

Leadership in the 21st Century: New Challenges for Islamic School Principals

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An Islamic school is more than an educational institution; it is the blue print of the future generation and a future society. Islamic schools help establish Islamic communities “whose manners, ideas and concepts, rules and regulations, values and criteria, are all derived from the Islamic source – so that the Muslims’ way of life is an example to all mankind”. (Qutb, 1990) Thus the leadership in Islamic schools should be a driving force in reforming the society, and this very important and difficult task can be accomplished through the team-effort of all those involved in leadership, the school board and the principal.

It is not sufficient to bring into Islamic schools the latest in technology and science, what is more important is to intertwine this with the moral fabric of the Quran and the Sunnah. Allah says in the Quran, “You are the best community raised for mankind, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong, and you believe in Allah.” (Quran: 3:110) Thus, the turn of this new century has called upon the Muslim ummah to fulfill its divinely appointed task for mankind, as Allah says in the Quran, “And thus have We made of you a community justly balance, that you may be witnesses over the nations, and the Messenger a witness over yourselves.” (Quran, 2:145).

The curriculum and instruction of Islamic schools should aim at the Quran as the guiding force in children’s education where the philosophy of Islam becomes a “part of their personalities, mingling with their lives and characters so that they become living examples of faith – a faith not hidden in intellect or books, but expressing itself in a dynamic movement which changed conditions and events during the course of life.” (Qutb, 1990)

What then should be the leadership model for Islamic school principals? It is the model unique to Islam; the knowledge about the Quran and the example of the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (sws) which compliments the latest in science, technology, and western education.

This model is the ISLAM model, where the leader:

Inspires the Vision (to serve Islam)

Strengthens the Heart (with Iman & Taqwa)

Leads the way (with the Quran & the Sunnah)

Assesses his/her actions (accountability of actions)

Mobilizes the Community (to develop an Islamic civilization)

Inspire the Vision

Leaders inspire the vision; and vision is “a clear, concise, and simple statement of what the organization is trying to accomplish and what you want it to become. It is the tool which guides people as they shape plans for their teams, departments, or individual objectives. By expressing a vision, leaders create a focus on the future in which people want to participate.”

(Capezio & Moorehouse, 1996) A vision can be extremely motivating and can give a powerful image for the followers to get on the bandwagon; on the other hand it can make the organization become stagnant. A vision needs to be very clear and focused – not vague and ambiguous.

Strengthen the Heart

Once the vision is inspired, this dream needs to be put into reality. The leader has to encourage its followers by strengthening it with the ingredients of iman and taqwa. Iman is the cornerstone of Islam; it is the belief in the oneness and superiority of Allah, the creator. It is the inspiration of all actions and the root of all causes for the actions. Taqwa is the fear of the

unknown; the inner consciousness of one's responsibility and duty towards the creator, the attitude of the heart. It is the guiding force towards all the actions and the underlying philosophy of education.

Lead the Way

A leader clears the path and leads the way; he must be able to appraise the present, anticipate the future, and collaborate with the school's stakeholders to lead the vision. Whether it is in the dark or on uncertain path, it is the leader who takes the initiative to lead with courage and perseverance. Throughout the daily functioning of the school the principal must look, reflect, and understand the critical importance of the leadership role. The principal's leadership can nurture ongoing need for developing a learning community for students, teachers, and parents. It is the principal who can make the entire school a learning community; the Islamic school is the driving force to reform a society.

Assess the Actions

Leadership in Islam is a trust from Allah (swt). Hence, a leader has to hold himself/herself accountable for all his/her actions. From building trust to taking ownership; from monitoring and assessing academic progress to moral and character development; and from determining the ability for change and planning to show appreciation and celebration of accomplishments, all requires sincerity and accountability of actions.

Mobilize the Community

Although the process of inspiring the vision, strengthening the faith, leading the way, and assessing the deeds may be very time consuming and extremely difficult; it is the pre-requisite

for the final stage which is to mobilize the community. Empowering and enabling others to act to contribute towards a better civilization should be the goal of every Islamic school leader. As a leader, the principal not only has to motivate its school community of parents, teachers, students and board to help reach the school's goals; but more importantly it should be able to mobilize the community to accept and believe in the vision of the school, which is largely to contribute towards a better society and a better world.

The principal should be able to inspire its community to collaborate the school's effort in building an Islamic community that is based solely on the principles of the Quran and the sunnah. The Islamic school in its final goal should help in promoting a "community that follows Islam in belief and ways of worship, in law and organization, and in morals and manners." Unlike the jahiliya society of the past, an Islamic school should contribute in creating an Islamic society that is based on the concept, belief, and way of life, originating from Allah and a society that places the highest value on the humanity of man not materialism. "Under the Islamic scheme of life, the family provides the environment in which human values and morals flourish and are transmitted to the next generation." A school needs to be an extension of this family, a continuation of the Islamic values and a safe place for its nurturance into strong Islamic personalities and communities.

"The role of the principal is pivotal because it involves putting the beliefs of the principal as an educator into action to achieve student and school success. As a leader, the principal must be able to appraise the present, anticipate the future, and collaborate with the school's stakeholders to develop a school vision that will yield a learning experience for all members of the learning community." (Speck, 1999)

The school leader has a gigantic task on his/her shoulders and a trust of building a strong Ummah on this earth. Allah is not in need of man's merely ritual prayers; He wants man to struggle for righteousness in order to promote a better society. He wants man to establish a community whose ultimate aim is to awaken the humanity with the mission of serving his creator. With the limited finances and resources of Islamic schools; with great diversity in cultures and traditions; with the lack of moral obligation in the stakeholders; and with a confused state of mind of the immigrant Muslims; this is no easy task. It needs a collective effort from those who set the vision (board) and those who are on a mission to fulfill the vision (administration).

The leadership in a majority of Islamic Schools rests with the school board, the donors of the school. Since financial resources are a serious concern in most Islamic schools; "donors" play a dominant role compared to the "educators". Boards and administrators are in constant conflict with each other, as former consider themselves the employers of the latter! If all goes on well the credit goes to the team work of the board, parents and staff; but if problems arise the one person that is usually blamed is the principal.

Hence a better approach to deal with the demanding challenges of principal-ship in Islamic schools is the Trustees & Administration Shura Unit (TASU) where a team of board members and administration work together to achieve the goals and vision of the school. In the absence of one single ideal leader like Prophet Muhammad (saw), strong in Iman, Taqwa, Islam and Ihsan, school leadership may be better off in having a team of leaders. This will facilitate the smooth functioning of the school and limit on the easy burnt out of a single person due to the great demands on stress and time commitments.

The following team of trustees and administration is recommended for Islamic Schools:

Chair of Board & Head of School

Financial Committee	Assistant Principal (Elementary)
Development/Marketing	Assistant Principal (Secondary)
Fundraising	Dean of Students/Administrator
Education	Office Manager
Grievance Committee /Imam/Counselor	Secretary

The Chair of the board should be the acting principal so there are no sides to blame each other when challenges and problems arise but it is one single unit working towards the cause of Islam without giving it a political or cultural turn. The board should follow the ISLAM model along with their employees the school staff and administration. The board needs to take AIM in leadership; as leadership is doing right things at the right time; it is taking risks and making sacrifices; it is building Taqwa, Iman, Islam, and Ihsan not only within the leaders but also within the followers. Leadership in Islamic schools is a service to Islam, to please Allah (swt), and to be better prepared for the hereafter.

In its simplest form, leadership should continually ask the simple question, “Are we doing the right things at the right time?” Leaders should take the responsibility and action to influence and motivate a process that keeps everyone actively participate in answering the question. The board members are the visionaries-- the dreamers; but the administrators are the missionaries-- the doers. Both are important for the success of the Islamic school.

The 21st Century brings new challenges and promises. Today the principalship is dynamic, complex, and demanding. The leadership must “appraise the present, anticipate the future, and help develop a school vision in collaboration with the various school stakeholders. (Speck, 1999)

September 11, 2001 was an eye opener for the Muslim Community, as the nation began to look at it with the hope to find answers to the many questions about the Muslims and their role in the west and in the world at large. Today, the challenges of leadership is even more greater; as the focus transfers from individuals to communities. Islamic schools can be the change agents in reforming the “jahiliyya” society and promoting the true community based solely on the principles of Islam rather than on cultural or western traditions. Challenges in the 21st Century will certainly lead towards identifying the communities through their schools, and more so identifying the Muslim communities through the Islamic schools!