

# Seven Habits of Effective Muslim Leaders

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By Br. Bashir Agboola

## What is Leadership?

Leadership is a trust (amanah) conferred on an individual by those he or she leads; A trust that he will guide them, protect their interest, and exert himself in bringing benefit to them while averting harm from them.

## The Basis of Leadership in Islam

Islam recognizes various forms of leadership, hence the Prophet (peace be upon him) said “Each one of you is a shepherd, and each one of you will be questioned about how he managed his flock”. The analogy of the shepherd is an excellent metaphor for describing the relationship between the leader and those that he serves. This metaphor relates to leadership in contemporary life, whether in a religious context such as in our Masajid, or in corporate settings. A Muslim should recognize that leadership is a trust from Allah, and a trust between him and the people that he leads, and that he is accountable to Allah for his performance, even as he should expect his followers to hold him to account. It is also important to understand that effective leadership can be learnt and isn't necessarily the exclusive preserve of the so-called “born leaders”. Learning the right lessons about leadership and following the examples of effective leaders are a means to honing one's leadership qualities.

## Leadership Role Models

The ultimate examples of leaders are the Prophets (peace be upon them all) that Allah sent. Their lives demonstrate the highest levels of leadership and sacrifice from which humanity will continue to draw benefit until the end of time. Hence, Allah describes them in the Quran by:

وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ أَئِمَّةً يَهْدُونَ بِأَمْرِنَا وَأَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْهِمْ فِعْلَ الْخَيْرَاتِ وَإِقَامَ الصَّلَاةِ وَإِيتَاءَ الزَّكَاةِ  
وَكَانُوا لَنَا عَابِدِينَ (21:73)

*And We made them leaders, guiding (men) by Our Command, and We sent them inspiration to do good deeds, to establish regular prayers, and to practice regular charity; and they constantly served Us (and Us only). - Al- Anbiyah 21:73*

وَجَعَلْنَا مِنْهُمْ أَئِمَّةً يَهْدُونَ بِأَمْرِنَا لَمَّا صَبَرُوا وَكَانُوا بِآيَاتِنَا يُوقِنُونَ (32:24)

*And We appointed, from among them, leaders, giving guidance under Our command, so long as they persevered with patience and continued to have faith in Our Signs. – Sajdah 32:24*

لَقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِي رَسُولِ اللَّهِ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ لِّمَن كَانَ يَرْجُو اللَّهَ وَالْيَوْمَ الْآخِرَ وَذَكَرَ اللَّهَ

كَثِيرًا (33:21)

*You have indeed in the Messenger of Allah a beautiful pattern (of conduct) for any one whose hope is in Allah and the Final Day, and who engages much in the Praise of Allah. – Al-Ahzab 33:21*

## **Leadership Qualities and Habits**

There are various qualities and habits that leaders must engender in order to lead effectively. These would often vary in form and relative importance depending on the context (form of leadership, organizational entity, community, time, and place) within which a leader serves. However, certain practices, or habits are very fundamental and are critical for leadership effectiveness and success. There are various examples from the Quran and the Sunnah and from the lives and examples of effective leaders in history and contemporary times that point to the importance of these practices in leadership effectiveness. We have identified and expounded on the most important of these practices in the following pages.

It is worth emphasizing however that these habits are not the only important practices leaders need to develop, but rather they are the foundation upon which effective leadership practices are built. These are also not limited to leadership within the context of Islamic organizations, but rather, they are equally important in various spheres of life.

# The Seven habits of Effective Muslim Leaders

- They have sincerity of purpose
- They practice leadership by example
- They develop and maintain trust
- They engage in consultation
- They possess and demonstrate a positive attitude
- They understand balance and relative priorities
- They strive to ease the affairs of their followers

## 1. They have Sincerity of Purpose

The most fundamental of the habits is that of sincerity of purpose. A leader has to serve a cause higher than his own self-interest. The Prophet (peace be upon him) (SAW) explained that actions are judged by Allah based on the intention with which they are performed:

إِنَّمَا الْأَعْمَالُ بِالنِّيَّةِ وَإِنَّمَا لِأَمْرِي مَا نَوَيْتُ - *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 54, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 1907*

Hence, for one's actions to be accepted, they must meet the criteria of sincerity of purpose and conformity of action (with Islamic teachings). Thus, a lofty intention is a necessary but insufficient condition of sincerity of purpose, as a sincere intention needs to be coupled with lawful and appropriate actions. Thus, we find numerous commandments in the Quran emphasizing these points.

قُلْ إِنِّي أُمِرْتُ أَنْ أَعْبُدَ اللَّهَ مُخْلِصًا لَهُ الدِّينَ

*Say: "Verily, I am commanded to serve Allah with sincere devotion; -Az-zumar 39:11*

قُلْ اللَّهُ أَعْبُدُ مُخْلِصًا لَهُ دِينِي (39:14)

*Say: "It is Allah I serve, with my sincere (and exclusive) devotion: - Az-zumar 39:14*

وَمَا أُمِرُوا إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ الدِّينَ حُنَفَاءَ وَيُقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَيُؤْتُوا الزَّكَاةَ وَذَلِكَ دِينُ الْقِيَمَةِ (98:5)

*And they have been commanded no more than this: To worship Allah, offering Him sincere devotion, being true (in faith); to establish regular prayer; and to practice regular charity; and that is the Religion Right and Straight. - 98:5*

## Benefits

Allah Most High rewards sincerity as only He can. Sincerity fosters a sense of accountability in the leader, and helps develop humility in him. The sincere leader is better able to lead without fear or favor and to uphold justice. Followers are also more apt to support a leader whose motivations are higher than his own self-interest.

## 2. They Lead by Example

A leader's first responsibility is to fulfil the legitimate needs of the community that he serves and to guide them in the attainment of their beneficial objectives. To be effective, the leader has to actually lead, literally and figuratively. He must:

- Lead from the front
- Serve the people (be a servant-leader)
- Demonstrate the qualities he seeks to encourage in the community or organization
- Inspire by action, not just with words
- Be a coach and mentor

The Prophet (peace be upon him) (SAW) said

إِنَّمَا الْإِمَامُ جُنَّةٌ يُقَاتَلُ مِنْ وَرَائِهِ وَيُتَّقَى بِهِ فَإِنْ أَمَرَ بِتَقْوَى اللَّهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ وَعَدَلَ كَانَ لَهُ بِذَلِكَ أَجْرٌ وَإِنْ يَأْمُرُ  
بِغَيْرِهِ كَانَ عَلَيْهِ مِنْهُ

*“Verily, the leader is only a shield behind whom they fight and he protects them. If he commands the fear of Allah the Exalted and justice, then he will have a reward. If he commands something else, then it will be against him.”* Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 1841

## Benefits

People are more apt to follow when the leader leads from the front by doing what he says, mirroring the qualities that he espouses, and by being, through his actions and conduct, the change he wants.

## 3. They Build and Maintain Trust

To follow someone requires trusting in their ability and capacity to do right by one. People will not willingly follow a leader, or support him or her if they do not trust in his ability to lead them, and to bring benefit to them. Trust however is a quality that must be earned (often with great effort, and over time) but can be quickly eroded if the leader fails to consciously strive to develop and nurture a relationship of trust with his community. For trust to exist and be sustained, the leader needs to:

- Not take the people's trust for granted
- Act with truthfulness and integrity

- Be transparent in his actions (people see actions and results, not intentions)
- Be selfless and just in his dealings with people

## Benefits

Leading people requires that they accept and trust in the ability of the leader to lead them and serve their interests. Leaders that earn the trust of their followers enjoy their steadfast support and loyalty, and are more likely to succeed.

### 4. They Practice Consultation (*Istikharah and Istisharah*)

Leaders are human, with human frailties and limitations of capabilities, knowledge and experience. Hence, Islam encourages everyone, leaders and followers, to seek help in their decision making process by engaging in consultation. Consultation is of two types – Seeking divine guidance (*Istikharah*), and seeking counsel of other people (*Istisharah*).

The Prophet (peace be upon him) (SAW) used to teach the companions to perform salatul istikharah in the same fashion as he would teach them the verses of the Qur'an. Jabir bn Abdullah narrated that the Prophet (peace be upon him) (peace be upon him) would say:

إِذَا هُمْ أَحَدَكُمْ بِالْأَمْرِ فليصل ركعتين

*"If anyone of you thinks of doing any matter he should offer a two rakaat prayer other than the compulsory ones and say.....(the istikharah supplication).*

Allah commanded the Prophet (peace be upon him) to consult with his companions:

فَبِمَا رَحْمَةٍ مِنَ اللَّهِ لِنْتَ لَهُمْ وَلَوْ كُنْتَ فَظًّا غَلِيظَ الْقَلْبِ لَانْفَضُّوا مِنْ حَوْلِكَ فَاعْفُ عَنْهُمْ وَاسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُمْ  
وَشَاوِرْهُمْ فِي الْأَمْرِ فَإِذَا عَزَمْتَ فَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُتَوَكِّلِينَ (3:159)

*It is part of the Mercy of Allah that thou dost deal gently with them Wert thou severe or harsh-hearted, they would have broken away from about thee: so pass over (their faults), and ask for (Allah's) forgiveness for them; and consult them in affairs (of moment). Then, when thou hast taken a decision put thy trust in Allah. For Allah loves those who put their trust (in Him). - 3:159*

Allah also describes mutual consultation as a positive attribute of believers:

وَالَّذِينَ اسْتَجَابُوا لِرَبِّهِمْ وَأَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَأَمْرُهُمْ شُورَى بَيْنَهُمْ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ يُنْفِقُونَ (42:38)

*Those who hearken to their Lord, and establish regular Prayer; who (conduct) their affairs by mutual Consultation; who spend out of what We bestow on them for Sustenance; - 42:38*

Sayyidina Umar bn al-Khattab (May Allah be pleased with him) advised:

واستشر في أمرك الذين يخشون الله؛ فإن الله تعالى يقول: {إنما يخشى الله من عباده العلماء}

*Seek the counsel of the righteous, for Allah Most High, says "Of all His servants, only such as are endowed with [innate] knowledge stand [truly] in awe of God"*

A leader should seek divine guidance as well as the counsel of the wise ones around him, and then move decisively to take action on the matters at hand, trusting in Allah.

## Benefits

Seeking Allah's guidance in deciding between lawful options is an act of worship and a means of benefiting from the divine wisdom. It also helps to strengthen the leader's resolve as he executes his decision knowing that he had sought Allah's guidance prior. Consulting people also allows the leader to leverage the various perspectives and experiences of the people that he consults. He is also more likely to enjoy the support of his followers as he is seen to be someone that listens to and engages others, rather than an arrogant, self-serving know-it all and dictator.

## 5. They Possess and Demonstrate a Positive Attitude

Leadership is hard, and good leaders are often underappreciated and face seemingly insurmountable hurdles and odds in the course of leading. They have to learn to be positive and to keep their spirit up even when there does not seem to be any cause for optimism. They have to do their best and then trust in Allah. They must

- Have a positive expectation of Allah
- Combine trust in Allah with meaningful action
- Put on a brave face even in the face of difficulties and great odds

The leader should have firm faith in Allah and pray for Allah's assistance, with the positive expectation that Allah will answer his supplication in one of the several ways that supplications are answered. He also needs to project confidence (while remaining humble) in the attainment, with the help of Allah, of the desired group objectives.

Many verses of the Qur'an explain the importance of trusting in Allah:

إِنْ يَنْصُرْكُمُ اللَّهُ فَلَا غَالِبَ لَكُمْ وَإِنْ يَخْذُلْكُمْ فَمَنْ ذَا الَّذِي يَنْصُرُكُمْ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ وَعَلَى اللَّهِ فَلْيَتَوَكَّلِ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ (3:160)

*If Allah helps you, none can overcome you: If He forsakes you, who is there, after that, that can help you? in Allah, then, let believers put their trust. – Qur'an 3:160*

Ibn Abbas reported: "The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, was optimistic and he did not see evil omens, and he liked good names". - Musnad Ahmad 2762

Abu Huraira reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace be and blessings on him, said, "Allah the Exalted says: I am as my servant expects me and I am with him as he remembers me. ....". In another narration of this

hadith, the Prophet (peace be upon him) said, *“Allah says: If he thinks good of me, he will have it. And if he thinks evil of me, he will have it.”* - Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 6970, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2675

Abu Huraira reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, *“Verily, thinking well about Allah is a part of excellent worship of Allah.”* - Source: Sunan al-Tirmidhī 3970

Abu Huraira reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, *“Call upon Allah with certainty that he will answer you. Know that Allah will not answer the supplication of a heart that is negligent and distracted.”* - Source: Sunan al-Tirmidhī 3479

## Benefits

Great objectives usually require tremendous effort to attain and call for great determination and optimism on the part of the leader. A leader’s attitude greatly influences the morale of the group he leads, hence it is important for the leader to demonstrate faith and confidence in the path he has chosen to lead his followers on, and to encourage them with his cheerful spirit, words and actions to follow along.

## 6. They Understand Relative Priorities and Balance in Affairs of their Community

Human affairs are not always neatly defined, and understanding the relative importance and priorities of issues is a critical competency of effective leaders. Leaders need to keep in mind the relative benefits or harm of various issues or actions they might be considering. Islam discourages extremism and Muslims are described in the Qur’an as the people of the middle way:

وَكَذَلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا لِتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ وَيَكُونَ الرَّسُولُ عَلَيْكُمْ شَهِيدًا

*And thus have We willed you to be a community of the middle way, so that [with your lives] you might bear witness to the truth before all mankind, and that the Apostle might bear witness to it before you... (Qur’an 2:143)*

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said *“Beware of extremism in the religion, for that is what destroyed those before you”* - Narrated by Ibn Majah in al-Sunan: Kitab al-manasik, 2:1008 #3029

The systematic approach that the Prophet (peace be upon him) took in introducing Islam to people, starting with building their understanding of Islam, and Tawheed (the Islamic ideology of the Unity of Allah) before progressing to the Islamic injunctions (dos and don’ts) as well as Islamic rituals, is an excellent example of how to effect change amongst people.

Many Muslim communities are perennially rocked by all manners of political crisis that threaten to tear the community apart. This is an unfortunate indication of a lack of understanding amongst the leaders and the led that the Unity of the community is an obligation that must be protected, and much of the issues they squabble over are at best, matters of individual opinions and policies that have relatively little or no religious significance.

## Benefits

Having a balanced outlook, and understanding the relative priorities of events and religious teachings help leaders to make better informed and more effective decisions. This helps to foster unity in the community, shows that the leader has empathy for his people, and in turn helps to build support for the leader amongst the people.

## 7. They Make Things Easy for their Followers

A leader must never lose sight of the importance of the well-being and protection of the interest of the lead. Like the shepherd, he must watch over them, provide for their needs (by facilitating their access to the means of meeting those needs), protect the weak and needy from threats internal and without, and guide them back and forth with gentleness and understanding.

Allah describes this in the relationship of the Prophet (peace be upon him) with the believers:

فَبِمَا رَحْمَةٍ مِّنَ اللَّهِ لِنْتَ لَهُمْ وَلَوْ كُنْتَ فَظًّا غَلِيظَ الْقَلْبِ لَانْفَضُّوا مِنْ حَوْلِكَ فَاعْفُ عَنْهُمْ  
وَاسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُمْ وَشَاوِرْهُمْ فِي الْأَمْرِ فَإِذَا عَزَمْتَ فَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُتَوَكِّلِينَ (3:159)

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لَقَدْ جَاءَكُمْ رَسُولٌ مِّنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ عَزِيزٌ عَلَيْهِ مَا عَنِتُّمْ حَرِيصٌ عَلَيْكُمْ بِالْمُؤْمِنِينَ رَؤُوفٌ رَّحِيمٌ (9:128)

*Now hath come unto you a Messenger from amongst yourselves: it grieves him that ye should perish: ardently anxious is he over you: to the Believers is he most kind and merciful. – Taubah 9:128*

لَا تَمُدَّنَّ عَيْنَيْكَ إِلَىٰ مَا مَتَّعْنَا بِهِ أَزْوَاجًا مِنْهُمْ وَلَا تَحْزَنْ عَلَيْهِمْ وَاخْفِضْ جَنَاحَكَ  
لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ (15:88)

*Strain not thine eyes. (Wistfully) at what We have bestowed on certain classes of them, nor grieve over them: but lower thy wing (in gentleness) to the believers. – Al-Hijr 15:88*

The leader should make things easy for himself and the people and not impose undue hardship on them.

Narrated 'Aisha (May Allah be pleased with her): *Whenever Allah's Apostle was given the choice of one of two matters, he would choose the easier of the two, as long as it was not sinful to do so, but if it was sinful to do so, he would not approach it. Allah's Apostle never took revenge (over anybody) for his own sake but (he did) only when Allah's Legal Bindings were outraged in which case he would take revenge for Allah's Sake.* Bukhari (Book #56, Hadith #760)

A leader must lead with kindness and gentleness, even when his efforts seem underappreciated by the people. The Prophet (Peace be upon him) emphasized the importance of dealing with people with gentleness, as we see in his various words of advice to Muadh Bn Jabal, when sending the latter to Yemen:

Abu Burda (May Allah be pleased with him) reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, sent Mu'adh to Yemen and he said:

يَسِّرًا وَلَا تُعَسِّرًا وَبَشِيرًا وَلَا تُنْفِرًا وَتَطَاوَعًا وَلَا تَخْتِلَفًا

*Make things easy and do not make things difficult. Give glad tidings and do not repel people. Cooperate with each other and do not become divided.*

The Prophet (Peace be upon him) also admonished Muadh about oppressing people, saying:

*Be on guard from the supplication of the oppressed, for there is no barrier between it and Allah.*

*Mu'adh ibn Jabal (May Allah be pleased with him) himself reported: The last advice given to me by the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, when I put my foot in the stirrup (as Muadh was setting out to Yemen) was that he said, "Make your character excellent for the people, O Mu'adh ibn Jabal."*

## Benefits

A kind and considerate leader will enjoy the support of his people, benefit from their supplications for him, and avoid the evil of their invocations against him. Allah will assist the kind leader who treats his people with kindness and does right by them.

## Conclusion

Leadership is a trust that has to be treated as such, and for which the leader is accountable (most importantly) to Allah, and to those that he leads. Many qualities are essential to becoming an effective leader. However, the preceding seven qualities, when imbibed and practiced, will in sha Allah, aid any leader, within various leadership contexts (religious and otherwise) to be effective and successful in fulfilling their leadership responsibilities.