

LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR SAUDI ARABIAN SOCIETY

Faiza Gonaim

The progress of any nation depends on its human resources. The government of Saudi Arabia has recognized the necessity of improving education as a crucial key for the country's advancement in order to compete globally. The budget for higher education has tripled to \$15 billion, enabling the establishment of new higher education institutions and the expansion of existing ones (Kreiger, 2007). However, money alone is not sufficient to ensure the advancement of Saudi universities. Leadership is pivotal for higher education to adapt successfully and develop in the changing climate of the 21st century (Delener, 2013; Rena, 2010; Hargrove, 2003). Some possible solutions for the lack of leadership in Saudi universities are suggested with reflection and analysis of their effectiveness.

KEYWORDS: Leadership, Servant Leadership, Administrative Corruption, Leadership Preparation, Maintaining Integrity

INTRODUCTION

Higher education is considered one of the most important tools for investment in human resources and a wise investment strategy for every country (Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia, 2012). At the individual level, higher education bestows the benefits of job opportunities and self-improvement. The benefits to society as a whole include social development, better overall health and a more productive, adaptable workforce. Like all institutions, most of the

Faiza Gonaim ✉
Lecturer, King Abdul-Aziz University, Saudi Arabia
Email: fghonaim@kau.edu.sa

challenges universities face stem from social and economic factors which have their origin in global pressures.

The government of Saudi Arabia has recognized the necessity of improving education as a crucial key for the country's advancement in order to compete globally. Therefore, many initiatives have been undertaken to further economic, social and academic development to adjust to the global economy and rapid changes in technology and society. The Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia has been urging Saudi universities to pursue excellence and achieve world-class status.

To this end, significant funds have been allocated for university development. In February 2007, the King Abdullah Public Education Development Project was approved by the Saudi Cabinet, representing a commitment of US\$ 3.1 billion over a five-year period to advance the Saudi education system at all levels. Additionally, since 2005 many Saudi students have been studying at international universities supported by government funding mostly through the King Abdullah Scholarship Programme. They bring the richness and diversity of their overseas experiences to nourish and advance Saudi universities and their workplaces.

Despite the efforts of the Ministry of Higher Education to strengthen Saudi universities, a number of obstacles hinder this progress. Saudi universities must find the point of equilibrium between internal and external pressures on the educational system. There is obvious tension between internal traditional forces within the country who want to preserve the culture and the religious values, while the external forces and modernists in the country argue that universities must prepare students to meet the demands of the global marketplace.

Another obstacle, which has not hitherto received adequate attention, is the lack of leadership competency in Saudi universities. This deficit is by no means confined to Saudi Arabian universities. As Buller pointed out, at conferences for university administrators the main focus is on such topics as academic outcome, strategic planning or programme reviews, while discussion about leadership in higher education is not given adequate attention (Buller, 2013). Although Greenleaf (1996) first identified a leadership crisis in higher education as colleges and universities failed to prepare students for future leadership roles in 1978, this problem still persists. He pointed out that many intellectuals criticise leaders, yet no one offers to educate them. This deficiency has implications for society, as I elaborate in the next section.

BACKGROUND ON HIGHER EDUCATION IN SAUDI ARABIA

Higher education in Saudi Arabia reflects the Islamic culture, which produced it. University education is offered to men and women, however, programmes

are segregated by gender. In 1975 the Ministry of Higher Education separated from the Ministry of Education due to the increase in enrolment and the need to look exclusively at higher education issues. The mission of the Ministry of Higher Education includes:

1. Establishing and administering universities and colleges in the Kingdom;
2. Authorizing the establishment of higher education institutions to offer programmes compatible with the country's needs;
3. Raising the connection between higher-education institutions and other governmental ministries and agencies in terms of their interest in higher education;
4. Representing the government in educational and cultural affairs abroad. (Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia, 2014)

Higher education in Saudi Arabia has expanded rapidly in the last five decades. It now includes 25 public universities and 9 private universities; 16 of the public universities and all the private universities were established in the last decade (The Ministry of Higher Education, 2014).

The government's goal is not merely to expand the educational sector but to enhance the quality of education. The Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia has been urging Saudi universities to pursue excellence and achieve world-class status. Hence, higher education has been undergoing tremendous changes and development in the last five decades to raise university rankings (Ministry of Higher Education, 2014). In 2010, King Saud University, the first university established in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1957, was ranked number one among Arab universities and 122nd in the Times Higher Education-QS World University Rankings (Smith, L., & Abouammoh, A., 2013). King Abdulaziz University, which bears the name of the founder of Saudi Arabia, is the second oldest university established in 1967. In 2013 this university advanced significantly in the ranking. Having been ranked in the 501-600 range in 2009, it has now reached the 201-300 range (Academic Ranking of World Universities, 2014).

The climate of academic institutions is not stable; rather they are in constant flux (Rumsey, 2013). Advances in technology, globalization, competition, the economy, and market orientation are some stimulus factors for change (Delener, 2013; Rena, 2010; Kamarudin & Starr, 2012). In her book *Leading Academic Change* (2000) Lucas stated "Change in higher education will be a compelling force in the next decade" (p. 7). The current common notion of thinking globally and acting locally has challenged higher education to balance external global pressures for change while maintaining the local principles of higher education (Knight & Trowler, 2001; van Ameijde, Nelson, Billsberry & van Meurs, 2009). Sergiovanni (2001) articulated the combination

of the need for improvement with maintaining stability as a daunting task. Consequently, in order to adapt successfully in the environment and climate of the 21st century, effective leadership is needed (Delener, 2013; Rena, 2010; Hargrove, 2003).

THE EFFECTS ON SOCIETY OF FAILING TO PROVIDE LEADERSHIP PREPARATION

In general, people perceive higher education as the panacea that will equip the younger generation with the knowledge and leadership capability to solve the problems facing society. However, when students are not exposed to leadership preparation during their academic study and do not even encounter effective role models in the educational system, they are ill equipped to assume positions of leadership. Consequently many organizations in Saudi Arabia, particularly in the private sector, prefer to hire expatriates for leadership positions, believing that they possess greater expertise in leadership than Saudi citizens (Alexander, 2010). Although the government has been trying to reduce the percentage of foreigners in the workforce, some organisations hire a Saudi citizen as a CEO to satisfy the government policy but nonetheless the real functional leader is a foreigner.

Another dire implication of this deficiency in leadership is widespread administrative corruption, which is a problem in Saudi Arabia. This hinders economic growth and the country's development. King Abdullah recognised this national problem and in 2007 initiated the National Strategy for Maintaining Integrity and Combating Corruption. Although awareness of integrity has increased, administrative corruption continues in terms of hiring people based on nepotism regardless of their leadership skills. Many university students are pessimistic with regards to obtaining a job that matches their qualifications because they know the best jobs are given to well connected people.

THE POLICY PROBLEM

According to Pal (2014), a policy problem is “unrealised needs, values or opportunities for improvement” (p. 100). The policy problem in higher education is the lack of leadership preparation for both students and educational administrators. In Saudi Arabia, the entire political system, including the education system, is firmly controlled by the government. Leadership implies empowerment, but the government is not in favour of empowering the population, which could lead to rebellion and criticism of the current political practices in the country.

Enlightening people about leadership and developing leadership skills will eliminate or at least reduce many social problems. Leadership is not about

how to achieve a specific goal or how to manage; instead, it is about relationships and enhancing moral and ethical behaviours (Sergiovanni, 2001). Teaching leadership to students and administrators will reduce many of the corrupt behaviours that affect society.

POLICY ARGUMENT

Crump (1992) argued that educators have to be willing to take risks and make adjustments to current educational policy for the good of students. Based on his pragmatic policy analysis, I suggest some possible solutions, reflecting on and analysing their effectiveness.

The human being is the best resource to establish a better society (Greenleaf, 1977). One possibility would be to require all university students to attend core courses on leadership regardless of their discipline. All students would be exposed to various leadership theories and knowledge, enhancing their sense of empowerment and moral obligation toward others. However, the challenge is that new courses must be approved by councillors in the Ministry of Higher Education and the ministry cannot approve courses teaching leadership awareness which could lead to criticism of the government.

Unlike schools in North America, the Saudi university system does not include elective courses. Every student taking the same major follows the exact same curriculum. This precludes offering leadership preparation topics as electives. Perhaps leadership courses could be offered that complement various majors, e.g. leadership in the classroom for teachers, management principles for business majors, and so forth.

A possible solution is to offer non-credit courses that cover leadership topics. The challenge of this alternative is that few students choose to take non-credit courses. Furthermore, finding faculty to teach these classes would be a challenge since in the Saudi educational climate faculty members typically do not volunteer.

Leadership preparation must include a discussion of leadership theories because a theory provides meaning to any set of actions and helps to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate actions (English, 2008). In this regard, I suggest exploring the impact of adopting the theory of servant leadership explained in the next section in Saudi universities. Because this theory focuses on ethical values and service to others rather than on attaining and wielding power, it embodies concepts that are not potentially threatening to the government. Additionally, the on-going pressure on universities to be competitive and dynamic provides them with a strong incentive to incorporate a productive leadership style that engages employees and increases their

productivity. Servant leadership is one model that increases employee satisfaction and has been shown to lead to higher retention rates. Servant leadership could strengthen and improve the institution itself. Spears (1996) noted that if any organization is interested in long-term effective reform and continuous quality improvement, it has to start with servant leadership as a foundation for an effective organization. Moreover, Thompson (2002) pointed out that people who work in organizations that promote the principles of servant leadership enjoy higher levels of job satisfaction. Crippen (2005) articulated, "Servant leadership provides the promise of an effective educational leadership and management model" (p. 16).

AN OVERVIEW OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Servant leadership was identified by Greenleaf in 1970 when he wrote an essay entitled *The Servant as Leader*. He proposed that servant leadership starts with the natural feeling of serving first and then conscious choice inspires one to lead (1977). Leading by serving involves using one's gifts to add value to others' gifts; these gifts and abilities are used to empower others to make a difference, not impose power over (Wis, 2002).

Greenleaf spent 40 years in the business world as an executive at AT&T (Spears, 1996). His leadership model combined theoretical as well as practical principles regarding the most effective methods of influencing and developing followers. Although the concept of servant leadership is three decades old as a theory, in fact, servant leaders have existed in every major religion (Polleys, 2002). For instance, Prophet Muhammad (Peace being upon him) demonstrated various principles of servant leadership.

The best test of great leaders, based on Greenleaf, is answering the following questions positively:

Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servant? And what is the effect on the least privileged in society: will they benefit; or at least not be further deprived? (p. 27)

A key concept in servant leadership is empowerment, granting individuals the permission to use their talents, skills, resources and experience to make decisions to complete their workloads in a timely manner. Spears (1996), who for many years worked as Executive Director of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, has compiled a list of ten servant leadership characteristics from Greenleaf's writings. These characteristics are: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, building community, and commitment to the growth of the community. As these characteristics suggest, they are concerned with building

effective relationships in one's life and in the organisation to balance self-interest and common goals (SanFacon, George, Spears & Larry, 2010). This concept intends to invert hierarchies, empower people and emphasize the role of service (Greenleaf, 1977). Much of the current literature in leadership indicates that 21st century leaders have to consider caring as a fundamental issue of leadership.

CONCLUSION

In the face of a rapidly changing world due to advances in technology, globalization and the information explosion, higher education nationally and globally is under pressure to change. Effective leadership is needed more than ever for the development and maintenance of higher education institutions. In this paper I discussed the lack of leadership in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia, which has an impact on society. The lack of leadership in higher education hinders the advancement of higher education in the country. Universities need competent leaders capable of maintaining a competitive university. Servant leadership is one of the foremost leadership models that can effectively promote organizational success. Hence, an overview of the model has been presented that can enhance leadership productivity in higher education. As the educational sector often reflects national policy, implementing new curriculum in leadership necessitates a political decree. I proposed some alternative solutions to this dilemma.

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