisation is however failing to build a pool of talent and it is also an indication of failing in the understanding the concept of human development.

The literature on Oman shows it as an example of a country where leadership development is not prioritised in the public sector. It is useful to examine other relevant examples and contrast them

with the Oman situation. The Singapore experience shows the benefits of a focus on human resources development.

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