

Leaders-Followers' Relation in Organizations: An Islamic Perspective

Abu Bakr Rafique Ahmad*

Abstract

The leaders and the followers or the bosses and the sub-ordinates are two essential organs of human society. Progress of an organization and welfare of a society mostly depend on healthy relation of these two important organs of a society. Islam - being a complete code of life and a comprehensive social order cannot be ignorant of a proper guideline regarding this very important aspect of human society. This study aims at highlighting the attitude of Islam towards this essential aspect of the society and tries to give an overview regarding the healthy relations of leaders and followers or the bosses and sub-ordinates in accordance with the teachings and guidelines given by the Qur'an and Sunnah. To prove that the principles which had been laid down by Islam some 15 centuries ago are still can be considered most practical and utmost beneficial for ensuring the healthy relations in a human society.

Keywords

Leader, Follower, Boss, Subordinate, Shura, Amanah, Taqwa, Tasiha

1. Preamble

Human beings are created as a social being. They can not live alone. They must live in a group under some systematic order. The more the rights, responsibility, role and obligation of each individual are well defined in a society, the more advanced that society is considered. These principles can equally be applied for each and every organization, whether it is social, commercial, economic, political, religious, spiritual or mundane. Islam being the most complete code of life, it must have a set of rules and regulations, guidelines and directives for leading an organized life under the Islamic system which will ensure the welfare of this life and the life hereafter.

This study attempts to find out the principles and guidelines laid down in Islam for the leaders and their followers or for the authority and the work force, for the employers and the employees and for the bosses and their subordinates in a greater sense of the term.

* Professor and Pro-Vice-Chancellor, International Islamic University Chittagong, Bangladesh and former Associate Professor, International Islamic University Malaysia.

2. Who is a leader?

Literally a leader means: master, a person who controls or gives orders to followers (Shornby, A.S.). Practically it is used to denote a leader of the community, or the coordinator and superior in position in any organization, like the manager, the supervisor and proprietor etc.

3. Importance of Leadership in Islam

Leadership is considered very important in Islam. The Muslims are not allowed to live without having a leader for them in any situation. And, as such, they are urged to appoint a leader for them in all circumstances even if they are on a trip and are few in number or even they are in a desert. The primary duties of a leader are to lead the prayers of the Muslims, to look after their affairs and to run their activities in a disciplined and systematic way.

There is a very well-known proverb in Arabic which means that 'leader is the servant of his nation'

سيد القوم خادهم

"The idea of a leader as a servant has been a part of Islam since its beginning and has only recently been developed by Robert Green leaf" (Beekun et al., 1999).

Islam always tried to give the leaders, the authority and the bosses an impression that they are not only the leaders but they are the servants first, so they are not supposed to seek obedience from their followers and the sub-ordinates, rather they must render services to them, look after their well-being and find out their potentialities to nurture them to grow as future leaders.

A Leader shall be either of the following:

- (a) A person in command over a group of people organized with the same objective.
- (b) He may be a religious leader i.e. Imam or Ameer of a group of people united for implementing some essential or voluntary religious programs.
- (c) He may be a political leader, chosen by a group of people voluntarily for implementing some political agenda.
- (d) He may be a commanding officer of an army or a group thereof.
- (e) He may be an executive in a commercial firm or industry having some controlling power over the whole organization or a part thereof.

The word "Leader" is synonymous to the supervisor in position whatever the case may be a general characteristic of Islam in this regard may be summarized as follows:

It has been the main characteristic of Islam that while addressing to each of the administrative and the subordinate, it reminds everyone of them about the responsibilities which are related to them, and which should be exercised by them in different situations. Hence when the leader of the community or the authority of an organization or the Boss of a business firm is addressed, it has been emphasized to them how to deal with their subordinates and when the subordinates or the followers are addressed they are emphasized on how to respect the authority and show obedience to their leaders.

Here we shall try to cite some guidelines given by Islam to the leaders of a community in particular and to the authority in general:

(i) Acceptability of an Imam must be ensured

The Prophet (SAW) has emphasized upon the acceptability of a leader to the people. He is reported to have said:

"There are three persons whose prayers wont be accepted by Allah (SWT) ... A person who takes over the leadership over a community while they are disliking him." ¹

(ii) Seeking position of leadership is discouraged

According to Islam leadership is not something to be obtained through candidature, it is rather an amanah (trust) which comes from Allah from which he will be accountable before Allah (SWT). The Prophet (SAW) is reported to have said :

لا تسأل الإمارة فإن أعطيتها من غير مسألة فقد أعنت (مسلم شريف)

Translation: "Don't ask for a leadership (position) if you are entrusted with it without asking for it, you will be helped (i.e. assisted by Allah) (Muslim Sharif).

(iii) The subordinates are amanah

According to Islam all the subordinates and the subjects are considered as amanah (trust) in the hands of the bosses or leaders and, as such, the bosses are responsible for ensuring their basic needs and welfare, failing which they should be accountable to Allah (SWT)

(iv) Consultation (Shura)

Consultation with the subordinates in all important issues is a religious duty upon the bosses and the leaders, which is called in the modern administration as participatory management. This concept was not known to the people until the recent time, while this has got its origin 1400 years ago through the Prophet (SAW). The pious Caliphs and the Muslim rulers later on practised it during their rule.

The Qur'anic injunctions in this respect are as follows :

وشاورهم فى الأمر، وإذا عزمت فتوكل على الله

Translation: "And consult them in Affairs (of moment) then when thou lastly taken a decision put thy trust in Allah (Al-Qur'an, 3:159).

وأمرهم شورى بينهم

Translation: "Who (conduct) their affairs by mutual consultation (Al-Qur'an, 42:38).

The history witnesses that the Prophet (SAW) used to consult the people before taking decision on every important issue. Before the battle of Badr he had changed the camp side upon the proposal of a companion. Before the battle of Uhud he had consulted the people on the matter whether they should fight the enemy on the city outskirts or should remain within the city and take a defensive policy. The Prophet himself was in favour of the 2nd opinion but he decided to follow the majority opinion though he had to pay very high price for this.

Caliph Umar (R.) is reported to have said: "That one man's idea is like a string, and two men's ideas are like two strings joined together, and three ideas are like three strings put together, they can never be easily broken. (Muhammad, 1987, p.230)

(v) Justice

It is a religious duty upon the Boss and the leader of a community to ensure upholding the policy of justice with his subordinates in any situation and all circumstances, even in case the personal relation between him and his subordinate is not pleasant and healthy due to some personal dislikes.

Allah (S.W.T.) says:

ولا يجرمنكم شنآن قوم على أن لا تعدلوا إعدلوا هو أقرب للتقوى

Translation: "And let not the hatred of others to make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice" (Al-Qur'an, 5:8).

إن الله يأمر بالعدل والإحسان

Translation: "Allah commands justice, the doing of good." (Al-Qur'an, 16:90).

The principle of justice demands that selection, recruitment and promotion should be done on the basis of merit and merit alone. The Qur'an says:

إن خير من استأجرت القوى الأمين

Translation: "Truly the best of men for thee to employ is the man who is strong and trustworthy." (Al-Qur'an, 28:26)

Here the word 'strong' corresponds to the qualification and expertise that the job requires, and the power to apply them, and "trustworthy" applies to the sense of responsibility, piety and commitment to the welfare of the organization.

(vi) Politeness, Soft Heartedness and Humility

Politeness, soft heartedness and humility are the virtues in every Muslim which are considered very much sought after specially for the leaders of the community, the authority and executives of an organization. The people will be more obedient to those who are gifted with these qualities. So doubtlessly they will be the most successful leaders and the executives. The Prophet (SAW), the most successful leader in the whole history of mankind had been adorned with these God gifted qualities. Allah (SWT) reminds him about these special qualities in the following verse with which Allah (SWT) had shown His favour to him.

فبما رحمة من الله لنت لهم، ولو كنت فظا غليظ القلب لانفضوا من حولك فاعف عنهم واستغفر لهم وشاورهم فى الأمر

Translation: "It is part of the mercy of Allah that thou dost deal gently with them, wert thou severe or harsh hearted they would have broken away from about thee: so pass over (their faults) and ask for Allah's forgiveness for them and consult them in affairs of moment..." (Al-Qur'an, 3:159)

Allah (SWT) says in another verse :

إِنَّكَ لَعَلَىٰ خُلُقٍ عَظِيمٍ

Translation: "And surely thou hast sublime morals." (Al-Qur'an, 68:4)

(vii) Setting the example through practising

According to Islam the leader and the boss is not a person who commands the others to do things according to his directives without considering whether he is doing it or not? Rather the leader and the boss is required in the first place to practise this by himself, then asking the others for practising that.

If a manager of an organization wants that the employees of that organization should be punctual then he should better attend his office before schedule, and at least in time. Otherwise the subordinates will be disrespectful to him.

This has been emphasized in an article by Ibnomer Mohammad Sharfuddin. He writes:

"Administrative leadership in Islam is supposed to be a role model for subordinates. Leaders are expected to comply fully with prescribed Islamic behavior before asking their subordinates to obey them... It should not in any case be oppressive, exploitative or authoritarian." (Op.cit.pp. 238-239)

(viii) Practising Taqwa or God fearing

God fearing is the combination of three things; i.e;

1. To believe that none is beyond the knowledge of All-knowing Allah (SWT), who even knows the inner intention of every body.
2. To believe that there is a day of judgement when each and every body has to give full account of his deeds and face either reward for his good deeds or punishment for bad deeds.
3. That beliefs, deeds and rewards are integrally linked in each ones life in this world and in the life hereafter.

In the light of the above discussion, we can come to a conclusion that doing a good job with the sense of God fearing (Taqwa) and with an expectation of good reward in the hereafter is a religious commitment in Islam, and, as such, the authority are required to motivate their subordinates about this matter. At the same time, the authority should ensure and guarantee full justice and job satisfaction for their employees. Taqwa will prevent a leader, boss or an authority from behaving unjustly whether to the community or the employees etc.

(ix) Not to impose any duty beyond the capacity of the employees

It is a religious obligation upon the authority of any Islamic organization not to impose any duty or responsibility upon the employees and subordinates which is beyond their capacity or burdensome for them. Allah (SWT) says :

وَأَوْفُوا الْكَيْلَ وَالْمِيزَانَ بِالْقِسْطِ لَا تَكْلَفُ نَفْسًا إِلَّا وُسْعَهَا وَإِذَا قُلْتُمْ فَاعْدُوا وَلَوْ كَانَ ذَا قُرْبَىٰ وَ بَعْدَ اللَّهِ أَوْفُوا

Translation: "Give measure and weight with full justice : no burden do We place on any soul, but that which it can bear, whenever you speak, speak justly, even if a near relation is concerned." (Al-Qur'an, 6:152)

(x) Transparency

It is very much important for a successful organization and its management to ensure transparency in its rules, regulations and implementation policy of these rules; so that no scope for any kind of exploitation remains therein. In this situation everyone will be convinced that he is getting his rights as per rule and a conducive work environment will prevail, which has prime importance for success of a program or a project.

Transparency is the safeguard against exploitation which is completely prohibited in Islam.

(xi) Fulfilling of obligations

It is a religious duty for every Muslim-whether he is a boss, leader or a subordinate- to keep their promises. Breaking a promise is tantamount to hypocrisy. Fulfilment of commitment and promise has been emphasized in many places of the Qur'an. To cite an example here :

وأوفوا بالعهد إن العهد كان مسؤولاً

Translation: And fulfill (every) engagement, for every engagement will be enquired into (in the Day of Judgement (Al-Qur'an, 17:34)

The prophet (saw) said :

آية المنافق ثلاث إذا حدث كذب وإذا وعد أخلف وإذا أؤتمن خان

Translation: The signs of a hypocrite are three : when he speaks, tells a lie, when he makes a promise he breaks this, and when he is trusted with something he shows distrust.²

(xii) Ensuring conducive work environment

This is one of the most important responsibilities of the management to ensure conducive work environment and provide job satisfaction for the employees. The conducive environment can only be ensured if every body considers that he is the integral part of the organization, playing an important role in his place. The importance of the individual can never be denied like every part of a structure has its own value in strengthening the whole structure. The prophet (saw.) has said :

المؤمن مع المؤمن كالبنيان الواحد يشد بعضه بعضا

Translation: "The relation of a believer with other is like that of a building, each part of it do strengthen then the other".

(xiii) Fellow feeling

The management in an Islamic organization is not just an authority which should keep themselves aloof from the subordinates and should not mix with them, but rather it must have a sense of fellow feeling for the employees, it should share in the sorrows and happiness of its subordinates.

The Prophet (S.A.W.) has said that the parable of relationship between one mu'min and the other is like the organs of a single body, whenever any of these organs is affected the whole body should respond to that in ailment and sufferings³ :

مثل المؤمن مع المؤمن في تراحمهم و توادهم كالجسد الواحد إذا اشتكى له عضو تداعى له سائر الجسد بالسهر و الحمى (الحديث)

4. Some Guidelines for the subordinates

As we have discussed earlier about the unique feature of Islam that while it addresses any of the parties of a society, it reminds their duties and responsibilities towards the other party. And as such, when Islam addresses the subordinates, it advises them how to be obedient, respectful, sincere and trustworthy etc. to their leaders, the bosses and the authority in general. In the following part of the article, we shall try to highlight on this aspect of the issue.

(i) Obedience to the authority

The subjects of a country, the followers of a leader and the subordinates of an organization are advised to show sincere obedience to their leaders who is called according to Islamic terminology as 'Ulul 'Amr or 'The men of affairs'

Allah (SWT) says:

وأطيعوا الله وأطيعوا الرسول وأولى الأمر منكم

Translation: "And obey Allah and obey the apostle and those who are at your affairs." (Al-Qur'an)

However, according to Islam, the obedience is not unconditional. The subordinates should follow the instructions, given to them, provided they do not contradict the obedience to Allah (SWT) and His Apostle.

The Prophet (SAW) of Allah declares :

لا طاعة لمخلوق في معصية الخالق

"No obedience is acceptable disobeying the Creator." (Al-Hadith).

Even every citizen of a country has the right to protest the opinion of the leader or Imam and every employee of an organization reserves the right to disagree with the opinion of the authority or a boss if it contradicts the injunctions of the Qur'an or the Sunnah. History of Islam is full of many splendid examples of this kind. To cite one example from 'Umar b. al Khattab the 2nd Caliph of the Prophet (SAW) that on one occasion 'Umar (R) was criticizing the fixation of dowry at high rate at the time of marriage. A lady from amongst the audience stood up immediately and said: "O Umar! fear God. While Allah has permitted us to receive a bullion as dowry who are you to prevent us from this right? And she cited the following verse from the Qur'an in support of her argument.

وَأْتَيْنَا إِحْدَاهُنَّ قَنْطَارًا فَلَا تَأْخُذُوا مِنْهُ شَيْئًا

Translation: [Even] "if ye had given the latter a whole treasure for dower, take not the least bit of it back." (Al-Qur'an, 4:20)

Umar (R) realized his mistake and said : "The lady is right and he himself is wrong." (Numani, 1957)

(ii) Sense of accountability

According to Islam each and every one of the members of a society or members of a family or even staff members of an organization is like a leader and important in his position. He is accountable to the God for his performance. The prophet (saw) has said :

....إلا كلكم راع وكلكم مسؤول عن رعيته الخ....

Translation: "Everyone of you is a leader and every one of you is accountable for his responsibility. For example, the husband is the leader in his house and is responsible for his family. Likewise the wife is a guardian in her husband's home and is responsible and accountable for her family, and the servant is a custodies in his master's home and is accountable for performing his responsibility.⁴

I can hardly find such a clear and comprehensive guideline in determining the responsibilities of each one in any other system except Islam.

(iii) Sense of cooperation

It is a religious duty on every member of an Islamic society to cooperate each other on any matter which is considered good, useful and beneficial to the community and / or an organization, unless it leads to sin and transgression. Allah (SWT) says:

تعاونوا على البر والتقوى ولا تعاونوا على الإثم والعدوان

Translation: "Help ye one another in righteousness and piety, but help ye not one another in sin and rancour." (Al-Qur'an, 5:2)

In the light of this verse, each and every employee of an organization is required to render sincere cooperation to the administration for the interest of his organization as long as it plays positive role to the advancement of the country or the society. On the other hand, if the agenda of an organization is against the interest of the people or it is contrary to the obedience to Allah and His Apostle then they cannot even get an employment there.

(iv) Sense of Amanah

Islam considers that the duties and responsibilities which have been prescribed to each one, whether it may be due to some social, political, commercial, economic or even job responsibilities to the salaried persons, are considered as an 'amanah (trust). Each one is must protect this 'amanah and perform his responsibilities with the sense of 'amanah in full sincerity which is called according to Islamic principle as returning the 'amanah to its owner and which has been emphasized in the Qur'an as follows :

إن الله يأمركم أن تؤدوا الأمانات إلى أهلها

Translation: "Allah doth command you to render back your trusts to those to whom they are due." (Al-Qur'an, 4:58)

(v) Sense of Nasihah (good advice or well wishing)

Good advice is considered an indispensable factor for a conducive social order. It is equally true and applicable in ensuring the strong relationship between the management and the employees of an organization. The importance of Nasihah has been depicted clearly in the following hadith of the prophet (saw) :

الدين النصيحة قلنا لمن يارسول الله ؟ قال لله ولرسوله ولكتابه ولأمة المؤمنين ولعامة المسلمين

Translation: "The Prophet (SAW) said : The religion is advice (Nasihah). We said: to whom? He said : To Allah, His messenger His Book to the leader of the believers and to the common Muslims."⁵

The word Nasihah is similarly applicable to denote loyalty and well wishing. And, as such, each and every employee should have a sense of loyalty and well wishing to their bosses, to the administration and to the welfare of the organization. Whenever he feels that something shall serve the interest of the organization better he should come forward to the administration with his sincere advice.

Here one thing is to be remembered that Nasihah must be sincere and honest, otherwise it will not be considered to be directed to Allah. And the following principles should be followed before giving some advices :

- (a) That one should not advise someone in an accusing tune.
 - (b) One should not expect others to comply instantly or expect the result very quickly.
 - (c) One should not advise others to do what he is not practising by himself.
 - (d) Advice should be given at the right time and in a decent manner.
 - (e) Setting a personal example to be followed is always a preferred method of advice.
- (Mahammad, 1987)

5. Conclusion

We can conclude this study with this remark that in spite of advancement of management and behavioral science descriptions in modern days the principles which have been laid down by Islam 1400 years ago is so complete, so comprehensive and such a guarantee for the welfare of both the management and the employees, so responsive to the mundane development and spiritual requirements that no other system of administration which has been invented and implemented by any society in the world after that of Islam can be compared with.

It has further been proved that Islam is the most complete code of life surpassing the boundaries of race, region, time and trend.

[Allah knows the best]

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Endnotes

¹ Ibn-Khuzaimah, from Anas b. Malik

² Bukhari & Muslim, This Hadith is narrated by Abu Hurayrah (R.)

³ Sahih Muslim, Al-Hadith

⁴ Sahih Bukhari, Al-Hadith

⁵ Riyadus Salehin, Yahya bin Sharad, (Beirut, Darul Qalam, p. 88)