



# **An Emirati leadership style for the new world economy**



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Leadership development is rapidly becoming a key objective across the GCC, and countries are increasingly interested to learn how to best nurture the next generation of leaders. **Robert Mogielnicki** and **Rida Kariem**, of Oxford Strategic Consulting (OSC), talk with UAE leaders about the Emirati leadership style, which is related to the wider Gulf leadership style.

**R**ecent research by Oxford Strategic Consulting, to be published later this year, suggests there is a distinctive Emirati leadership style, with clear advantages in the new world economy. This style is consistent with national identity and culture and so provides the basis for a huge number of young Emiratis to quickly become effective leaders – a key requirement for the UAE's future growth. This unique research will provide a platform to help aspiring and young Emirati leaders leverage their natural leadership strengths to take up key roles across the UAE.



Sultan Al-Hajji

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*Vice-president & chief strategy officer, Total E&P United Arab Emirates (Abu Dhabi branch)*

Sultan Al-Hajji frames the Emirati leadership style in the context of the UAE's geography, history and culture, with the evolution of its increasing significance on the world platform being one of the most important factors in shaping it.

Many Emirati leaders are described as “Bedouins at heart”, the products of both the desert environment and Bedouin culture. “They possess distinct attributes – humility and gratitude, being ‘service leaders’ of people tolerantly accommodating diverse views. Their communication starts with listening. The visionary characteristics make them passionately look beyond the present and think of a broad spectrum perspective with deep impact,” says Al-Hajji.

## Sheikh Zayed's pragmatic approach

Al-Hajji looks towards His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan as both a role model and pragmatic leader because he believed that “the impossible is not a choice”.

He describes his role model as the epitome of a visionary leader – one who has an uncompromising conviction against all odds and challenges. “Sheikh Zayed ensured the realisation of vast green areas in Abu Dhabi contrary to what the consultants had initially opined,” explains Al-Hajji.

He believes Sheikh Zayed's profound elatedness is evident in his assertion: “We are blessed with the next generation of UAE leadership who possess the virtues of the father of the nation, possess a long-term vision and demonstrate passion for the development and welfare of people.”

## Emirati leaders: rare but precious

Al-Hajji shares this passion for his fellow Emiratis, describing leaders as jewels – both valuable and rare. He adds: “Emiratis act as bridges between the East and the West, and there is a huge demand for Emirati leaders.” As for developing people, capacity building is the top priority for him.

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It was his social innovation concept that led Total to establish in 2008 an academy for high-school undergraduate Emiratis, to make them employable in field operations of the oil and gas industry. Today, most Emirati academy graduates from the four graduating classes are employed at offshore oil and gas facilities in Abu Dhabi.

An accomplished Emirati leader in his own right, Al-Hajji believes that “there is a clear need to export leadership”. This led him to create the Alreyada programme for young leaders from across the Middle East. The programme trains promising university students to address energy and leadership challenges of the future.

The importance of mentors in developing leaders should not be underestimated, Al-Hajji being a clear role model for his Alreyada students. “My hope is these students go on to become the region’s future leaders,” adds a proud Emirati leader.

### Nabil Ali Alyousuf

*Chairman, Nabil Alyousuf & Associates, former director-general of The Executive Office of Dubai*

Nabil Ali Alyousuf led the development of the Dubai Strategy 2015 in his director-general role, so is well positioned to speak about leadership in the UAE.

### Friendship and information reign

Ali Alyousuf explains that Emirati leaders want to be seen as being close to their employees, adding: “There is an element of friendship and informality that is inherent in the Emirati leadership style.”

One emerging theme in this new research suggests Emirati leaders reflect the historical practice of tribal sheikhs in that they behave as firsts among equals. While Ali Alyousuf thinks that the tribal element does play a role in shaping the leadership style, he also believes that Emirati leaders often act like family heads when leading others. “The Emirati leadership style is not collective but consultative,” he explains. The ultimate authority rests with the leader, but Emirati leaders ensure they consult with others in a way that does not make them feel inferior.

“The consultative aspect to the Emirati leadership relates to the majlis spirit of interaction,” he adds, making a clear link between UAE culture and the consequent leadership style.

While consultation is generally good practice for leaders, with clear advantages in employee engagement, it can have disadvantages in a fast-growth context. “Sometimes, decision-making can be somewhat slower because of the consultative nature of the Emirati leadership style,” explains Ali Alyousuf.



Nabil Ali Alyousuf

OSC aims to produce a guide that combines the most engaging aspects of the Gulf leadership style with proven elements of more task-focused Western styles.

### Empowerment is key

Ali Alyousuf considers His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Ruler of Dubai, to be an exemplary role model precisely because of his prowess at the art of consultation.

“He is an expert listener – someone who respects and trusts those willing to make positive contributions,” Ali Alyousuf adds. “Most importantly, though, Sheikh Mohammed empowers people to do what they believe is right.”

Trust and empowerment are vital ingredients in an environment where taking risks is often necessary for success. “Risk taking is related to our merchant history. A merchant may make five decisions knowing one of them may turn out to be a mistake. Thanks to our history, Emirati leaders today understand that making mistakes is part of learning how to succeed.”

### Ahmed Mohamed Salem Al Dhaheeri Vice-chairman, Bin Salem Holding

Ahmed Mohamed Salem Al Dhaheeri has seen many styles of leadership, first in the public and then the private sector, where he started the family business. He says the rapid progress and development across the UAE is down to sound Emirati leadership. “The great formation and transformation of the UAE in a very short period of time shows the effectiveness of Emirati leadership – and the great degree to which it is appreciated by Emiratis,” he says.



Ahmed Mohamed Salem Al Dhaheri

Al Dhaheri says the welcoming spirit of Emiratis is a trait that has helped shape many of today's Emirati leaders. "The Emirati leadership style is about dedication and accepting those who are willing to contribute to the development of this country."

### Keep role models in mind

"Role models can teach leadership to people around them," he explains. Al Dhaheri believes one of his role models, the late Sheikh Zayed, taught excellent leadership qualities to all Emiratis. His leadership style was not only passed down to his successor, Sheikh Khalifa, but also to other UAE leaders and Emiratis.

"Sheikh Zayed was a tireless worker, loved his people and was willing to sacrifice to build a nation," says Al Dhaheri, whose late father worked in the private department of Sheikh Zayed. He believes this exemplary leadership style was reflected in his father, and he intends to instil these sound leadership capabilities in his children.

As for Al Dhaheri's leadership style, he says: "The best way to lead is by encouraging co-operation and trusting your team." To lead in this way, a leader must understand the strengths and weaknesses of his or her employees so he or she can be confident of their capabilities, and trust that they can get the job done.

Al Dhaheri fosters this level of trust through constant communication with his employees. "You see, I never close my door, and anyone can access my office. At the same time I respect and encourage the chain of command within my senior managers and their staff."

He notes the great contributions of expats in the impressive

**"I never close my door, and anyone can access my office. At the same time I respect and encourage the chain of command within my senior managers and their staff"**

development of the UAE, but believes Emirati talent is key to the future. "With the greatest respect to my expat friends and colleagues, my business and my country will ultimately survive on Emiratis and Emirati leadership."

### Mohammad Zamani

*Assistant manager, financial services audit and banking, KPMG*

The first Emirati student to graduate from the ICAEW Emiratisation Scholarship Scheme (IESS), and now in a management role at KPMG in London, Mohammad Zamani sees himself primarily as a risk taker. The young leader left the UAE for London, but sees the relocation as an opportunity.

### Turning challenges into opportunities

"Leadership about stepping out of your comfort zone and setting an example – turning challenge into opportunity," he adds.

Speaking about the advantages of the Emirati leadership style, Zamani says of Emirati leaders' passion: "We Emiratis feel like one big family – and you do anything for your family." He adds: "Many expats come to the UAE on temporary assignments, but Emiratis are permanent fixtures in the country. This allows Emirati leaders to act like heads of family by helping their followers, community and country."

He says a disadvantage of some Emirati leaders is a lack of technical skills. However, Zamani adds: "I have witnessed a major change in this as currently there are more Emiratis interested in pursuing postgraduate degrees and a competitive



Mohammad Zamani

**“Leadership is about stepping out of your comfort zone and setting an example – turning challenge into opportunity”**

### Share success with your people

Speaking of his role model, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Zamani says: “I admire him because he is a risk taker with a long-term vision. Great leaders won’t last unless they share their success with their people. Dubai has witnessed massive developments under his leadership.”

A key theme that emerged while speaking with Zamani was the importance of motivation in the development of Emirati leaders. “Future leaders must be constantly motivated and encouraged to take risks so they can continue to develop,” he explains.

A young leader not afraid to take risks, Zamani also has a long-term vision. “The private sector promises more learning opportunities than the public sector. You may have to go the extra mile and do extraordinary things, but that is what it takes to succeed as a leader.” ●●

career in the private sector to further develop their technical skills.”

Therefore, he believes that, although most Emiratis have the foundation of leadership, their technical skills could be further polished to be able to take on senior roles in key organisations and become all-rounder leaders.

“Despite having many great Western leaders, especially in the private sector, who have been in the UAE for years, a lot of them still haven’t acquired the cultural, social and linguistic know-how particular to the UAE or the wider GCC environment.”

### Take part in leadership research

**OSC needs your valuable input on this cutting-edge research project. To get involved and for your chance to win an iPad Air, please contact:**

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Sultan is responsible for leading Total E&P UAE’s strategic operations.



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Nabil heads up this UAE-based strategic advisory firm, providing services to a select group of governments.



#### Ahmed Mohamed Salem Al Dhaheeri

vice-chairman, Bin Salem Holding

Ahmed has overseen the expansion of the family business into a well-reputed holding company.



#### Mohammad Zamani

assistant manager financial services audit and banking, KPMG

Mohammad was the first Emirati student to graduate from the ICAEW Emiratisation Scholarship Scheme (IESS).

# Contact us

## Who we are

Oxford Strategic Consulting is an Oxford and GCC based Consultancy with an enviable track record in helping to build human capital across the GCC and in Europe. OSC carries out advanced research and high –impact consultancy, working with major private and government organizations to help them achieve their key strategic objectives.

## What we do

Oxford Strategic Consulting believes that better HR delivers better business results, creates more productive employees, and addresses strategic national priorities. We're passionate about helping our clients integrate HR delivery with business strategy, developing the next-generation of leaders and building national talent. We combine expert researchers with seasoned HR professionals from Fortune500 firms and family businesses, blending international best practice with local market knowledge. We help from strategy design through to building the key strategic capabilities through maximizing HR effectiveness, highly successful executive search and training and development (especially of leaders and nationals).

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