

Leading teams: tactics inspired by the Middle East

Randall Peterson's ongoing research into leading across cultures reveals leadership and teamwork lessons from the Arab world
By Randall S Peterson 15 May 2017



If you're an entrepreneur setting up in, say, Saudi Arabia, you won't get far without meeting people face-to-face and a little 'wasta'. It's important to invest time in building relationships. In Kuwait, family matters: business is preferably done with known and trusted people. Leaders are accessible, with a widely-adopted open-door approach in the Arab business world. If you're visiting someone based in Bahrain and they are unexpectedly called away to consult on a pressing matter, be prepared to wait.

In the UAE, 80% of the population are expatriates with large groups of Europeans, Asian Muslims, as well as people from around the Arab region. "The nature of the diverse and multicultural society there means that many western business leaders can run their organisations without fully understanding local customs and values," says Randall S Peterson, Professor of Organisational Behaviour and Academic Director of the Leadership Institute at London Business School. "But it doesn't mean they shouldn't try.

"Arab Middle Eastern culture is rooted in trust. People are generally guided by tenets of the Quran: they respect their culture, uphold their traditions and value relationships."

What's more, he says the Arab Middle East leadership style can teach people worldwide lessons in teamwork.

Leaders shaped by culture

Culture and teamwork are inextricably linked. Dutch psychologist Geert Hofstede summarised culture – the way we do things – as software of the mind. "Software" refers to a web of instructions that allow users to perform tasks, while "mind" is the part that makes people think, feel and experience.

An African banker working in London differs from an Asian entrepreneur operating in Berlin and a German engineer leading a team in Hong Kong. Identities are shaped by factors including family, friends, nationalities, careers and location.

Professor Peterson says Hofstede's research shows that the Arab Middle East is high in "power distance", where power between leaders and their team members is often distributed unequally, meaning once a leader has taken a decision the members are expected to implement faithfully. Leaders in high-power distance cultures have more power than their

low-power distance counterparts, such as the US and UK where team members expect to help set the agenda and have direct influence on the final decision. In countries such as these, where freedom of speech is embedded in society, people offer their opinions freely, often making it difficult for leaders to coordinate.

The Arab Middle East and China are both high-power distance cultures. Does that mean that two separate regions 5,724 km apart promote the same kind of leadership and teamwork? “It’s too simplistic to think that Arab and Chinese leaders operate in the same way,” says Professor Peterson. For instance, Chinese team members are unlikely to challenge their leaders. An opinion that makes you stand out in China’s collectivist culture may not work in your favour the way it does in the Arab Middle East. “Leading across cultures is more nuanced than that,” he says. And the full picture still requires some colouring in.

Ongoing research by Professor Peterson into this cultural diversity challenge, including hundreds of interviews with business leaders around the globe, is gradually revealing a tapestry of leadership and teamwork traits. Some emerging themes from discussions with leaders in the Arab Middle East already offer lessons in teamwork – with each finding informing the next.

Build trust on a foundation of excellence

Trust is a universal imperative for good working relationships no matter where you work, so not unique to teams in the Arab Middle East. However, honour is also important, with a corresponding desire to avoid public shame. One leader in Qatar interviewed as part of Professor Peterson’s research reported: “Our religion and society tells us to complete our job in the best possible way.” Another reported that Islam promoted “sincerity and excellence”, which encouraged his team to produce high-quality work.

Everyone has a purpose

“A team is like a bee hive. Everyone in the hive knows their role, when to leave and enter, when to place the honey, when to protect the nest, and when to advise the leader,” another manager shared. One interviewee likened their team to a body: “If one part aches because of an ailment, the rest of the body feels the pain. If it weakens from one side, it is strengthened by the other.” This metaphor rings true throughout team dynamics in the Arab Middle East. Trust and clear goals embolden team members to challenge and advise their superiors at appropriate times. Many leaders reject the traditional notion that workers must “blindly” follow them. Because of their rituals and values, leaders are expected to consult with their teams.

Open-door culture

Arab leaders can generally be called on at any time and they often establish open and transparent relationships with employees by introducing open-door policies. But that doesn’t mean holding a team up to the light and expecting to see straight through them: conflict is inevitable. It’s human nature to disagree. If employees suppress their true opinions it “kills the work” declared one leader. Another reported encouraging healthy debate, saying: “My door is always open. I don’t see any harm in differences of opinion. Rather, good can come from it, especially if the one disagreeing has expertise in a particular field.”

Balance consulting with decision-making

It's a religious and moral obligation for leaders in the Arab Middle East to consult their people before exercising power. "Consultation is in our Islamic heritage," another leader reminds us. "Even the Prophet Muhammad consulted his companions, taking on their opinions." Though management structures are typically more hierarchical in the Arab Middle East than in western European firms, decisions taken without consultation are viewed as illegitimate.

With that being the case, how are decisions ever made? It seems like a complicated dance. "It's more of an intricate ballet," says Professor Peterson. After consultation with the team, leaders assert their power, making decisions grounded in merit. It's not uncommon to hear managers say, 'I reject an employee's loyalty to me. Loyalty should be to the work alone' or, 'My work is for the sake of the organisation'. Choices are made irrespective of personal opinions; they are made for the good of the organisation. It seems managers in the Arab Middle East make choices based on excellence, so after taking on subordinate's perspectives, their decision stands.

"But of course, when you throw different cultures into the mix, [the advice for leaders and their teams is different again](#)," says Professor Peterson. "That's the cultural diversity challenge."