

The Gulf Arab Management Style as a source of strategic advantage: Building Global Strategic Capabilities On The Foundations Of Local Culture

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Abstract. Global organisations have to maximize the development of their strategic capabilities whilst leveraging local advantages and opportunities. The management, acquisition and development of talent, in particular, can be an important source of competitive advantage. This paper presents a method for identifying and building strategic capabilities, together with an emerging process to identify those cultural and social attributes which might add to, or detract from, such capabilities following research by the Centre for Applied HR Research (sponsored by the UK Chartered Management Institute and in conjunction with the UAE Federal Government). A diverse and inclusive approach is proposed, that in contrast to the imposition of a standardized world-wide management and organizational development model based on Western cultural values. Also discussed is the suggestion that there is great value in policy makers, educationalists, managers and academics in emerging economies articulating their deeply held values and culture before submitting to models of management and business practice that have been developed in the context of dissimilar cultural frameworks. A brief overview of the component attributes and strategic utility of a ‘Gulf Arab Management Style’ is also included here.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper proposes an approach to the development of strategic human capabilities derived from the resource-based view of the firm (RBV). There is a wide body of literature dealing with this subject, by writers exploring the dynamic nature of resources [35] and others providing models of the formation and structure of resources (e.g. [22], [26]). However, there are still important dilemmas and debates in RBV and Human Resource (HR) theory, where empirical research is hampered by the lack of agreed theoretical frameworks or a clear research agenda.

In particular, this paper proposes, and illustrates through an example case study (a major global bank), an approach to the development of a differentiating resource and the strategic treatment of human resources. In the process, the case study illustrates how a differentiating strategic capability was identified and is being developed as a source of sustainable competitive advantage for the bank. Following on from the results of various studies in the region, the paper poses the question of whether a distinctive ‘Gulf Arab management style’ could provide a potential source of advantage for local organisations - often operating globally.

The main purpose of this paper is therefore twofold, firstly to present a framework for organisations to create differentiating strategic capabilities integrated with their strategic goals. Secondly, it suggests that a ‘Gulf Arab Management Style’ may well be a potential differentiating strategic capability and a source of advantage.

The paper first reviews the basic tenets and dilemmas in theories of RBV followed by a report on the illustrative case. A method for identifying and building differentiating strategic capabilities is then described. Next, the possible components of the Gulf Arab Management Style are briefly reviewed.

The conclusion briefly returns to the main dilemmas and summarizes the framework proposed in the paper.

2. RESOURCE BASED VIEW OF THE FIRM (RBV)

The Resource Based View (RBV) of the firm has proven to be a highly influential theory of strategy, the main principles of which have been developed in important papers published since the mid-eighties (e.g. [7], [8] and [30]).

Although there have been criticisms of various aspects of the theory (for example [12], [13] and [25] and see below), the basic tenets are that firms can achieve sustainable competitive advantage through owning and deploying valuable and (more or less) unique resources. The criteria variously described [32] as necessary for resources to be sources of sustainable competitive advantage (described here as ‘differentiating strategic capabilities’) include:

- Strategic value – The resource has to add real advantage
- Rare – So that unique advantage is conferred.
- Inimitable – So that competitors, having recognized a source of advantage, are unable to copy it.

- Non-substitutable – So that competitors cannot simply substitute a different resource for the one which confers advantage.
- Appropriable - the degree to which the firm really owns and can appropriate the value of the resource.
- Immobile – So that competitors cannot simply acquire the resource.

The criteria of inimitability has been the particular focus of much debate and will be explored further. Proposed limitations to imitation include:

- causal ambiguity - where it is difficult to analyze or understand how a capability was acquired or developed,
- path dependence - where the evolution of a capability is over a long period and in a specific context, which again makes imitation difficult and
- interconnectedness of assets - where the formation or value of one resource depends on its relationship to other factors in the firm. The complex set of interrelationships and context again makes the resource difficult to imitate.

The criteria of ‘Appropriability’ is particularly important where ‘people’ represent the resource in question, as employment contracts do not confer real ownership over the individual (or any human resource a person may represent). Grant [15] makes the point that strategic value lodged in a few people is therefore a high risk (and cannot provide sustainable advantage) as they can leave or alternatively bargain away most of their value.

RBV has also been accused of taking an internal (endogenous) perspective, in contrast with market led (exogenous) strategic theories such as Porter’s [31]. It is, in fact, clear that the characteristics of ‘rare’, ‘unique’ and ‘valuable’ can only be defined in terms of the competitive market. Competitive advantage is achieved when distinctive capabilities are applied in a particular industry and brought to a particular market [23]. Many of the criticisms of RBV also assume it is a static system, unresponsive to markets and competitor forces. These criticisms have largely been answered through the concept of dynamic capabilities [17], which suggests that firms continuously review and recreate their strategically important capabilities to meet changing market forces. The ability to change and remodel capabilities is thus a source of competitive advantage in itself. It is a small logical step to then suggest that, instead of applying existing differentiating capabilities to market situations, firms could apply RBV to identify and build new capabilities necessary to achieve strategic goals in the context of market and competitive forces. The obvious flaw is that if one firm can build such capabilities then they must be relatively easy to copy. Human capabilities however, particularly those at group level rather than individual skills, are extremely difficult to build but are also difficult to

copy. Their creation tends to be interwoven with organizational culture, management style and many other contextual factors which are very difficult to replicate. Thus, a process to build ‘change competence’ in one company may not work in another. Human capabilities, therefore, are one of the best sources of new differentiating strategic capabilities - by virtue of their complexity, path dependence, causal ambiguity and interconnectedness [33].

One objective of this paper is to suggest how differentiating resources could be deliberately identified and built by a firm to provide sustainable competitive advantage. The intangible characteristics of groups of people, such as knowledge, social capital and ‘culture’, are ideal candidates as they are highly valuable, difficult to understand, causally ambiguous and likely to have arisen over a long period in a particular situation.

A framework and case study for the creation of differentiating capability is now examined and whether a strongly cultural capability, such as ‘A Gulf Arab Management Style’ might also be a source of competitive advantage as it has high causal ambiguity, long path dependence and high interconnectedness through a complex set of relationships to Arab culture, religion and history.

2.1 Identifying and building a strategic capability: case study in a major global bank

The process for identifying and building a strategic capability first requires a clear understanding of the strategic intent of the organisation. In this case study, a workshop was held with the senior executive board of the bank to identify the key elements of their strategic intent. There were four main elements, of which one was to become a high value bank, gaining and retaining customers (and increasing market share) through exceptional customer service rather than competing on price. The Board then took part in a formal brainstorm session to identify possible contributory capabilities which might support that strategic intent. Twelve key capabilities were identified, including systems efficiency, complaint handling and Branch attractiveness (décor). These were then ranked according to importance in achieving the strategy but also according to the criteria for differentiating strategic capabilities: rare, inimitable, valuable etc. At this stage, the participants were instructed not to consider whether the capability could be realistically built. It was soon agreed that ‘friendliness’ of front line staff would be a true differentiating capability, especially as it was seen as rare in the industry (as an organizational capability) and inimitable due to its high causal ambiguity and interconnectedness. The Board members were then led through a process of defining the construct of ‘friendliness’ in their specific context. The output of this four hour session was a set of clearly defined strategic intent statements, together with ranked list of necessary and advantageous capabilities to focus on and a clear requirement to somehow build ‘friendliness’ of frontline staff as a differentiating capability.

Having defined the construct 'friendliness', the next stage was to work with the Human Resource department to design a plan to build the capability. The obvious ways to inculcate this capability were to ensure that 'friendly' people were recruited, that 'friendliness' was developed through training and that 'friendliness' to customers was recognized and rewarded. Interestingly, none of the existing processes of recruitment, induction, development, reward and deployment contained any mention of this key strategic capability. Any 'friendliness' that currently existed was entirely accidental!

One of the issues in trying to build the capability of 'friendliness' was that there was relatively little understanding of the concept and therefore it was difficult to design recruitment and assessment process to identify those people who already had the capability. The team therefore launched a research project to develop new assessment techniques, including psychometric instruments, and to identify any other organisations who did recruit and assess closely related competencies. From this research, a new web-based recruitment tool was designed which allowed potential candidates to assess their own capability in this regard and to self-select before further assessment via structured interviews (developed using the constructs of 'friendliness' as defined). These underlying constructs were also able to be used in designing new customer service training courses and, interestingly, could also be used to provide an approximate measure of organizational 'friendliness' to review progress in building the capability year on year. This example demonstrates a straightforward framework and method for identifying and developing differentiating strategic capabilities – even one as initially ill-defined as 'friendliness'.

The process requires:

A senior management workshop to:

- clarify strategic intents
- brainstorm necessary capabilities
- rank the capabilities according to criteria from the RBV (rare, valuable, inimitable etc)
- define the capability construct in the context of the specific strategic intent.

A project to:

- research the capability and how it might be created and measured
- investigate and learn from other organisations' related efforts
- Design and implement HR processes of recruitment, training, reward and measurement to build the capability

A measurement and review process to:

- ensure the capability is being developed
- make changes in the programme to reflect changes in strategic intent or market competitive conditions.

It could be argued that the intervention described above to create the capability of 'friendliness' could be copied by others, is imitable and therefore cannot be a differentiating strategic capability. Exceptional customer service is, of course, a key requirement for many retail operations, including many competitor banks. A sufficiently complex capability, integrated with existing culture, values and management style seems to provide adequate protection against imitation given that it is causally ambiguous, path dependent and interconnected with other aspects of the organisation. Culture, in particular, is highly path dependent and causally ambiguous and therefore provides a good basis for differentiating capabilities. It can be argued that organizational culture is often primarily a function of societal culture [3]. It is therefore interesting to consider whether any capability could be identified which is valuable but also derives from societal culture. Such a capability would be difficult to imitate, except by those organisations within the same society. In a global market, unique combinations of such capabilities deriving from, and taking the best from, various societal cultures would be extremely hard to copy. An obvious and valuable capability is 'effective management'. The next section briefly considers the relevant literature and poses the following questions:

- Could a 'Gulf Arab management style' be a differentiating strategic capability for companies based in Gulf societies
- Does a distinctive 'Gulf Management Style' actually exist – and what are its features?
- Is this 'Gulf Management Style' valuable and can it be defined and promoted in contrast to competing (largely Western) models?
- Can this 'Gulf Management Style' work in combination with other models in organisations with global reach or composed of many diverse socio-cultural components?

3. THE GULF ARAB MANAGEMENT STYLE

There is an increasing recognition that management styles and business practices in so-called 'emerging' economies are often well-founded and of high value. They may also complement or improve on predominant management and business models from the 'developed' world [34]. It is also true that some studies of non-Western management and leadership styles have a clear Western perspective involving negative assumptions about their utility and value. The Arab world, and the Gulf in particular, is of global importance politically, economically, socially and spiritually. Except for the notable exceptions discussed below, relatively little academic interest (as noted by Weir [37] has been shown in the business and management practices of the

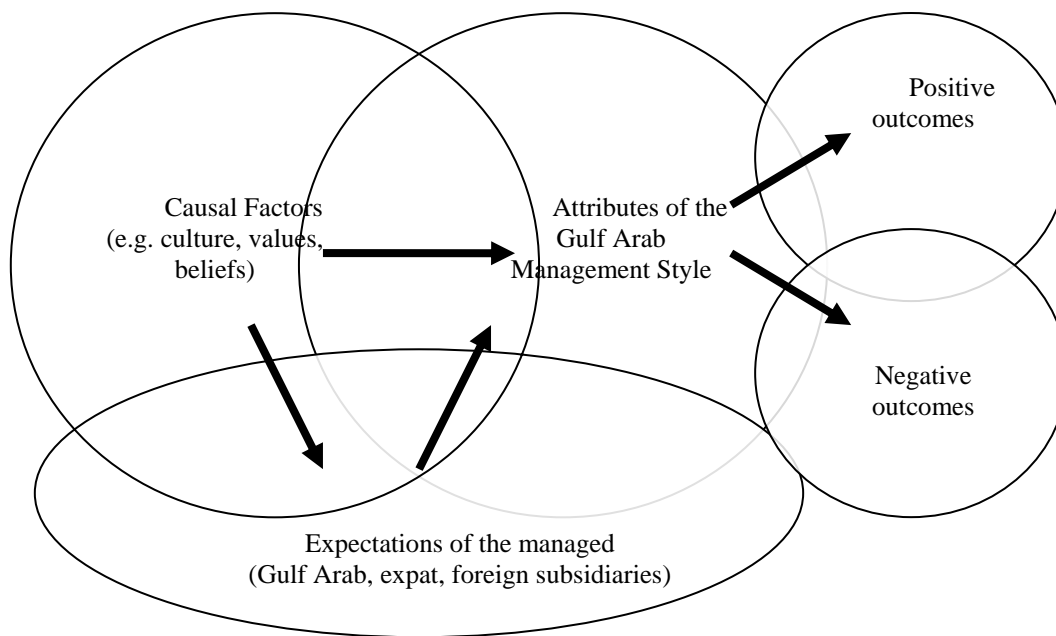


Figure 1: Gulf Arab Management Style: Causes and effects

region, which have developed over many centuries of tradition and religion. The Gulf is now home to some of the biggest and most successful organisations in the world (e.g. Saudi Aramco, SABIC, DP World), run by highly experienced Arab nationals, and its national leaders, such as Sheikh Mohammed of the UAE, Sultan Qaboos of Oman and King Abdulaziz of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are recognised as exemplars of leadership whilst remaining true to their cultural and spiritual traditions.

Several authors, academic and practitioners, have carried out research into wider but related subjects including Arab culture [4], Globalisation and the Arab world [14] and country specific strategic reviews (e.g. the UAE – [11].

However, as Weir and Hutchins [38:3] point out:

“Where other management styles and business practices rooted in apparently alien philosophical and ethical systems are encountered, as in the Arab Middle East, they are apt to be dismissed with the discourse of ‘traditionalism’ or ‘underdevelopment’ or stigmatised as inconsistent with the requirements of business efficiency. Many of these systems of ethics are embodied in cultural traditions which are, in origin, older than those of western capitalism, yet in contemporary societies are evolving and transmuting even more radically. It is incorrect and un-helpful to see them as merely deviant cases or as unsuccessful attempts to reproduce western modalities.”

Typically, Western practices are seen as the advanced end of a continuum with ‘traditional/foreign’ placed at the ‘primitive’ end. For example, Arab family business structures are seen as ‘simple’ with limited liability shareholder organisations seen as ‘complex’ and ‘advanced’. Western business practices are seen as responsible for global trading and economic success, with Arabic business as local, inward and peripheral. In fact, as we shall try to explore below, many features of the Gulf Arab Management Style resonate with the

most advanced ideas in management theory, many of which have failed to be widely implemented in the West. Rather than the Gulf Arab world adopting Western management practices wholesale, there is a strong argument for identifying and defending the most beneficial aspects of the Gulf Arab Management Style and for Western management theorists and practitioners to perhaps learn from this long and effective tradition of leadership and management.

Existing research has mainly focused on describing the cultural and societal factors that cause particular elements of the Gulf, or wider, Arab approach to management or on deconstructing various features of this approach. The former studies tend to utilise models of cultural difference (e.g. Hofstede [19] and Trompenaars [36] and sometimes discuss the impact of the expectations of the managed, under the assumption that they are derived from the same culture and society as the managers. There has been very little research on the utility or ‘worth’ of the Gulf Arab Management Style, other than a general assumption of negative worth. The cause and effect model (Figure. 1) aims to provide a framework within which existing research can be examined as well as highlighting gaps which may prove fruitful in guiding a future research agenda.

3.1 Causal Factors

The major factors which give rise to the approach to management adopted by Gulf (and wider) Arab managers, include the following:

3.1.1 Islam

The influence of Islam ranges through from a general appreciation of spiritual values and ethics [29], to guidance on appropriate attitudes [21] and specific instruction on practices such as not cheating, or practicing usury, respecting authority and taking personal responsibility for situations and people [1]. Islam states that work is spiritually rewarding in itself. Whiteoak *et al.* [39] found that the Islamic work ethic

was still a strongly held 'ideal' in UAE adults of all ages and both sexes;

3.1.2 Tribal/Family factors

Ali [1] points out that structure, strategy and organisation in the Arab business are often predicated by societal/tribal demands rather than pure business or market. He suggests, for example, that many of the large family holding companies have numerous and diverse operating companies partly to provide vehicles for sons (and sometimes daughters) to manage.

Arab executives see themselves as head of 'a family', irrespective of size or type of organisation, and often described themselves as 'father' or, in the case of younger executives as 'elder brother' [27].

3.1.3 Ottoman and European colonial bureaucracy

Much of the Arab world including, to a certain extent, the Gulf states, has been subject to, or affected by, European and Ottoman government structures and bureaucracies. This legacy includes a strict adherence to the chain of command, adherence to the scalar principle (communicating only through management layers) and centralised decision-making [1]. These factors all somewhat conflict with the culturally consultative style and political systems based around the *Majlis* consultative model (see 3.3.1 below).

3.1.4 Reaction to Western influences

Recent discussions with Arab executives highlight a dichotomy between adopting Western management models (and in some cases decrying 'old-fashioned' Arab approaches) and desire to retain culturally aligned Arab management practices (in some cases calling for a rejection of Western models). Westernization is seen as corrupting, materialistic, weakening family values and destroying the moral and social basis of society [6].

The influence of the West, or indeed other cultural models, is greatly increased as organisations within the Gulf not only employ and work with very large numbers of non-Arab staff but also own and manage overseas subsidiaries in non-Arab countries. An informed, considered and flexible application of a blend of the best management practices from other cultures, combined with the most valuable elements of the Gulf Arab Management Style will, it is argued here, provide a potential source of competitive advantage – particularly if applied in the context of the workforce culture and expectations [18].

3.1.5 'Arab' identity and role models

As in any strong culture, role models are used to embody the 'Arab' identity'. For example, Khadra [24] stresses the role of the Prophetic/visionary leader and Hawi [16] provides a model of the Islamic leader with numerous traits including: knowledgeable, stable, courageous, wise, in control, honest, assertive, humble, alert, caring sensitive, sincere, patient, cheerful,

cautious, receptive, willing to give advice, good organiser, rewarding, respectable and appreciative.

3.1.6 Obligation to society

Leaders in Arab societies (including managers) have a strong obligation to the community for which they are responsible (which could range from the tribe to the nation). Jreisat [20] found that a major distinction between the motivations of Arab and US managers was that the Arab managers had a very high sense of public responsibility and that the sense of nationhood (an extension of the tribe) was a strong source of fulfilment.

3.1.7 Culture

Many of the preceding factors influence the general culture of the Gulf Arabic societies which in turn impacts the Gulf Arab Management Style. Studies, including Hofesde's analysis [19] and Kabasakal and Bodur's 2002 [21] study, based on data from the Global Leadership and Organizational Behaviour (GLOBE) project [9] suggest that Arabic culture, as illustrated in Figure. 2, is relatively high on collectivism (where self-interest and work pressure is subordinate to the family/tribe or indeed other relationships) and also high on power-distance (the degree to which the power of the most senior differs to that of subordinates).

Kabasakal and Bodur [21] also note that the Arab 'cluster' is low on uncertainty avoidance, future orientation and gender egalitarianism. The Arab cluster showed a very strong patriarchal loyalty and acceptance of power and wealth within a rigid hierarchy, indeed, Islam seems to encourage the relatively uncritical acceptance of people in authority (Ali 1990)).

Abbas and Camp [5] confirm the importance of relationships over task and the desire to operate in a family structure with a strong father-figure and an avoidance of conflict. Yasin and Stahl [40] also confirmed that, in this affiliation-oriented culture, most managers would demonstrate a greater affiliation-orientation than effective managers in high power/achievement cultures such as the US.

3.2 Expectations of the managed:

The 'father' role requires the fulfillment of many expectations from employees. For example: advice on personal problems/family issues; help with employment; use of contacts or pressure on government or other agencies (mediation); carrying out family visits and hospitality and providing financial assistance/loans. The role also involves wider social obligations: to develop industry and country; provide financial support for community/charities; intermediate via *wasta* and provide a link between the organisation and community.

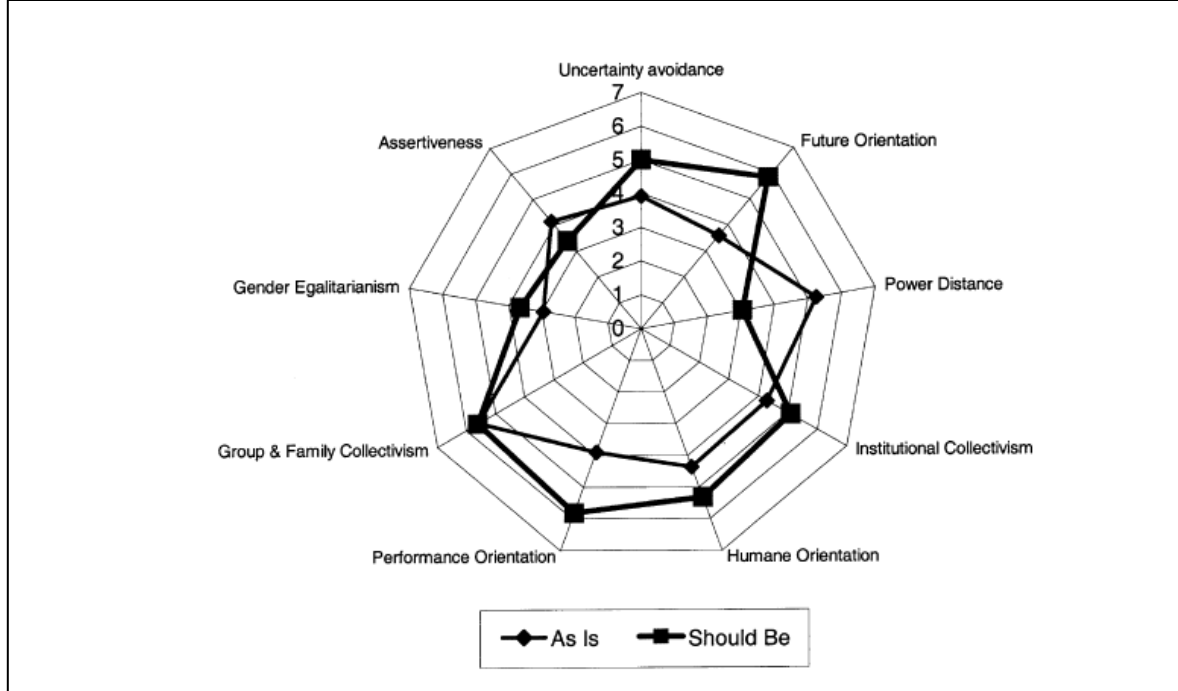


Figure 2: GLOBE dimensions for Arab cluster (Kabasakal and Bodur 2002)

3.3 The Gulf Arab Management Style: Components and Attributes

Some attributes of the Gulf Arab Management Style, identified at this early stage of the research, are now discussed. This discussion should be seen as an initial review of existing research. It also true, as noted by Ismaili [20] that not only do various aspects of the Gulf Arab Management Style vary between countries and sub-cultures, but also that Gulf Arab Managers adapt different styles depending on the situation and context.

3.3.1 Connections: *Wasta*

Business in the Arab world is conducted by building connections through social relationships before transacting business [38]. Once trust is established then business is transacted informally but with high levels of commitment. *Wasta* is a measure of influence through interconnected social networks based on kinship but extended to trusted individuals in the wider society. The general criticism of *wasta* (e.g. [10]) as nepotism and cronyism, ignores the benefits of working through a trusted network and, ironically, the general exhortations of Western management experts for managers to strive to build good networks. Simplistic criticism of this age-old and well-tried system, fails to distinguish between its more negative effects (e.g. promoting someone unfairly despite unsuitability) and its many benefits in building trust through strong social networks. Strong '*wasta*' is perhaps a competence in itself!

3.3.2 Person-oriented approach

Studies relevant to the Gulf Arab Management Style find that the Arab executive prefers a person-oriented, rather than an impersonal, approach. Meetings (normally one-to-one) will begin with lengthy social exchanges and 'getting down to business' would be seen as very impolite. Muna [27] found that 84% of Arab executives considered this practice beneficial for

getting to know each other and 'breaking the ice' whereas 18% thought it necessary but wasteful and only one person thought it a total waste of time.

3.3.3 Loyalty

The preference for this person-oriented style also means that executives value loyalty – in fact Muna (*ibid*) found around 70% of Arab executives valued loyalty more highly than efficiency. This is not to say that efficiency is not valued. The ideal would be a loyal and efficient employee.

3.3.4 'Open door' tradition

It is possible for a national, if the person feels strongly enough, to attend the ruler's *majlis* to request a favour, air a grievance or comment on an issue. Within organisations, 75% of executives would allow anyone in the company to visit the CEO, 17% would allow any level, provided they have gone through the hierarchy and 8% would only see immediate subordinates [28]. Issues raised were either work related (in which they are listened to but referred back to the relevant manager) or personal in which case the executive might take action or refer the matter to the appropriate department. The *majlis* open door tradition provides a useful counter to the preference for centralized decision-making and the scalar principle. The *majlis* can only work in the context of a commonly held view of the need to avoid conflict and maintain personal relations and a commonly held understanding of when it is appropriate to take an issue the *majlis*.

3.3.5 Duty to stakeholders

In the Western model, Directors and managers serve the financial interests of shareholders. Arab Managers and organisations have a duty to serve the interests of the collective society, tribe and family [2]. This could be described as reflecting advanced thinking on stakeholder management and corporate social responsibility.

3.3.6 Consultation and decision making

Arab leaders adopt a consultative, but somewhat autocratic style, where decision making is highly centralized [21]. Consultation is used, not only to ensure the decision is correct and based on good data, but also because people expect to be consulted, it helps avoid conflict and allows face-saving. Ismaili [20] found that consultation did include actual participation, rather than the somewhat passive consultation reported by others.

3.3.7 Knowledge and Learning

Organizational Learning and 'Knowledge Management' are important capabilities for organizational success. Arab business people share more knowledge, the closer the positions in a network. As noted by Weir and Hutchins [38], a disclosure may be preceded by the phrase 'you are my brother' to suggest a degree of closeness and privacy. Such disclosure, of course, also implies mutual obligation as appropriate to the closeness in the network. In regard to learning, Weir and Hutchins (*ibid*) suggest that, unlike Western Managers, Arab Managers tend to 'know through doing'. Knowledge gained from one situation will be applied in others and is used informally and interpretively. Formal training is now well-established in most large organisations but must, perhaps even more than in the West, be supported by subsequent practice, application and debate. This 'Arab way of learning' is very similar to more recent models of learning [32] and it would be particularly ironic if Arab businesses lose that potential advantage in a quest for increased modernization and efficiency.

3.3.8 Conflict Management

"I apply not my sword where my lash suffices, nor my lash where my tongue is enough. And even if there be one hair binding me to my fellowmen, I do not let it break: when they pull I loosen, and if the loosen I pull" Caliph Mu'awiyah AD 661-680 in Muna ([27]:63)

Muna (*ibid*) found that Arab executives were concerned not to allow open conflict to develop and non-verbal cues, third parties (mediators), procrastination and avoidance to prevent this. Consultation (and persuasion) was used to reduce the chances of conflict in the first place.

4. RESEARCH AGENDA: GULF ARAB MANAGEMENT STYLE AS A SOURCE OF COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

The results of this research show that it is difficult to deliberately create differentiating strategic capabilities as they have to be ambiguous and inimitable. Capabilities that derive from complex cultural factors are, however potential differentiating capabilities as they are causally ambiguous and difficult to copy. The Gulf Management Style, particularly if carefully blended with the best elements of other models, could provide strategic advantage. The next stage of the

investigations by the Centre for Applied HR Research, (Oxford Brookes University Business School, Oxford, UK), in conjunction with Oxford Strategic Consulting (Oxford, UK), is to carry out a major study to:

- Identify those elements which characterise and differentiate a 'Gulf' style of management and business practice.
- Develop a model of management which combines the best elements of Gulf and Western management style.
- Propose alternative training, development and learning methods by which the Gulf management style can be promoted and adapted to global business.

5. THE GULFSOL GLOBAL FORUM

The GulfSOL Global Forum provides us with an opportunity to share the views and experiences of a wide range of experts in order to guide, inform and develop this research agenda. If you would like to be involved in, or support, the research, then email wsj@cahrr.org.

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