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ENTREPRENEURS AND TRIBAL LEADERS
Cultural Issues in Organizational Leadership

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Thesis: Effective multi-cultural relationships both appreciate and embrace cultural diversity.

Disclaimer

Before I begin I want to make clear that throughout this presentation I will be describing generalized patterns, and while generalizations can be extremely helpful in describing cultural and social differences, they run the danger of becoming stereotypes to which there are always exceptions. With this disclaimer behind me let's begin with a story.

Introduction:

Reverend Bill Williams was an experienced mentor for new pastors. Because of the large number of Arabic-speaking people in the community, Reverend Williams's church agreed to share its facilities with a new Arab congregation, and shortly thereafter Reverend Williams was asked to mentor Brother Ibrahim an emerging young leader who served as the pastor of the Arab congregation.

After only a few months, tension was evident in their relationship. Each week when the two pastors met to share concerns and pray, the conversation would be something like this.

- Reverend Williams: How many did you have in worship on Sunday?
- Brother Ibrahim: It was a great service. Praise God! God is really blessing us. Two new families came to our service.
- Reverend Williams: So how many were there in all?
- Brother Ibrahim: You must come and be with us sometime, pastor. Everyone is so excited. Our new music leader is doing a fantastic job with our worship service. The people are praising God and I can tell that lives are really being changed
- Reverend Williams: (*Frustrated, but trying one more time to get an answer to his question*): Did you notice how many people were there?
- Brother Ibrahim: Everyone stayed for our fellowship meal. We ate together and prayed for each other. Even our visitors had a wonderful experience.¹

Your cultural background largely influences how you view this conversation. In general Americans feel greater sympathy with Reverend Williams, an experienced American leader who is thoroughly frustrated with this young Arab pastor: Reverend Williams wants to be a good mentor to Brother Ibrahim, but does not know what to do if Brother Ibrahim

¹ Taken from Patty Lane, *A Beginner's Guide to Crossing Cultures: Making Friends in a Multi-Cultural World*, Downer's Grove: IVP, 2002, 61-65.

will not answer even a simple question. Why is Brother Ibrahim so reluctant to provide a straight answer? Is he trying to hide something?

Middle Easterners on the other hand feel greater sympathy with Brother Ibrahim. Why is Reverend Williams so concerned about numbers? Does he have spiritual problems that drive him to measure what God is doing simply on external bases? Why is this supposed senior leader so worldly-minded?

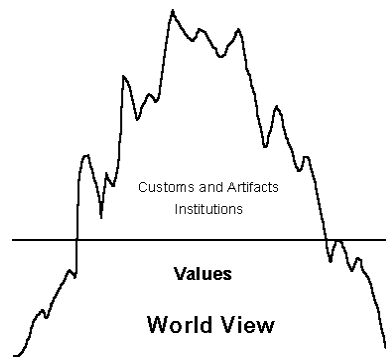
The source of the tension is (of course) that Reverend Williams and Brother Ibrahim have fundamentally different understandings of leadership – understandings which have emerged from their fundamentally different cultural backgrounds.

In an increasingly globalized context, organizations around the world are finding themselves wrestling with the complexities associated with multicultural relationships – particularly in cosmopolitan societies such as the United States. Whenever different cultural perspectives encounter one another, tensions similar to those experienced between Reverend Williams and Brother Ibrahim are almost inevitable – at least from time to time.

In this presentation I hope to clarify some of the sources of these tensions by providing an overview of a few of the more notable and well-documented cultural differences in leadership evident between North America and the Middle East, my central thesis being that *effective multi-cultural relationships both appreciate and embrace cultural diversity*.

Culture and Leadership

Culture is made up of a number of layers:



At the most superficial level are *customs and artifacts* – readily observable practices (such as the Middle Eastern custom of raising the eyebrows to say no, or having a seventh-inning stretch at a baseball game in the USA) and objects (such as a coffee pot sitting on a coffee table, or foam fingers and colored inflatable baseball bats in the hands of spectators on the bleachers).

Customs and artifacts reveal some of the *institutions* which underlie them. For example, in many Middle Eastern homes one will find a coffee pot and cups sitting on a coffee table. These artifacts point to the centrality of drinking coffee in social interactions. The whole paraphernalia associated with baseball points to the unifying role that sports play in a highly individualistic society. Customs, artifacts, and institutions are readily seen and understood, but are only the tip of the iceberg. To truly understand a person from another culture you must go below the surface to the values and the world view of the other.

Values are the source for a culture's institutions. They are the enduring standards by which the culture evaluates and makes judgments. For example, the Middle Eastern institution of drinking coffee together points to the value of hospitality and giving time to

building social relationships. The high profile of sports in America points to a cultural value of individual achievement in a highly competitive world: “any poor boy can become President” – if he only works hard enough!

Underlying the whole cultural framework is the *world view* of the culture – the society’s basic model of reality, in which ideas and behavior find their unified meaning. Our world view explains how and why we exist, evaluates which forms are proper or improper, gives a psychological stability in times of crisis, and provides sociological identity in times of peace. It systematizes and orders the varied perceptions of reality into an overall integrated perspective.²

Over our 22 years of living in the Middle East, I have come to recognize that different world view understandings drive the structure of social institutions in the Middle East from those that exist and function in the West. While many factors are influential, I would like to suggest that the two key world view understandings that drive the structure of Middle Eastern social institutions are “relationship” and “honor.” These stand in contrast to the West (and particularly countries like America and Australia) where social institutions are driven by the values of “order” and “individual dignity and initiative.”³

The terms “relationship,” “honor” and “individuality” are all fairly self-explanatory, but the term “order” needs some explanation. Every society has some form of order – otherwise it could not exist. But in the West “order” has taken on particularly strong meaning and value. It is seen in the way we “lay streets out on grids, mark the edges by curbs, and indicate lanes by lines. [When our son at the age of three first came to the States having lived all of his short life in Syria he was amazed that people actually drove within the lane markings: “I always thought the lines were there for decoration,” he commented – much to our amusement.] ... We plant flowers in rows, and use fences and borders to mark boundaries between lots. ... We structure time to create order. We expect meetings to begin and end “on time.” We see punctuality, efficiency, and organization as unquestionably good. We use long-range planning, appointments, calendars, schedules, programs, flow charts, punch clocks, and watches to regulate our lives.”⁴ We buy tickets in November 2010 to fly from Hartford to Santa Rosa on 18 August 2011, leaving at 10:33 AM and arriving at 8:10 PM precisely, and we are disgruntled if the plane is delayed forty minutes because the luggage is not balanced right. “We ... treat relationships as subordinate to time ... [making] ten-minute appointments, and [planning] “quality time” with our families.”⁵

The contrast between relationship and order is key to understanding the Reverend Williams – Brother Ibrahim story: for Reverend Williams clear and measurable responses reflect order – and (after all) our God is a God of order, isn’t He? For Brother Ibrahim order and structure are secondary (perhaps even irrelevant) in comparison with the centrality of relationships. So what if there is chaos (and there may not in fact be chaos); if people are growing together – then isn’t this what it’s all about?

To delve into these differences further one needs to turn to the growing body of research in the area of cross-cultural leadership patterns. While most of this research has focused on the business world, my observation is that the same phenomena are readily seen throughout society – not least in churches and Christian institutions.

² Summarized from Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979, 53-57.

³ The contrast between “honor” and “individual dignity and initiative” is my own suggestion. The contrast between “relationship” and “order” is applied by Paul Hiebert (*Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 137-146) to traditional Indian society, but I feel is equally applicable in the Middle Eastern context.

⁴ Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, 138.

⁵ Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, 138.

Love him or hate him, the guru of international managerial research over the past 30 years has been Geert Hofstede,⁶ whose ground-breaking study of IBM managers in 50 different countries highlighted the profound significance of culture in patterns of leadership. Over the years Hofstede has suggested six predominant parameters⁷ for studying culture and leadership. His initial work has more recently been expanded, elaborated, and largely verified in the GLOBE international research project.⁸ At a more focused level, scholars such as Abbas Ali (Texas A & M University), Bashir Khadra (University of Jordan), and Farid Muna (now with MEIRC Training & Consulting) have examined the ways in which the general framework suggested by Hofstede and others is reflected in the specific context of the Middle East.

As a way to facilitate our reflection on culture and social patterns, I want to look at two of the more significant and widely studied parameters suggested by Hofstede. Before I continue, however, I want to reiterate what I said at the beginning – that what I am suggesting are general tendencies, and there are many exceptions to the rule. Moreover, the Middle East is in a great state of flux, and certainly is not immune from the McDonaldization of the world that has resulted from globalization. Nonetheless, traditional cultural patterns run deep and continue to shape much of the way that social institutions such as family, business, and churches function. An understanding of general cultural differences can help us all both to appreciate and embrace cultural diversity in our relationships with those from other cultures.

Power Distance

The most widely researched aspect of intercultural leadership studies is that of vertical versus horizontal – authoritarian versus democratic – leadership patterns of decision-making. Hofstede used the term “Power Distance,” pointing to the extent to which both superiors and subordinates expect and accept that power will be distributed unequally, the extent to which a leader can determine the behavior of the follower, and the extent (or lack thereof) to which the follower can influence the leader.⁹

Over the past month I have had to renew residency in Lebanon for both my daughter and me. It is always a tortuous process. To begin with our family cannot apply together; we must each apply separately. For my daughter the process begins by securing a letter from her school that states that she is registered at the school. This letter must be taken to the branch of the Ministry of Education that is specific for the local governate, where the letter is checked by the clerk, given to the supervisor who stamps and signs the letter, gives it back to the clerk, who signs it, returns it to me, and then I need to go to a different office for a more senior supervisor to also review, stamp, and sign the letter. With letter, passport, and previous residency card in hand, my wife, my daughter, and I must all

⁶ Geert Hofstede’s two most influential works have been *Culture’s Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1980) and *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (2nd ed., New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005).

⁷ In Hofstede’s initial work he suggested four parameters: Power Distance, Individualism-Collectivism; Masculinity-Femininity; and Uncertainty Avoidance. As a result of Michael Bond’s research (Chinese Culture Connection, “Chinese values and the search for culture-free dimensions of culture,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, Vol. 18 (1987), 143–174.) Hofstede (G. Hofstede and M.H. Bond, “The Confucius connection: From cultural roots to economic growth,” *Organizational Dynamics*, Vol. 16 No.4 (1988), 4–21) added Long Term-Short Term Orientation (originally entitled Confucian Dynamism). The final parameter, Dependence on Others, emerged through more recent research (Geert Hofstede, “A European in Asia,” *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 10 (2007), 16–21).

⁸ Online at http://www.ucalgary.ca/mg/GLOBE/Public/publications_2001.html.

⁹ Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations*, 46.

present ourselves at General Security where an official checks our papers and gives us a number. When our number comes up, we go to the clerk who fills out the form and checks everything is place, then sends us to the supervising officer who again checks the material, stamps and signs the form, and then sends us to the head of department who stamps and signs a green slip. We then leave the forms in the registrar's office, taking the green slip with us. A week later my daughter and I return (my wife doesn't need to be with us this time) to pay. This involves presenting the green slip at the registrar's office, who gives us our file and takes us to the first official who records that we are paying today, then to a clerk who prepares a new green slip and fills some more boxes on the form, and sends us to the supervising officer who stamps and signs the form again, and sends us to the head of department who stamps and signs the green slip, at which point we can go to the cashier and pay. Note: we have just gone to 6 different people simply to pay for the approved residency renewal! Finally, a week later, I am allowed to go (alone this time) and collect my daughter's residency. And this is relatively routine; ask Arthur about getting his son Jack's residency!

Similar patterns have been observed throughout the Middle East.¹⁰ The norm is for organisational design that is centralised and bureaucratic, where organisational power and authority is focused at the top, with decision-making exclusively in the hands of highest management.¹¹ A rigid chain of command is common, with a clear hierarchy of communication and control considered standard, even ideal. Khadra's Jordanian study of 75 senior Jordanian managers, for example, found that 80% saw no need for consultation in decision making, and 60% expressed the expectation of total obedience from subordinates irrespective of their desires.¹²

Although a rigidly hierarchical pattern of decision-making is standard, this is often balanced by a level of consultation, particularly in regions such as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf where the traditional use of a tribal council (مجلس الشورى – "majlis al-shoura") remains strong.¹³ However, even in contexts where consultation is practiced, delegation of responsibility remains a mostly foreign concept in Arab business: the general managerial pattern is for the top executive to seek intimacy with all operations of the organisation

¹⁰ M.K. Badawy, "Styles of Mideastern Managers," *California Management Review* XXII:2 (Spring 1980): 51-58.

¹¹ S. M. Abbasi and K.W. Hollman, "Business success in the Middle East," *Management Decision*, Vol. 31 No. 1. (1993), 55-60, S.A. Anwar and M.N. Chaker, "Globalization of corporate America and its implications for management styles in an Arabian cultural context," *International Journal of Management*, Vol. 20 No. 1 (2003), 43-56. Naser A. Aboyassin, "Managers' Belief In Employees' Job And Psychological Readiness And Employees' Participation In Decision-Making: A Comparison Between American And Jordanian Managers," DBA Dissertation, Argosy University, 2005, 82.

¹² Bashir Khadra, "The Prophetic-Caliphal Model of Leadership: An Empirical Study." *International Studies of Management and Organization* 20:3 (1990): 37-51. Naser A. Aboyassin's more recent study ("Managers' Belief") found that the Jordanian managers controlled the whole process of decision-making, suggesting that the high power-distance patterns evident in Khadra's earlier study continue to prevail in Jordan. Compare with Hassan Bakhtari, "Cultural Effects on Management Style: A Comparative Study of American and Middle Eastern Management Styles." *International Studies of Management and Organization* 25:3 (1995): 97-118.

¹³ Abbas J. Ali and M. al-Shakhis, "Managerial Value Systems for Working in Saudi Arabia: An Empirical Investigation," *Group and Organization Studies* 2 (1985): 135-151, Abbas J. Ali, "Decision Style and Work Satisfaction of Arab Gulf Executives," *International Studies of Management and Organization* 19:2 (1989): 22-37, Mahmoud M. Yasin and Michael J. Stahl, "An Investigation of Managerial Motivational Effectiveness in the Arab Culture," *International Studies of Management and Organization* 20:3 (1990): 69-78, Khalifa N. Al-Khalifa and Elaine M. Aspinwall, "Using the Competing Values Framework to Investigate the Culture of Qatar Industries," *Total Quality Management* 12:4 (2001): 417-428.

through consultation and regular reporting, while maintaining total authority over every element of the decision-making process.¹⁴ Abbas Ali has concluded that much of what appears to be consultation is effectively “pseudo-consultation.”¹⁵ This practice is equally common in Middle Eastern Christian circles: frequently I have observed Westerners serving on Middle Eastern committees frustrated when decisions are made, and nothing is ever done (it remains largely, as they would say in Arabic, “ink on paper”); or a decision firmly recommended by a committee is overridden by the person in authority with little if any rationale given; alternatively, the committee exists primarily to rubber stamp decisions that have already been made by those in authority.

Muna’s seminal study on Arab executive decision-making¹⁶ discovered that while consultative styles were approved in theory, in practice consultation was used almost exclusively for personnel-related decisions. In other circumstances a more autocratic style was evident. Results also varied according to country, with Egypt and Jordan showing higher levels of autocratic decision-making than the countries of the Gulf and Saudi Arabia. The age of the executive also had an impact on the results, older executives universally demonstrating a higher level of authoritarian behaviour than younger executives. Another observation was the general dislike Arab executives have for committee or group meetings. Where decisions are to be made involving more than one subordinate, “the executives seem to prefer individual-to-individual consultation with each subordinate thereby, de facto, avoiding majority decisions.”¹⁷ Under these circumstances it could be argued that “consultation” is merely a diluted form of autocracy.

My experience is that most Middle Eastern church leaders function in the same way. One pastor I know has articulated to me his laudable sense of responsibility for the church he serves. In reality this means that he needs to be informed of everything but everything, and reserves the right to override any decision made by any committee in the church. The end result is that the pastor is always exhausted and has significant health problems, while the lower levels of leadership know they are powerless and have lost any desire to take initiative.¹⁸

These vertical patterns of leadership stand in sharp contrast to the more horizontal patterns of many Western cultural contexts – particularly those of Holland, Britain and Scandinavia. By way of example, the predominantly British mission organization to which our family belonged for many years had no international director, and while it would have been beneficial for interacting with Middle Eastern leadership, we functioned very well (thank you very much!) with a matrix leadership of seven (perfect of course!) with the Chair leading the meetings but carrying little if any executive power. Nonetheless, more than one Middle Eastern leader expressed his frustration with the lack of a single person with whom negotiations could be made.

Most Westerners are unaware that vertical leadership patterns are inextricably linked to the driving force of honor. The role of the leader as tribal leader (شيخ القبيلة – “sheikh al-qabila”) is pervasive. Westerners working in relationship with Middle Easterners struggle

¹⁴ Abdulrahman al-Jafary and A.T. Hollingsworth, “An Exploratory Study of Managerial Practices in the Arabian Region,” *Journal of International Business Studies* (Fall 1983): 143-151.

¹⁵ Ali, “Decision Style and Work Satisfaction of Arab Gulf Executives,” 34.

¹⁶ Farid A. Muna, *The Arab Executive*, New York: St. Martins, 1980, 44-62.

¹⁷ Saleh Mohamed Barakat, “Profile of the Lebanese Executive.” M.B.A. thesis, American University of Beirut 1994, 32; Muna, *The Arab Executive*, 60

¹⁸ The widespread debilitating effect of high power distance seen throughout Arab society is discussed in some depth in Richard M. Hodgetts and Luthans, *International Management: Culture, Strategy, and Behavior*, 5th ed., Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill Irwin, 2003, 161.

to understand this pattern, as it runs counter to the Western value of individual dignity and initiative, and I have seen many Westerners come to despise or even attack those perceived as dictators, unaware that such behavior is often interpreted as dishonoring and undermining trust; the Westerners hence place themselves in direct conflict with the two central Middle Eastern values of honor and relationship.

A related issue is that of patronage. In Middle Eastern institutions the leader in a sense becomes the personification of the organization, representing the organization to the outside world, and bearing the responsibility of bringing credit to the institution (the value of honor) and protecting and caring for those under his or her patronage (the value of relationship). In the complex world of the Middle East those of us who come from outside find it crucial and appropriate to recognize and honor these patrons who facilitate our work and service, often at great personal sacrifice.

There are, however, some notable dangers – particularly for Middle Eastern Christian leaders. Alongside this patronage tends to come a focus on Image: after all any honour, respect, and dignity gained by the leader reflects back on the institution. I come from Australia, one of the flattest societies in the world, in which a common expression is “Cut down the tall poppies” – that is, anyone who rises above the pack should be cut down to size. In Australia university professors are generally known to their students by their first name only, and I have found the ever-present honorifics hard to get used to. With my students in the Middle East the best I can bring them to do is to call me Dr. Perry; and I shake my head when I receive official letters – which generally have as the addressee something along the lines of *فاضل حضرة القس الدكتور بييري شو المحترم* (“Fadil Hadrat al-qass al-daktour Perry Shaw al-muhtaram” – “the preferred Excellency Rev Dr Perry Shaw the honored one”)! It is noteworthy that in English “you can’t know a book by its cover,” but in Arabic “you know the book by its title.” While respect for leaders is universally advocated in the Scriptures, too many Middle Eastern leaders fall into the societal trap of building personal worth on externals – what you do (or appear to do), titles, status, position, belongings – rather than on internal spiritual qualities – a practice universally condemned by Jesus and the apostles.

Group Affiliation

Many years ago in Australia, my wife and I were involved in a very difficult church dominated by one large extended family that represented 1/3 of the church’s membership and 2/3 of the church’s governing board. In retrospect we now realize what wonderful preparation this experience was for service in the Middle East.

One of the most widely studied of all cultural patterns is that of individualism and collectivism – the extent to which the relationship ties between individuals is loose or strong. Individualistic societies have a loosely knit social framework in which ultimate concern rests primarily on the individual and his or her immediate family. Collectivist societies have tight social networks in which the individual’s identity is found primarily in relation to a wider group to which the individual has extensive obligations and from which he or she can expect widespread support and help.¹⁹ The famous Cartesian dictum, “I think therefore I am” could only ever have emerged in an individualistic context. More collectivist

¹⁹ Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations*, 76.

societies see the world somewhat along the lines of a counter to Descartes that I heard recently: "I am because we are, and because we are I am."²⁰

In every aspect of Middle Eastern life group affiliation, and particularly one's role in the family, has a pervasive influence.²¹ For example in his study of Arab executives Muna²² found a widespread acknowledgement of the centrality in organizational decision-making of family influence and pressure from the individual's wider community. The managers interviewed repeatedly mentioned the particular importance they gave in decision-making to "family reputation" (note the interweaving of "honor" and "relationship"). The practice of nepotism in the workplace was generally reported as normative, even preferable.

It is noteworthy that the English word "nepotism" with its very negative connotations is thoroughly Western: in the West the general belief is that employment should be on the basis of a person's individual abilities and initiative, and disgruntled rumblings often follow the employment of someone (particularly to a senior position) simply on the basis of family connections. As far as I have been able to determine there is no equivalent word to "nepotism" in Arabic. It is not merely that Middle Easterners see no problem in giving open preference to family members; the approach is so normal that it is not even worthy of a descriptive word!

The strong emphasis on relationships is pervasive in Middle Eastern social institutions. Studies from both Libya²³ and Kuwait²⁴ have discovered that management training programs in the Arab world tended to focus almost exclusively on improving social relations at work facilities, with near neglect of improving the quality of production. Muna's study of Arab executives found a strong expectation that their employees should view the workplace as a second family, with the manager functioning as a parent figure. A large majority of managers valued loyalty to the company more highly than efficiency,²⁵ the idea being that "if the employee is loyal we can always train him and improve his efficiency."²⁶

My own experience is that loyalty and trust (note again the emphasis on honor and relationship) rather than logic and reason are the foundation for bringing about change in Middle Eastern organizations: if those in leadership recognize your absolute loyalty to them as patrons, they will be more likely to trust you and support you. While this pattern certainly exists in the West, in the Middle East it is ubiquitous.

²⁰ A West African church leader, quoted by Duane Elmer, "Spiritual Formation: A Programme or a Culture?" plenary presentation presented at the Overseas Council Institute for Excellence in Christian Leadership Development, 28 October 2009, Beirut, Lebanon.

²¹ S. M. Abbasi and K.W. Hollman, "Business success in the Middle East," *Management Decision*, Vol. 31 No. 1. (1993), 55-60, R.M. Hodgetts and F. Luthans, *International Management: Culture, strategy and behavior*, 5th ed., Boston, MA: McGraw Hill Irwin, 2003, S.A. Anwar and M.N. Chaker, "Globalization of corporate America and its implications for management styles in an Arabian cultural context," *International Journal of Management*, Vol. 20 No. 1 (2003), 43-56, Naser A. Aboyassin, "Managers' Belief In Employees' Job And Psychological Readiness And Employees' Participation In Decision-Making: A Comparison Between American And Jordanian Managers," DBA Dissertation, Argosy University, 2005, 83.

²² Muna, *The Arab Executive*, 31-33.

²³ A. A. Agnala, "Management development in the Arab world," *Human Resource Management International Digest*, Vol. 5 No. 5 (1997), 38-41.

²⁴ A.A. Al-Kazemi and A.J. Ali, "Managerial problems in Kuwait," *The Journal of Management Development*, Vol. 21 No. 5/6 (2002), 366-376.

²⁵ See also A.A. Al-Kazemi and A.J. Ali, A. J., "Managerial problems in Kuwait," *The Journal of Management Development*, Vol. 21 No. 5/6 (2002), 366-376.

²⁶ Muna, *The Arab Executive*, 78-80.

Interestingly, despite the widespread emphasis on group loyalty, a certain level of individualistic behavior has also been observed in the Arab business world.²⁷ Research has found that most Arab employees generally prefer to work alone and the development of team projects is difficult if not impossible. There is a tendency for individual employees to believe that no-one else can fulfill their particular position,²⁸ to take sole credit for good deeds and to pass the blame to others, or to circumstances, when things go wrong.²⁹ In these and other cases the desire for “honor” overrides the desire for “relationship” – pointing perhaps to the greater strength of the former in the world view of many Middle Easterners.

The emphasis on affiliative behavior in the Middle East extends far beyond the family and company loyalty. In every aspect of life relationships are seen as key to getting things done. For many Westerners this can appear chaotic and inefficient. Relationships take time. People who come at inopportune times must be welcomed and cannot be put off. You must never seem to be trying to rush a person away, and you must never, never be seen to be putting business before relationships.

The Arab managers Muna interviewed frequently expressed their annoyance at the custom of friends “to drop in to the office for non-business chats over coffee or tea,” but all experienced great difficulty in discouraging social visits in the workplace, irrespective of how busy they were, due to the strong societal norm of hospitality and the priority of relationship over task.³⁰ The importance and value of showing hospitality before engaging in business was almost universally acknowledged. Reasons given for this custom included getting to know the guest on a person-to-person basis, evaluating the person, establishing trust, cementing relations, and putting people at ease.³¹

This stands in stark contrast to the way business is done in the West, where the common practice is to walk into the office and “get down to business.” Interestingly, while many Westerners – and even some Middle Easterners – see this time as “wasted” one recent piece of research³² suggests that the Arab emphasis on face-to-face communication and direct personal relations can be helpful in solving problems and saving time by minimizing misunderstanding, when compared to the more formal electronic communications increasingly being used by managers in Western countries.

In concluding his study on affiliative behavior in the workplace, Muna contrasted what has been described as the North American “hit-and-run” school of business behaviour, with its focus on “technique” and high pressure salesmanship, with the person-oriented approach of Arab managers – the Arab executive preferring a personalised relational approach rather than impersonal and transient relationships when conducting business.³³

²⁷ Halim Barakat, “Socioeconomic, Cultural and Personality Forces Determining Development in Arab Society.” *Social Praxis* 2:3-4 (1974): 179-204, Halim Barakat, “Beyond the Always and the Never: A Critique of Social Psychological Interpretations of Arab Society and Culture,” in Hisham Sharabi, ed., *Theory, Politics and the Arab World*, New York: Routledge, 1990, 132-159, Morroe Berger, *The Arab World Today*, New York: Doubleday, 1964.

²⁸ Khadra, “The Prophetic-Caliphal Model,” 47-49.

²⁹ Muna, *The Arab Executive*, 30

³⁰ Muna, *The Arab Executive*, 32-33. Compare with Hamady, *Temperament and Character of the Arabs*, 75-83, and Raphael Patai, *The Arab Mind*, New York: Scribner’s, 1973, 84-87.

³¹ Terri Morrison, Wayne A. Conaway, and George A. Borden, *Kiss, Bow or Shake Hands*, Holbrook, MA: Bob Adams, 1994, 97, 213, Muna, *The Arab Executive*, 72.

³² S.A. Anwar and M.N. Chaker, “Globalization of corporate America and its implications for management styles in an Arabian cultural context,” *International Journal of Management*, Vol. 20 No. 1 (2003), 43-56.

³³ Muna, *The Arab Executive*, 73-74. Compare with M.K. Badawy, “Styles of Mideastern Managers,” 51-58, Yasin and Stahl, “An Investigation of Managerial Motivational Effectiveness,” 69-78, Hassan

Let me give you a personal story to illustrate the point further. I remember distinctively in Damascus when the rental contract on our apartment was coming up for renewal, our landlord and his wife invited us over for dinner. It was a typical Arab feast with the requisite 10 dishes (for four of us) and a lot of laughter. Finally the coffee was served, and after the necessary niceties we prepared to leave. It was only as we reached the door that our landlord said – virtually in passing – “I presume you will be wanting to renew the contract on the apartment.”

The combined force of “honor” and “relationship” finds one of its most powerful expressions in the avoidance of open conflict and the widespread use of consultation and mediators (*wasit*) as the appropriate means of resolving conflict in the Middle East.³⁴ In the West (and particularly in countries like Australia and America where the individual is all important) people grow up being trained to be assertive, to have conflicts out in the open, to see clear communication as the most orderly, efficient and effective means for conflict resolution. In the Middle East such publicly expressed disagreements are frequently perceived as a sign of personal animosity.³⁵ Of all areas of cultural difference, I have observed that none other creates greater difficulty. Personally I sometimes despair of finding an appropriate compromise that could ease the frequent tensions and misunderstandings between Westerners and Middle Easterners that emerge from their vastly different approaches to conflict resolution.

Improving Intercultural Communication

I recognize that not all the patterns I have described in this presentation are universally seen in every Middle Eastern organization or institution. Moreover, for better or for worse we are seeing a profound Westernization of many aspects of Middle Eastern society – not least in organizational leadership. Nonetheless I would suggest that the basic values of “honor” and “relationship” are deeply embedded in the Middle Eastern world view, as indeed the values of “order” and “individual dignity and initiative” are in the West. The outworking of these contrasting understandings continues to influence relationships between Westerners and Middle Easterners, and we do well to articulate and address them. I would suggest that varied cultural understandings and the vastly different world views these understandings represent are among the chief sources of much of the conflict and misunderstanding that exist between the West and the Middle East today.

But while this cultural diversity can be a source of great conflict and distress, it is also has potential for rich and creative benefit and mutual learning. And again I would like to urge that *effective multi-cultural relationships both appreciate and embrace cultural diversity*.

The first step towards appreciation and embrace is an awareness of the differences and the desire to improve intercultural communication. In this regard I would like to give 12

Bakhtari, “Cultural Effects on Management Style: A Comparative Study of American and Middle Eastern Management Styles.” *International Studies of Management and Organization* 25:3 (1995): 97-118.

³⁴ David W. Augsburger, *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures: Pathways and Patterns*, Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1992, 192-193, Hamady, *Temperament and Character of the Arabs*, 72, Muna, *The Arab Executive*, 63-65, Cathie J. Witty, *Mediation and Society: Conflict Management in Lebanon*, New York: Academic, 1980, 6.

³⁵ Daniel Bates and Amal Rassam, *Peoples and Cultures of the Middle East*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983, 246.

suggestions, courtesy of James McCroskey and Virginia Richmond,³⁶ which I trust will facilitate the process of learning and growing together.

1. *Recognize your own ethnocentrism.* We all like to think that our culture is the best culture in the world. But if we are to grow personally and corporately, we must first recognize that such judgments are a matter of opinion not fact, and that a person from *any* other culture is most likely not to agree with you.
2. *Avoid criticizing anyone else's culture.* Be sensitive to the ethnocentricity of people from other cultures. They, like you, are proud of their culture. You gain nothing by making negative references to the other person's cultural views or practices. Such references will only serve to create enmity, and ruin your chances for establishing effective intercultural communication.
3. *Demonstrate respect for the other person and his or her culture.* If you show respect and sensitivity to the other person and his or her culture, it is more likely that you will be shown similar respect in return. Remember: You do not need to like another person's cultural orientations, but you do need to be sensitive to them and show respect for them if there is to be effective intercultural communication.
4. *Be empathetic.* Try to see things from the position of the other person's culture. If you can empathize with the other person and understand why he or she has a different view from your own, it is more likely that the two of you can reach some common ground for communication.
5. *Develop a higher tolerance for ambiguity.* Intercultural communication often presents one with situations for which one has no previous experience. If you develop a high tolerance for ambiguity, you are more likely to presume that there is some good reason for what is perceived as strange behavior, go along with it, and find out later what was going on. Duane Elmer has commented that "people usually don't act randomly or stupidly. ... [We] may think it random or stupid, but from the local people's perspective, they are thinking or acting out of a larger framework that makes sense to them. ... Too often we assume others are foolish or illogical simply because their reasoning is not self-evident to us."³⁷
6. *Reduce the level of evaluation in your messages.* Be descriptive: "That seems somewhat strange to me; can you explain why it is done?" rather than "I hate the way you all ..."
7. *Be particularly careful in interaction management.* You can be reasonably certain that the way you have learned to manage a conversation is not the same as the way a person from another culture has learned to do so. In order not to offend, the best rule is: watch and learn.
8. *Be sensitive to relational and social needs.* Finding a balance between task (the passionate concern of the Westerners and their value of order) and relationship (a significant factor throughout the Middle East and beyond into Africa and Asia) can be one of the greatest challenges we face in our richly intercultural world.
9. *Be aware of cultural differences in non-verbal communication.* We learn our non-verbal behavior from our culture, and we learn it so well that we assume it is "natural human behavior" that everyone uses. It isn't. In fact, some of the most innocuous non-verbal behaviors in one culture are seen as offensive in other cultures. This includes the way people dress, the honorifics (or lack thereof) they give, the ways in which affection and

³⁶ Adapted from James McCroskey and Virginia Richmond, *Fundamentals of Human Communication: An Interpersonal Perspective*, Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1995, 289-291.

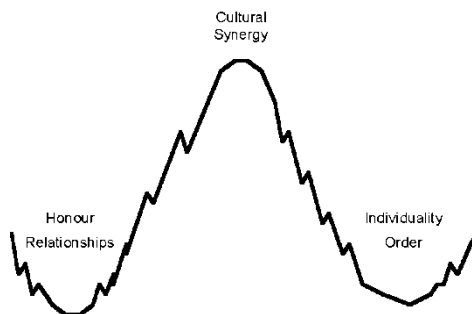
³⁷ Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Servanthood: Serving the World in Christlike Humility*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006, 126.

approval are shown ... and so the list goes on. The more we are aware of each others' ways the greater the potential for mutual understanding and appreciation.

10. *Be sensitive to both differences and similarities.* In intercultural encounters it is easy to become overly focused on the differences between people. While it is important to recognize these differences, it is equally important to recognize the similarities between yourself and the other. Commonality is essential to any form of effective communication, and intercultural communication is no exception. A small number of important similarities will go a long way toward overcoming problems caused by less important differences. We as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ should be uniquely equipped to recognize in one another our one faith and one Lord over all.³⁸
11. *Work to build better stereotypes.* The formation of generalizations is necessary to intercultural understanding. However, the more accurate and sympathetic your generalized picture of another culture, the more your communication with people from that culture will be enhanced.
12. *Never forget that meanings are in people, not in cultures.* Remember that people in any culture do not all behave alike. Therefore, while it is fine to start with cultural stereotypes, try to monitor the behavior of the particular individual with whom you are communicating in order to identify the important ways that person is different from the cultural stereotype. Not all Americans are objectionable hard sell businessmen, not all Middle Easterners are tradition-bound conservatives, not all Australians are apathetic slob. While these characteristics exist, they generally are not the norm, and there is a huge diversity in every society. Ultimately we are dealing not with "those Arabs" or "those Americans" but with "this Arab" or "this American" standing or sitting before me.

Conclusion

I must confess that even after 21 years living cross-culturally I am still largely Western at heart, and I frequently find myself standing in disbelief at the way things are done in the Middle East. I know I am not alone in this: from my own conversations with both Westerners and Middle Easterners I know that we frequently find ourselves standing in separate valleys with a mountain of difference between us.



Although I am frequently discouraged by the mountain, I nonetheless believe that particularly those of us who are *Christian* are uniquely positioned to rise above our differences to the mountaintop experience of mutual benefit and growth in a rich cultural synergy. In this rarified atmosphere we can recognize that God has placed us together not to come into conflict but *to appreciate and to embrace cultural diversity* on the path to love and service.

³⁸ Ephesians 4:5-6.

To reach that mountaintop experience, however, we must first be willing to do some sober cultural self-evaluation, what one writer³⁹ describes as decontextualizing, allowing our cultural value systems to be judged and purified under the light of the Scriptures. Only when we have the courage to look at ourselves and at others honestly, seeing both the evil and the good in our own culture and in the cultures of others will we be in the position to come to one another in humility and grace, and together work towards a rich synergy of personal and communal growth.

³⁹ Robert Pazmiño, *Foundational Issues in Christian Education*, 2nd ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997, 168-169.