

Characteristics of Authentic Islamic School Leaders

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When we think of anything authentic to Islam, we naturally think of the Prophet Muhammed, ﷺ the truest of humanity. He naturally modeled leadership qualities that are commonly found in research on best practices in leadership. In a study by two leadership researchers, Kouzes and Posner, results from surveying 2,615 of the most successful leaders in the U.S., the top four characteristics that followers looked for leaders to have were honesty, competency, forward-looking, and inspiring (Beekun, Badawi, 1999). It is no surprise that he ﷺ was called *Sadiq* (truthful) and *Amin* (trustworthy) even by his enemies. He is the beloved of Allah and chosen as the most competent being to bring light to the world. He helped his companions, ﷺ envision the success of Islam to come, and prepare us for the Last Day. He inspired hearts to love and follow his way without ever meeting him, ﷺ. He truly was authentic in all his ways.

These qualities are essential in authentic school leaders, as they lead the trueness to the school's mission and vision. School leaders understand their responsibility is a sacred trust, one that impacts each child, staff member, family, community, and society. If they don't value the work with this sense of responsibility, they cannot be authentic to the profession or as the school's organizational leader. One's mindset, limitations, and worldview will impact their effectiveness, and as such, we cannot focus on leadership techniques unless we have an inside-outside approach.

Effective school leaders have a sense of who they are, and understand their own identity. Stephen Covey, author of the 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, says you can only win the public victories when you've paid the price of the private ones (Covey, 2004). A public victory, the ability to work effectively with others interdependently, cannot be achieved unless a person develops within themselves, and from there, true leadership develops. In his research covering 150 years of successful leaders, he found a pattern that all successful leaders shared: leading through character ethics. He notes that from around the 1930's, businesses moved away from character ethics to personality ethics, where people focused more on how to create the right *image* or how to appear to be, as opposed to how to *actually* be. If the roots are not based on character and principles, they won't have the power to create enduring effectiveness (Covey, 2004).

School leaders are courageous in knowing and accepting their limitations, professionally and spiritually. They ensure that those limitations do not negatively impact those they are responsible for by seeking spiritual and professional guidance and other resources to fulfill their school's needs.

This comes with much reflection and seeking guidance, such as reflecting on the du'a, "Oh Allah, just as You have made my physical form beautiful, make my character beautiful as well" (An-Nasai). This beautification of character only comes from working within ourselves. A proactive approach leads to such self-improvement. When we behave proactively, we are more responsible for what we say and do. Our behavior is a function of our decisions, not our conditions. We choose how we respond to situations and are responsible for those decisions. Proactive people understand that their behavior is a product of a conscious, value-based choice or response. Reactive people however, blame circumstances, genetics, and conditions. They see their behavior is a product of their conditions based on feelings and build their lives around other's emotions.

Instead of reacting to or worrying about conditions over which they have little or no control, proactive people focus their time and energy on things they can control. They work on the things they can do something about. Reactive people focus their efforts things over which they have little or no control. Gaining an awareness of the areas in which we expend our energies in is a giant step in becoming proactive.

Covey states there is "space" between a stimulus and response called the *freedom to choose*, where we use our self-awareness, imagination, conscience, and independent will to respond proactively (2004). If we are not used to being proactive or have powerful negative experiences, that space is small, or reactionary. However, that space grows if we take responsibility of our actions over time.

The ability to respond proactively leads to stronger trust between school leaders and their staff, as it provides a sense of emotional safety, reliability, and overall competency. To further reinforce the most essential aspect of authenticity, trust, leaders must have the ability to make and keep commitments and promises. The commitments they make to themselves and others, and their integrity to those commitments, is a clear manifestation of proactivity.

Test your proactivity by reflecting on the following:

- Is my language proactive? Do I use terms such as I can, I will, I prefer, etc. or do I use more reactive language, such as: I can't, I have to, if only, I don't have any choices?
- How well do I make and keep commitments?
- How do I handle home or work-related conflicts?
- How do I respond to an irate parent?
- How do I react to an upset teacher?

Suggestions to work on proactivity and essential qualities of authentic leaders:

- Be a lifelong student of the seerah and sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ. Take classes where scholars expand on his life and try to apply even the most intricate of knowledge to your life. You will find not only the best, or most authentic way, but blessings in both your personal and professional life.
- Spend time daily to reflect on your behavior that day. Try doing it every day or night around the same time and ask yourself if your responses to situations were proactive or reactive.
- Keep the company of those who have these traits. Learn from them by observation moreover direct instruction.
- Develop the habit in The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People.

Individuals need to make a conscious effort to visualize who they are and where they are headed in life, otherwise, they empower other people and circumstances to shape their lives by default. Once individuals can be authentic, or true to themselves, they can move into being true to their profession. They reflect on their strengths, admit their limitations, continuously seek to develop themselves as a lifelong learner, and truly understand the importance of good character and work ethic in their profession.

Many pioneering Islamic School leaders helped their communities start schools and ran them with the intent for it to be temporary, until the school was in a better situation. They made many sacrifices and their noble efforts may have been just what the school needed in its initial stages but at some point in time, they had to decide whether their involvement was situational or something they were going to commit to and adopt as their profession. Oftentimes great situational leaders emerge when there is a need, but lasting, sustainable leadership requires a commitment to develop competency and skills in their respective areas. One cannot be true to a profession if they choose with the intent of it being temporary.

Once they have committed to the profession, they develop a direction of where we are going in our professional career, choose professional development opportunities that further our skills, and make decisions in our personal lives to that end. If an organizational leader displays professionalism, they will be successful in gaining trust as they are competent to carry out what they are entrusted with, and do so with integrity. The authenticity is observed in the profession as what they say and do are aligned to their professional behaviors.

School leaders are responsible to aligning the school's mission to projects, initiatives, day to day decision-making, and work to develop other leaders within the organization. The more effective leaders are in these capacities, the greater the outcome for the leader, school, and student. What they prioritize tells their organizational community who they are, what is important, and whether practices and decisions are truly aligned to the missions and beliefs. If done well, even with minor work-related setbacks, the staff

will maintain the vision's momentum as they've learned to trust the leader as he/she has shown reliability and consistency in what they say and do to reflect the organization's mission. When what leaders say and do differ, it sends mixed messages that lead to ambiguity. A minor setback may lead to loss of momentum as the direction is no longer clear. Clarity is needed for the staff to see where they are headed under the leader's direction.

The ability to articulate a vision is critical to move an organization forward. Having a vision is one aspect, but this alone will not move people unless it is articulated to all stakeholders, and done so consistently and clearly. When there is a perceived articulation of the vision, leaders assume that stakeholders understand the vision, but realize later that stakeholders are confused as the initiative is moving along. Evidence of successfully articulating the vision is when the stakeholders are able to articulate the vision clearly to others and act accordingly. Sending out a memo or email to a list serve may be a practice to spread the word, but for it to reach all critical parties in a way they understand needs to be done through multiple modes of communication that reflects the people and how "they hear." Having face-to-face meetings allows people to ask questions and get a better sense of how serious and committed the leader is in this endeavor. Leaders seek a response and input from others at this time as outcomes of these ideas can transmit a sense of enthusiasm and urgency for others.

Leaders are approached with multitudes of ideas and in order to be effective, they must sift through them to identify what is aligned to the goal. Leaders stay on track and understand that though there will be bumps in the road and offshoots may be of benefit, they are able to discern tasks and events that truly lead towards the goal and are courageous to redirect their teams when their work is off track. Otherwise, leaders find themselves achieving victories that are empty. Once the team has made a wrong turn, every step taken gets them to the wrong place faster. They make a conscious effort to visualize the goal, beginning each project with a clear vision of the desired direction and destination.

They are courageous as they welcome constructive criticism, seek out to understand the pulse of the school, and develop a "safe" working environment, where the staff can freely express their ideas and opinions without fear of reprimand. Many examples are evident if one learns and reflects on the safe and expressive society of Medina during Prophetic times.

People need to feel valued and leaders do this beyond the appreciation luncheon, and an *Eid* gift. Being valued and empowered as a professional leads people to move naturally in an organization, as they fulfill their role beyond expectations and seek to be better at what they do. This is seen when the effective leader invests in their staff, assist them in setting individual professional goals, and support them in that process. Leaders help others to envision what they cannot yet see within themselves. They look for those

who have the potential to lead others and are not swayed by the hard-working employee that insists on working in isolation. Organizations may have brilliant people, but they may not have the skillset to work well on teams as they prefer to make decisions on their own. They are either groomed into someone who can work well on teams, or replaced with someone who can. Working in silos and dictating commands not only adds obstacles for staff buy-in, but it also stifles the capacity of building leadership among others. Strong organizations have strong teams, and effective leaders know they cannot lead every team. They seek out team players and train them in areas as needed. This investment will assist the leader to delegate their staff in carrying out the school's mission. They match the skill needed to the qualified staff, and trust them with greater responsibilities and leadership. Islam models this through the carrying of our tradition of fourteen centuries by the devoted, sincere, knowledgeable companions, *tabi-een*, and those after them. They were equipped with the love of the mission, and the knowledge and skills to pass it on. Authentic leaders value this tradition, and as such, an authentic, natural working environment emerges, and the leader not only has been sincere in fulfilling their sacred trust, but through this process has developed a found fulfillment in their personal and professional lives.

Works Cited

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