Paternalistic University Leadership in the UAE – Its Impact on Management Behaviour

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Abstract

The Middle East is an area which in recent years has been characterised by political turbulence and conflict, with potential implications for every stratum of society. Faced with instability, higher education is increasingly coming under the spotlight, as countries in the region wish to encourage stability and prosperity through economic and social development. University leadership in the region, and in the UAE in particular, is paternalistic in nature. What are the implications for organizational development?Is a paternalistic style of leadership the most suitable one for universities in the region, given the fast-paced changes that are occurring in education? This research study aims to investigate how this has an impact on the behaviour of managers, by examining their experiences to see how their performance has been affected as result of a paternalistic leadership style. A qualitative approach is employed in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of their professional experiences. Finally, some recommendations are proposed to see how the competency of managers might be improved.

Keywords: Paternalism, UAE, University, Case Study, Management.

1. Introduction

Effective management and leadership in schools and universities is becoming increasingly significant to researchers (Bush, 2011; Earley, 2013), in large part due to issues such as standardization and accreditation. In the Middle East, where universities are paying increasing attention to the processes of accreditation and data reporting to ministerial bodies, though accountability is more prevalent than hitherto, the style of leadership, paternalism, has not changed.

This paper explores the impact of paternalistic university leadership on the corresponding behaviour of management, through means of a case study of a private university in the UAE. Examining leadership in this way is important for two reasons: firstly, it offers a better understanding of the concept of paternalistic leadership within the Middle East; and, secondly, it enables us to assess the impact such a leadership style exerts over eth day to day operations of management. As we shall see, the managers, from varying cultural backgrounds, differ in their conceptions of what kind of leadership is the most effective in a

university setting in the UAE. This will hopefully encourage a careful re-examining of the current state of leadership in universities in the region.

The argument in this paper is that paternalism in organizations, which prioritises personal relationships above others, has a role to play in maintaining organizational cohesiveness, though this role is undermined when where is persistent bending of rules to favour certain group members.As a result, productivity may be undermined, and the effects can trickle all the way to the classroom. More than anything else, this case study is a snapshot of what many higher education institutions in the region are currently facing, as they navigate a path from more traditional societies towards more modern ones.

2. Literature Review

The notion of paternalism as a management concept dates back to Max Weber, who conceptualized paternalism as a form of legitimated authority. In Economy and Society Weber (1968) discussed three types of legitimate control, namely, bureaucratic (strict rules procedures), charismatic (rooted in the leader's characteristics) and traditional. Traditional forms of authority are those led by a paternal authority with a following that is filial in nature. Paternalistic leadership is defined by a reliance on loyalty to the leader and also unquestioning obedience. According to Padavic and Earnest (1994), paternalism is still prevalent as a management strategy today, primarily because it meets both material and psychological needs of employees.

2.1 Different Types of Paternalism

Aycan (2006) refined the concept of paternalism, distinguishing between benevolent paternalism and exploitative paternalism. Benevolent paternalism indicates genuine concern for the welfare of employees, which they reciprocate by exhibiting loyalty, as a token of appreciation and respect. Exploitative paternalism, on the other hand, points towards showing concern only to ensure employees comply, whereas employees exhibit loyalty as long as their needs are met.

Authoritarian management was also identified as a form of paternalism by Aycan (2006) as a form of paternalism which is more exploitative in nature, with the employee conforming so as to either receive a reward or avoid punishment, as was authoritative management, which has the employees' welfare at heart, in turn engendering respect on the part of employees.

2.2 Differing Cultural Views with Regard to Paternalism

There is no culture-free theory of management or leadership, a view supported by several researchers (Abdalla & Al-Homoud, 2001; Ali, 2009; Barakat, 2008; Bardak, 2005; Bass, 1997; Bellow, 2003; Dorfman, 1996; Dorfman & House, 2004; Hofstede, 1984, 1993, 2001, 2004, 2010; Hooker, 2009; House et al, 1997, 2001, 2004; Khatri et al, 2006; Mohammad & Hamdi, 2008; Sabri, 2004, 2012). Organizations are culture bound, as are managers (Hofstede, 1993). Hofstede's (1984) work on culture and organizations notes that Arab cultures typically exhibit a high degree of power distance (the extent to which people expect power to be unequally distributed), uncertainty avoidance (the extent to which people avoid ambiguity by developing rules for behaviour), masculinity (the extent to which people believe that performance is what matters) and collectivism (the extent to which people rely on family and other groupings). He also maintained that, when a culture has a combination of power distance and uncertainty avoidance, the leader has absolute power and authority, with all rules and regulations designed to concentrate such authority in the hands of the leader. This reinforces the status quo.

Though Weber's work on authority is well-known, what is not perhaps as widely known is that Weber (1978) was also interested in the relationship between Western and Arab cultural values, particularly where the nature of authority was concerned. Although he viewed Arab culture as being predominantly traditional, he also saw a conflict between ashab-al-hadith (traditionalist) and ashab-al-fikh (rational-legal) jurisprudential values. This, according to Weir (2000), goes a long way towards explaining the concept of *wasta*, commonly viewed as a form of traditional authority, sustained by tribal or family connections. When wasta operates within rational-legal authority, conflict ensues, characterised by Weber (1978) as patrimonialism.

Abdalla and Al-Homoud, in a 2001 comparative study on two Gulf Arab countries, Kuwait and Qatar, found that autocratic leadership styles are seen to inhibit the success of leaders, with respondents favouring a more charismatic, participatory style, a finding which is somewhat at odds with Weber's focus on traditional and rational-legal values. They explained this by noting that, although it may be true that more autocratic leadership styles prevail in the Gulf, which they characterise as 'what is', what people actually prefer is a more participative leadership, or 'what should be'.

Analysing charismatic authority, Abdalla and Al-Homoud (2001) noted that, in many Western countries, charismatic authority is transformational in nature, based upon a combination of charisma and interactive skills (see also Bass, 1997). They posit that interactive skills are not necessarily a requirement for charismatic authority, as charisma can exist even when leaders are incompetent.

Although paternalism has been viewed as somewhat authoritarian in Western contexts (Uhl-Bien & Maslyn, 2005), research suggests that paternalism is viewed more positively as an effective leadership style in many non-Western cultures, particularly those that are collectivist (Aycan, 2006; Farh et al., 2006; Pellegrini & Scandura, 2006; Uhl-Bien et al., 1990). In some collectivist cultures (Hofstede, 2001), paternalistic leadership is welcomed, due to its focus on employees' wellbeing and even their personal lives. Employees show loyalty out of respect for the leader's position as a father figure, and accept the underlying notion of power inequality.

In the Middle Eastern context, research in the business context highlights the potential effectiveness of paternalism as a form of management (Pellegrini & Scandura, 2006). This was reiterated in the GLOBE study (House et al., 2004), a study of leadership and culture in sixty-two different countries. As paternalism is concerned with maintaining close personal relationships (Gelfand et al., 2007), it can be one of the most practical management styles in certain cultural contexts, and can have a positive impact on employee's attitudes towards their work.

The Arab cultural context, like that of any other, is highly unique. History, language and religion are deeply intertwined, with family and tribe playing a pivotal role. All of this is playing out against a backdrop of globalization and modernization, as the countries in the Gulf region, including the UAE, seek to create knowledge economies. Sabri (2004, 2012) has inferred that Arab managers and leaders are reluctant to delegate authority to others, and will always prioritize the needs of family and friends over the needs of the organization. This would appear to have been confirmed by the GLOBE study (House et al, 2001, 2004), which found that self-protection (typified by race-saving, reliance on procedure and self-centredness), is one of the most significant traits exhibited by Arab managers and leaders.

2.3 Leadership and Values

What emerges from the literature is that the type of leadership that is most effective varies from culture to culture. This is exemplified by Dorfman (1996), who identified two cultural perspectives on leadership, the universal (which suggests that some leadership concepts are generalizable across all cultures) and the culturally specific (which posits that some leadership theories are culturally laden, so that what may work in one context will not work in another culture). Thus, it stands to reason that the culture-specific perspective proposesleadership will be perceived differently by those who do not share the same cultural values (House et al, 2004).

2.4 Nepotism

One of the most obvious examples of how people with different cultural values perceive leadership styles differently is where nepotism is concerned. Nepotism, which has its origins in the renaissance era, when popes placed their nephews in key positions, may be defined as preferential treatment given to family members when making management-related decisions (for example, hiring, promotion, salary increments). This is at odds with cultures who place importance on merit-based systems, although it could be said that nepotism exists to a greater or lesser degree in most societies, as, for example, a 2004 study found that approximately forty per cent of Fortune 500 companies had relatives in key positions over generations (Conway, 2004).Thus, it is perhaps inevitable that conflict will ensue when business and family are mixed, as in, for example, the hiring of an employee who is unsuited to the position, or even incompetent. What differs is the degree to which nepotism is tolerated or even accepted in different cultures.

Nepotism is a form of favouritism, which Kwon (2005) defines as a leader bestowing privilege upon a person for reasons other than professional. The two other forms of favouritism are cronyism, which means to confer privileges only upon friends and patronage, which involves political parties bestowing privilege upon both friends and relatives.

3. Background Context

The university in this study is a private co-ed university in the UAE, based on an international model. The president of the university is Arab by birth, and a naturalised citizen of a Western country, in common with many other expatriate academics who were born in Arab countries. The management layer comprises a mixture of Arab expatriates and Westerners, with the majority being either related to, or close friends of, the president. Again, this is a common feature of universities in the region, be they government or private.

The university is an established university and has seen steady growth in student enrolment in recent years, with the student body now numbering over three thousand. Data reporting to the Ministry and Commission of Academic Accreditation is frequent, and international accreditation has assumed increasing importance, in line with similar institutions. Staff turnover is a constant issue as the university strives for stability in an educational landscape that is ever-changing.

4. Research Question and Method

This study is a case study of how a paternalistic university leadership style affects management behaviour. Accordingly, the research questions guiding this study were:

(1)   What are the main ways in which a paternalistic leadership style affects the performance of management?

(2)   Is a paternalistic university leadership style the most suitable one for a university in
         the UAE in today's changing educational landscape?

In this case study, a non-probability sampling method, known as purposive sampling, was used. This is commonly featured in qualitative research (Cohen et al., 2013), where purposive sampling is used for the specific purpose of selecting those who have in-depth knowledge about specifictopics, due to the nature of their professional role and experience (Cohen et al., 2013). Given the nature of the study, the number of participants is not a large one, ten in all, comprising six Arab expatriate managers and four Western ones. There is no rule in non-probability sampling as to how large the sample should be. Of the ten participants, seven are male and three are female. In addition, a mere three participants are not related to, or friends of, the president.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants, to assess the perceptions of managers regarding how their behaviour is affected by the paternalistic university leadership style employed (Kvale, 2007). During the analysis, a number of diverse themes emerged, which were subsequently placed into categories, with quotes used to ensure a narrative would emerge that more accurately conveyed the participants' views (Cohen et al., 2013). Due to the nature of the work environment, the participants' real names are not used in the interview extracts.

As the non-probability method employed may not be representative, findings may not be generalizable to the Middle East region. However, generalizing findings was not the main aim of this study; instead, the aim was "to acquire in-depth information from those who are in a position to give it" (Cohen et al., 2013: 157).

5. Results and Discussion

Five main categories emerged from the data analysis, namely: managerial selection process, favouritism, no room to lead, talent retention and the only constant is change. Each of these will be discussed in turn below.

5.1 Managerial Selection Process

Hofstede (2001) denotes that as organizations and management styles are culture bound, and that in collectivist cultures, management is management of groups, meaning that relationship sometimes prevails over task. This also has implications for the managerial selection process, as perhaps the most qualified candidate does not always get the position, which Mohamed notes:

> *'For the head of that department, there was no advertisement. We were just called into a meeting and told that the person had been chosen by the president. Then, nobody dared to ask a question, because the president's word is law. I think this person is not the best person for the job. Look what happened when he was in charge of the other department – it was a disaster, which the new one is trying to fix. If anyone says something, he'll be moved to another department and his salary will be cut. So we say nothing.'*

Bill agrees that the criteria for management selection are flawed:

> *'We can talk all we want about being a Western university, but we all know that not a single university in this country is Western. Here it's a family business. Just look at the HR department – they're not allowed to do their jobs, they have to hire who they ate told to hire. Nothing matters more than family, even if they are not the right*

> *people for the job. I can't hire my own staff, even when I know who the best person for the job is. I have no control.'*

This feature of a paternalistic style of leadership means that the employer-employee relationship is perceived like a family link. Therefore, commitment to the growth of the university appears to be secondary to that of the family. Managers are powerless to act as they wish, due to the favouritism that prevails.

5.2 Favouritism

Seven of the participants in this study indicate that favouritism is shown in the appointment of heads of department, noting that this spills over into the appointment of senior faculty members such as associate professors, professors, chairs and deans. As Ghani notes:

> *'When a new department is created, it's always someone from the president's past who gets the job of leading it. When bonuses are handed out, it's always family who get the highest ones. There is no transparency, as it's a family business, so there's a lot of favouritism. Some of them are very good at what they do, but look at the others. They just tell him what they think he wants to hear, which makes it impossible for the rest of us who want to say the hard things. When they want something, all they have to do is walk into his office or meet him after work, but for others, it can take weeks to get an appointment, even if the matter is urgent.'*

Ghani also points out those contracts for lucrative consultancy work invariably go to friends and family. What is apparent is that issues involving favouritism extend beyond hiring and contracting practices to the more general problem of influence, or wasta, which Widedelaborates on:

> *'Today I had a meeting with the president at 11, because he wanted to see the latest figures. I prepared everything and was ready on time. Then his nephew came and my meeting was pushed back. Then a friend came and it's now 6. I won't get to meet with him today, and it was important. What his nephew wants is not the best thing for the university, and my meeting was going to deal specifically with this. But because he is a relative, he will get what he wants. I think it's difficult for the president, because he has all these family members he has to protect. For me it is difficult too. I was brought here to work on this project, but, if I'm not allowed to do what I am supposed to do, I will leave.'*

Wasta is widely practiced throughout the Arab world as a feature of paternalistic leadership. Mohamed and Hamdy (2008) argue that unqualified candidates mayobtain jobs solely on the basis of influence or connections. What Wided feels as a professional is a sense of frustration which is being fed by the style of leadership she has encountered. What is also apparent is that a paternalistic leadership style is creating stress, so that wasta is perhaps evolving into a practice to further individual benefit more than collective benefit. For managers like Wided, the result is that freedom to operate as a manager is being severely curtailed.

5.3 No Room to Lead

Constantly complying with bureaucratic reporting measures is a feature of the managerial experience in higher education, especially in the UAE, where reports are regularly submitted to the Ministry or Commission for Academic Accreditation, often on very short notice. Although the managers in this study did not relish such tasks, what they found hampered their efforts to be effective in their roles were idiosyncratic reporting measures within the university itself. As Abdullah commented:

'Some days I arrive at work and before I can even switch on the computer, I get a call from the President's Office, to go to a meeting in the boardroom. Then I know I'm in for a long day, and won't get anything done, because the meeting will be at least 4 or 5 hours long. I have to postpone meetings with staff and faculty, and they don't understand why I can't meet with them. It seems to them like I'm not doing my job, when all I'm doing is trying to protect them. These meetings should be in the calendar, and, if a meeting is supposed to last an hour, then it should be an hour, not longer. It seems as if they [meetings] are called on the spur of the moment. I seem to spend my days in the boardroom, so that I'm not managing and leading like I should. Instead, I have to report on things the way the president wants, even if that is not the most fruitful way, or the way the Ministry wants. That's what I spend my time on, because nobody wants the president to be angry.'

The frequency and length of meetings was mentioned by all of the participants, who felt their effectiveness in their role was being hampered as a result. Managers feel they are being overly directed, due to the paternalistic leadership style that exists. Patricia elaborated on this:

'If the meetings were genuinely about consultation, that would be one thing, but they're not. Changes are made, and sometimes we in management are the last to know. When we are asked for our input, 9 times out of 10 it's ignored.In previous positions in other countries, people were consulted, which reflects my own values as a leader. People need to understand why they're doing a task, and those who are carrying out the task need to be consulted before management decides what the next step is. Unfortunately, that doesn't happen – it will never happen. Sometimes we are asked to do the same thing 3 or 4 different ways. Any initiative we have is shot down in flames, so we learn to hardly ever say anything. It's frustrating.'

It seems, therefore, that much of the managers' time is being spent on operational matters, and not enough on strategy or leading their teams. This is by no means unusual in higher education in the UAE, but perhaps is a factor in the high turnover rate of employees in the education sector.

Perhaps this exercise of control can also explain what is happening in the education system in general, and in the classroom in particular. Submission appears to be key, which means compliance, not critical thinking (Bardak, 2005). Could this explain why curricula are undergoing reform throughout the country, to begin to encourage self-directed learning? The micro context is linked with the macro one, and perhaps until leadership in education undergoes structural reform, the attainment levels of students will not significantly change, remaining below international norms (OECD, 2014).

5.4 Talent Retention

Establishing professionalism can be quite difficult in a workplacewhere paternalism prevails, where many employees tend either to be related or to know each other personally. For example, nepotism is likely to occur more frequently in such micro contexts where people are obligated to support their close relatives or friends. This means that an environment is created which is more open to corruption. Nowhere is this more evident than in the area of talent retention, as Hesham explains:

'I've been here just a couple of years, and I'm going to stay as long as the president needs me. What I see is that good people come, but they don't stay long, because they can't do their jobs the way they want. When they want to hire someone, they don't have the freedom to choose very often, so that it's difficult to develop a department or grow. They are directed as to what they must do, so their ideas are not taken into

> *consideration. The whip is a good tool to use now and then, but not all the time. They need to feel valued, but they are made to feel as if they don't know anything.'*

Such sentiments are echoed by Mary, who is open about her desire to move elsewhere:

> *'I'm looking around, dipping my toe in the water to see what else is out there. I'm good at what I do – it's lucky I have self-confidence, because I'm belittled on a regular basis. Here, to be successful, you need to be part of the family. It doesn't matter if you can do the job or not, if you're family, you're protected, and you're also paid highly enough to take the ****. The rest of us either have to put up with it or move on. It's a shame, because this university has a great atmosphere, with some wonderful people, but also some people who really shouldn't have been hired in the first place. The good ones never stay long, why would they? And they wonder why this university hasn't moved farther along?'*

From the above comments, it would appear that hiring, rewarding and retention of employees is a complex issue, and constant turnover, a direct consequence of a paternalistic leadership style,is possibly one of the greatest obstacles to the growth of the institution.

5.5 The Only Constant is Change

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose – the more things change, the more they stay the same. That is the message that prevails from eight of the participants, exemplified by John:

> *'I've been here for a long time now, and I see new faces come and go – and then come back again, just in a different position. If things didn't work first time round, why go through the same charade again? Isn't that the definition of insanity, doing the same thing again and again, but expecting the result to be different each time? People are continually being put in the wrong positions, because it's a family business. It's ok if someone is competent, but not everyone is capable of that. That means nothing will ever really change, just the titles and the faces. It's not possible to sustain something in that kind of environment.'*

The education landscape in the UAE is one of constantly shifting boundaries, with reform programs, the rush towards Western accreditation and ministerial edicts all making stability challenging to achieve. This is reflected in leadership styles, as Abdulrahman explains:

> *'It's tough to be in the president's position, because the pressure is on him. Things change all the time, and he has to react to that. No wonder that we have to change all the time, because nobody has control. We want to develop and improve, but the goalposts change all the time, and it's not fair to put that on the president all the time. He's as stressed as we are and it's our job to help him.'*

Abdulrahman is one of only two participants who links leadership style with the macro context, intimating that innovation is simply not possible in an educational environment when things are subject to change at a moment's notice. This leads to an organizational culture that is not transparent, as certain leaders will, in time of uncertainty, surround themselves with those they know best. How, then, can managers move forward? In the following section, some recommendations are put forward.

6. Recommendations

What has been evident throughout this study is that paternalism has a central role to play in management in higher education institutions in the UAE. This will not change for the

foreseeable future, and, indeed, there are some benefits to a paternalistic style of leadership at universities.

However, the greatest drawback of such a leadership style is that those in management are not free to behave as they would wish, meaning that valuable opportunities for innovation and development are being lost. In addition to this, there is a high staff turnover at universities, leading to an environment that is neither secure nor stable.

Therefore, it is recommended that:

i)   University organizational culture should become more open and transparent. This would result, for example, in more comprehensible hiring strategies, with at least a proportion of positions going to those who are best qualified to fill them.

ii)   A culture of innovation and improvement be established. This would cascade down to the classroom level, resulting in curriculum that would be more responsive to the needs of both students and society. The education landscape is changing, and universities need to evolve in order to meet this challenge.

iii)   A culture of constructive criticism should be encouraged. At present, nobody dare criticize not only the leaders in higher education institutions, but also those connected to them by ties of blood or friendship. This stifles creativity in an environment that seeks to metamorphose into a knowledge-based economy. Those who speak up should be able to do so in a way that will not place their employment in jeopardy – but they do need to speak up, otherwise the status quo will prevail.

7. Conclusion

One overall conclusion from the above analysis is that organizational behaviour in cultures such as that in the UAE is connected to the shift from traditional to modern cultures and economies. It appears that paternalism and nepotism are concentrated when traditional ways of doing business are being supplanted by more modern ways, without a corresponding shift in ethical standards. Perhaps paternalistic leadership is a way of dealing with the unknown in a changing environment, a way to make leaders feel more in control. However, moving forward, this will be difficult to sustain, as change is now a constant feature of the education backdrop.

In the UAE, it is difficult to establish professionalism in many universities, mainly because so many of the stakeholders tend to be either relatedto each other, or at least, personally known to each other. This is the case in both government and private universities, but is perhaps more prevalent in private universities, as they tend to be smaller in size. This means paternalism is likely to be commonplace, particularly when both economic and socio-cultural factors are taken into account, which oblige people to support friends and extended family. An unintended result on the part of leaders and managers is that such workplaces are more vulnerable to corruptive practices.

Paternalism in essence makes it more difficult to hire and retain qualified and experienced employees, as the decisions are more complex in nature. Those employees who are talented are rarely given the opportunity to develop their talents, as any success they have is contingent on their connection with the leadership, not any innate skills. This curbs motivation, and ultimately is one of the main reasons for high staff turnover in higher education in the UAE. Until this is recognised and tackled head-on, it will be a case of the more things change, the more they stay the same.

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