

# Leadership of the Heart: Lessons From a 21st Century Arab Monarch

Reynold James<sup>1</sup> & Arwa Said Abdallah Al Saaidi<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Zayed University, Abu Dhabi, UAE

Correspondence: Reynold James, MBA PhD FHEA, Zayed University, P.O. Box 144534, Abu Dhabi, UAE.

Received: February 28, 2023

Accepted: March 29, 2023

Online Published: April 3, 2023

doi:10.5430/ijba.v14n1p139

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijba.v14n1p139>

## Abstract

The past half a century has witnessed a universal and publicly acknowledged bankruptcy of strong ethical and moral leadership within corporations and nations alike, aptly summed up by President Obama in 2009, as: “*the attitude that’s prevailed from Washington to Wall Street to Detroit for too long; an attitude that valued wealth over work, selfishness over sacrifice, and greed over responsibility*”. Given the deteriorating state of ethical and humane leadership within much of the current crop of leaders of industry and governments, there are a few valuable lessons to be learned from the life and work of Sheikh Zayed, the monarch of the UAE until recently. Most important perhaps, were his traits of selflessness, sharing, consensus building and striving untiringly to uplift those under his care, eventuating in the transformation of the UAE under his watch, from a state of impoverishment to one of prosperity. There is little difference between modern day CEO’s, monarchs and nations’ leaders. However, whilst they all enjoy immense authority and power, how and to what end they use the same is a matter of personal choice, that eventually determines their legacies. As monarch of a fairly new state, despite being relatively free of legal or institutional compulsions, Sheikh Zayed’s choices were always premised on the ‘others first’ principle, that transformed the UAE to its current state. Surprisingly, despite such rare qualities, little has been written about him in the mainstream western academic leadership and ethics literature, which is a shortcoming this article seeks to rectify.

**Keywords:** UAE, Sheikh Zayed, Level 5 leadership, authentic leadership, ethical leadership

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) had christened the year 2018 as ‘The Year of Zayed’, to commemorate the birth of its founding father Sheikh Zayed Bin Nahyan (1918-2004). An outstanding leader by any standard, he epitomized the heart of leadership, which with his far sightedness, transformed what was less than half a century ago a collection of seven barren desert sheikhdoms (‘Emirates’), into a prosperous nation with a per capita GDP (PPP) that rivals countries including Switzerland and Sweden, and with its passport ranked as the most powerful in the world -ahead of Singapore and Germany- for the decade ending 2019.

The nation turned 52 this year -and is going strong- contradicting the several naysayers who predicted its collapse within a few years of Sheikh Zayed painstakingly stitching it together in 1971. With its enviable balance sheet of all round development-particularly its economy, progressive socio-cultural outlook and religious tolerance—the country bears witness to the highly ethical, visionary, selfless qualities of its founder, and concomitantly, the strong foundations he laid for its sustained development and progress, resulting in its ability to punch much above its weight in several arenas today, both, in the middle east region, and beyond.

Given this backdrop on the one hand, and on the other, the publicly acknowledged universal bankruptcy of strong ethical and moral leadership witnessed by corporations and nations alike since the turn of the last century- and all of the current one- there are a few valuable lessons that the life and work of Sheikh Zayed holds for leaders of both industry and government: who he was, how and what he had set out to achieve, and did, and why his legacy will live on within the hearts and minds of the UAE for a very long time. Most important of all perhaps, were his traits of selflessness, sharing, and striving untiringly for the upliftment of those under his care- in other words his heart of leadership-conspicuously absent today for the most part, within the current crop of global level industry captains and heads of government.

The comparison between industry leaders and Sheikh Zayed – a modern-day monarch- is well justified by the contentions of leading academics Bolman and Deal (*Monarchs, Lords and Serfs*, 2000, pp117-118), and also Robert Jackall (1988, p23,28) about the minimal differences between modern day CEO’s and monarchs. These authors are amongst others who provide compelling comparisons between today’s CEO’s, and monarchs and feudal lords of

medieval fiefdoms. This analogy serves to foreground the fact that although both these figures-as with elected heads of government- enjoy immense authority and power, how and to what end they use the same is largely a matter of personal choice, and therefore a measure of the quality of their leadership -or its absence- which significantly influences how their corporations or nations fare, and the kind of legacies they leave behind.

Modern organizations often resemble feudal hierarchies: organizational kingdoms with monarchs, lords, and serfs. At the top is a monarch, who more or less reigns over everything. Of course, the title today is dressed up with contemporary lingo. In business, monarchs are called chief executives, presidents, and managing directors. In government they carry titles like president, governor, minister, or cabinet secretary. Schools and colleges have presidents, school superintendents, headmasters and principals. Whatever their label, monarchs preside over a corporate "kingdom." Their subjects often presume that the wisdom or folly of the monarch's rule is fateful for the realm's health and well-being.

Source: Monarchs, Lords and Serfs. Bolman and Deal (2000, p117-118)

One of the more popular quotes in Mark Miller's (2013) bestseller (*The Heart of Leadership: Becoming A Leader People Want to Follow*), reads thus: "*The most important leadership tool you have is not your education, your experience, or your know-how. It's your heart*". Given Sheikh Zayed's little education and experience- that his large heartedness more than made up for- there are arguably very few present day examples of those with his stature one could possibly think of, whose lives literally exemplify Miller's quote. Another of Miller's claims, that Sheikh Zayed's life arguably personifies, is about leadership being 10% Skills and 90% character.

As a modern day monarch with great power and negligible institutional accountability for his actions (sans moral and obligatory) to any legally constituted authority- since the UAE during its formative years was bereft of its current day institutions-Sheikh Zayed was at liberty to have done as he pleased with the oil revenues that began flowing into the state since the late 60's. He however chose to be abundant in his mentality, and from the very date of (officially) becoming the UAE's President, commenced with his lifelong mission of equitably distributing the nation's wealth in cash and kind amongst his countrymen. This continued in tandem with nation and infrastructure building at a frantic, unrelenting pace for almost 34 years, right until his death in 2004, resultantly, and by which time, he managed to transform the nation from one of impoverishment, to that of a wealthy, prosperous and modern state (Osman,2020). Described as a man in a hurry, he once said: "*I was dreaming about our land catching up with the modern world...I did not have the wherewithal in my hands to achieve those dreams. I was, however, sure that one day they would come true*" (Hellyer,2018).

It is pertinent to stress at this point, that Sheikh Zayed was under no obligation whatsoever to share the oil revenues that began flowing into the Abu Dhabi emirate (arguably 'his' state) since the late 60's, based broadly on the 'finders-keepers' principle. This is since by 1970, a year before the UAE was established as a nation, Sheikh Zayed was the recognized head of his ('Nahyan') clan that held sway for centuries over the Abu Dhabi region-legally 'his' 'emirate'- which alone has 10 per cent of the world's, and 94% of the UAE's oil reserves, and was for all purposes an independent entity until 1970. This was until the 6 other emirates along with Abu Dhabi merged to form the UAE state in 1971. With the exception of the emirate of Dubai, there was literally nothing that Sheikh Zayed stood to gain-economically speaking- by merging his rich region with the other 5 relatively resource-poor, barren emirates. However, despite this situation, and based on the historical ties and tribal associations dating back to the pre-oil era, he freely chose to be abundant in his mentality, accept the less well off into his fold, and to distribute his wealth across all regions of the nation, which is the case even today.

As absolute monarch enjoying the unstinted support and loyalty of the subjects of his oil rich region, and with no formal governmental control mechanisms such as ethics programs (Ascencio, 2022) to restrict his actions, did Sheikh Zayed have the choice of first filling his personal coffers before thinking of others' needs, or selfishly squandering the young nation's income? Most certainly, if he wished to. However he chose not to. Rather, his actions seemed always premised on the '*others first*' principle, which again, going by Miller (2013), is one of the five principles one needs to practice, to develop *the heart of leadership*.

In stark contrast to the foregoing scenario, are the dozens of heads of corporations and elected rulers of nations who during Sheikh Zayed's time (until 2004) -and in even greater numbers today- continue to prioritize their own selfish interests above their nation's and others, and with many of them serving prison terms for their self-centered, unethical

actions. A cursory internet google search (using terms such as ‘heads of state imprisoned’, or, ‘list of corporate criminals serving jail sentences’) would corroborate these claims, and yield names of leaders fallen-or falling- from grace, year-on-year, by the dozens.

One might be tempted to attribute the aforesaid largesse to Sheikh Zayed’s affordability, or, to his ability to recover from the nation’s oil revenues twice as much as he gave. However, there is a well known-and often narrated- anecdote from documented history that proves otherwise. The Saudis in 1952 had offered the young Sheikh a bribe of \$42 million (which today equals \$407 million, and reportedly the highest bribe ever declined) in exchange for a piece of land in the region of Al Ain and Buraimi (the latter now within Oman). This occurred at the time when oil had not yet been struck, and when in the words of the historian Al Fahim (2007), ‘Zayed needed every rupee he could manage, to keep his tribe going’. In his characteristic fashion, with his heart of leadership clearly showing from those early days too, he refused the offer regardless of its price, and chose instead not to compromise on matters of territorial integrity and community sentiments. In our present day money-for-contracts- world, one would arguably sooner find needles in haystacks than leaders with the strength of character displayed by Sheikh Zayed.

Amongst the more notable figures who were fortunate to have personally known and met with Sheikh Zayed during his life, and therefore vouch for his selflessness and generosity (besides his legendary capacity for consultation and mediation (‘shura’ and ‘tawassut’ in Arabic), were Sir Wilfred Patrick Thesiger, the famous English explorer and travel writer who crossed the Rub’ al Khali -or the Empty Quarter- of the great Arabian desert; Colonel Sir Hugh Boustead, the British Political Agent in Abu Dhabi; and the British scholar, Clarence Mann.

Whilst the global financial meltdown of 2008-2011 was squarely attributed to the bankruptcy of ethical and moral leadership, one of the more popular statements that derided this situation was that of former President Barack Obama, about: “the attitude that’s prevailed from Washington to Wall Street to Detroit for too long; an attitude that valued wealth over work, selfishness over sacrifice, and greed over responsibility...”

Arguably, an antithesis to these aforesaid leaders’ attitudes, and those of the several heads of state either facing trial or currently serving prison terms for putting self before nation, is the life and work of Sheikh Zayed. His legendary generosity and selflessness, farsightedness, tribal sense of right, wrong, and fair-play, served to contribute significantly to the nation’s ambitious economic diversification agenda, that effectively prevented its succumbing to the ails associated with rentier states, the Dutch disease and resource curse theory, that afflict several resource rich nations today.

There are thus major lessons that Sheikh Zayed’s life holds for today’s powers that be, with perhaps the need for practicing ‘shura’ and ‘tawassut’ -described earlier-being the more important of these. Scholars such as Shakeel et.al. (2019, p614) associate the qualities of *character; duty; and greatest good* with ethical leadership, and, for the leadership process to be robust. It is pertinent to mention here, that it is these qualities, as well as those of his generosity and equitable sharing of the nation’s wealth-since nation for him always came first -that made the UAE’s citizens’ living standards, and their overall happiness levels, a study in significant contrast to several comparable nations. A few cases in point would include Venezuela and Iran (Blandau, 2017), both of which are oil producing nations with far higher oil reserves than the UAE, however, with their internal situations and levels of poverty being a dismal story, as with the case of Nigeria, which too could have had a far better deal, had the leadership been more statesman like, and selfless (Okoi, 2019).

Unfortunately, the abundance of academic literature on leadership-or ethical leadership- is churned out mainly from the west, hence eulogizes primarily heroes of the western hemisphere, at the expense of neglecting stalwarts from elsewhere in the world and their lessons to share. The academic writings about Sheikh Zayed in English mostly assume the form of biographical narratives and documentaries, and lack a scholarly approach (Alhosani, 2012). A few notable exceptions to this are the works of Al-Mansoori (2003), who examined Sheikh Zayed’s leadership style from the charismatic leadership lens, and James & Al Saidi (2015), who analyzed the leadership style of Sheikh Zayed in light of the qualities one would need to possess, in order to qualify either as ‘Level 5’, or, as ‘Authentic leaders’. Reportedly, Sheikh Zayed satisfied the criteria for both. It is hoped that this article would serve to increase the awareness of Sheikh Zayed, who silently achieved during his watch for those under his care, what several others could also have, but either chose-or currently choose-not to.

On a note of conclusion, Robin Sharma, author of the bestseller ‘The monk who sold his Ferrari’, in yet another of his books poses a question – that also happens to be the title of this book- ‘Who will cry when you die?’

'Not a soul', would arguably be the answer to this question, if posed to those unethical, failed leaders whom President Obama had referred to in 2009, during his address to the workers of a General Motors Plant in Ohio 2009, or, for that matter, to the dozens of corporate and national leaders the world continues to suffer year after year since then.

The answer to the same question however -assuming it was posed to Sheikh Zayed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November 2004 when he breathed his last- would be a no brainer, as evidenced by the nation-wide outpouring of grief the UAE witnessed on his passing. What is noteworthy here, is that although about 90% of this nation's populace were expatriates -not citizens-they all grieved as one, when this leader's end had come.

## References

- Al Hosani, H. A. (2012). The Political Thought of the Late H.H. Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, Founder of the United Arab Emirates (1966 - 2004). *Durham theses*, Durham University.
- Al-Fahim, M. (2007). *From Rags to riches: A story of Abu Dhabi*. London Centre of Arab Studies, Ltd: London.
- Al-Mansoori, M. O. (2003). Charismatic Leadership Characteristics of President Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan of the United Arab Emirates. *Doctor of Public Administration (D.P.A.) Dissertation*. La Verne: University of La Verne.
- Antwi-Boateng, O. (2020). The Role of Norm Entrepreneurship in Nation-Building: Sheikh Zayed of the United Arab Emirates. *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 14(2), 268-287. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2020.1760546>
- Asencio, H. D. (2022). Ethical Leadership and Commitment to Behave Ethically in Government Agencies. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 45(12), 907-916. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2021.1928186>
- Blandau, R. (2017). Why is Iran Poor?. *Borgen Magazine: Humanity, Politics and You*. September 23, 2017. Retrieved 6th August 2020, from <https://www.borgenmagazine.com/why-is-iran-poor/>
- Bolman, L., & Deal, T. (2000). *Escape from Cluelessness: a Guide for the Organizationally Challenged*. New York: Amacom, pp. 117-118.
- Collins, J. (2005, January). Level 5 Leadership: The Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve. *Harvard Business Review*.
- Hellyer, P. (2018). Year of Zayed: remembering the vision of an innovative and inspirational leader. *The National*, 4th May, 2018. Retrieved 4th August 2020, from <https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/year-of-zayed-remembering-the-vision-of-an-innovative-and-inspirational-leader-1.727313>
- Jackall, R. (1988). *Moral mazes: The world of corporate managers*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 23-28. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01390690>
- James, R., & Arwa, A. A. (2015). Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan: Authentic Leader, Level 5 Leader, or Both: A Case Study. *11th International Business and Social Sciences Research Conference, Dubai, UAE*. 8th January 2015, Paper 474.
- Okoi, O. (2019). The paradox of Nigeria's oil dependency. Retrieved 24th July 2020, from <https://www.africaportal.org/features/paradox-nigerias-oil-dependency/>
- Shakeel, F., Kruiyen, P. M., & Van Thiel, S. (2019). Ethical Leadership as Process: A Conceptual Proposition. *Public Integrity*, 21(6), 613-624. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999922.2019.1606544>

## Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).