

An Islamic Perspective on the Characteristics and Criteria of Good Management

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This essay aims to examine the characteristics and criteria of good management as prescribed by the Qur'an and traditions, especially the sayings of Imam Ali (a) in *Nahj al-balaghah*. These have been recommended by the aforementioned sources with the intent of creating a prosperous society.

By "management" we mean the general sense of the word, which includes the management of organizations and other entities, as well as the leadership of society and the guidance of individuals in social communication. We believe that Islam is a comprehensive religion that gives importance to the rights of individuals and society. Furthermore, when it wants to make worldly, spiritual, or moral propositions, Islam always takes the purpose of man's existence into consideration. According to Islamic teachings, without proper leadership and management, society and its members will not be able to achieve prosperity and success.

Keywords: management, leadership, society, Islam.

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Introduction

Sometimes “management” implies the management of an organization. However, it is often taken in a generic sense and includes all types of leadership and guidance at any level of society whatsoever, such as leadership, guidance, and Imamate. It is in this broad meaning of the term that the word “management” is used in this article.

Various sociological and philosophical schools of thought admit that man’s social subsistence depends upon good leaders and managers. Without them, there would be no success in their social affairs. The only difference between these schools of thought is on the characters of leaders and the methods by which they are selected. History affirms the important role of leaders and managers. In fact, some historians are of the opinion that all of the victories and defeats that we see in history stem from proper or improper leadership. They hold that there is nothing more effective in the felicity or wretchedness of man than leadership and management.

In Islam, management and leadership are considered to be vital and necessary requirements for the subsistence of human life. In the Qur’an and Islamic traditions, godly and satanic forms of management have both been discussed. Man’s destiny depends upon who he obeys, a leader who invites him to the truth or one that tempts him to follow falsehood.

It should be noted that in this article, we do not seek to present a detailed outline of Islamic management. Rather, we simply want to state some of the characteristics of good management and social communication that have been emphasized in reliable Islamic sources such as the Qur’an, *Nahj al-balagah*, and the conduct of the Imams (a).

1. The Importance of Management

Islam acknowledges the fact that management is vital in the organization of society. This is because proper management introduces solutions for the challenges that society faces. Various verses of the

Qur'an and traditions have mentioned the importance of management and the need for a leader in society: "Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: 'I will create a vicegerent on earth'" (Qur'an 2:30). According to this verse, even before the creation of mankind, Adam was selected to be God's caliph and representative, and this indicates the importance of leadership and management in the Qur'an (Makarim Shirazi 1377 Sh). In addition, Prophet Muhammad (s) emphasized the importance of management in the following hadith: "Whenever the number of travelers reaches three, they should make one of them the leader of the group" (Jasbi 1369 Sh).

In a society whose members seek to communicate with one another properly, management is an unavoidable element. Every community needs a leader that understands the goal good enough in order to apply the proper methods to achieve that goal. The Prophet (s) was also appointed by God to relieve the burdens of people by means of his proper management (Jokar and Dehkurdi 1386 Sh).

2. The Characteristics of Values in Islam

In contrast to values in some schools of thought, Islamic values are not relative in nature. They do not change with the change of time and place. This is because the one who has delineated Islamic values is not a fallible being, but the Almighty and All-Knowing God. The values that Islam promotes are related to the individual as well as to society as a whole. There are social values that everyone should observe. These values can be related to large societies or limited and select societies. The various categories of values will not be discussed in this paper; rather, we will only discuss social values. Social values are primarily based upon two things: ideas and tendencies. When these two are combined, they give birth to a value. A value falls between a belief and a tendency. Here, by "idea" we mean our knowledge of reality, and by "tendency" we mean that which arises from these ideas in the form of propensities. Values are the roots of the choices we make. That is to

say, when a man adopts certain values, he only selects those actions that are in line with them. Hence, values are what directs our actions.

In Islam, social values are based upon three principles: The first principle is the belief in the idea that all human beings are God's servants. When man believes that other people, like himself, are God's creatures and that God is merciful to them, he becomes interested in knowing His Creator and feels happiness when he acquires this knowledge. When he views the world in this way, a theist comes to feel a special affection for all humans. This is a principle that stems from a specific view of man. As was mentioned, every value stems from an outlook, and the monotheistic vision gives rise to solidarity with other human beings.

The second principle is the belief that all human beings have the same parents, Adam and Eve. According to this belief, one comes to believe that other human beings are his sisters and brothers and that together they make up a large family. This insight leads to social affection. Thus, he becomes fond of all those who are related to himself in this way. This is a natural affection that exists in all human beings.

The third principle is religious brotherhood. According to Islamic teachings, there is a firm spiritual bond between all Muslims, which makes their spirits closely connected to each other: "The believers are but a single brotherhood. So make peace and reconciliation between your two (contending) brothers" (Qur'an 49:10).

3. Education and Management

Education is an effort to increase one's knowledge. It encourages a person to acquire new information, which leads to a change in his habits, behavior, and outlook on the universe, as well as his ultimate destiny. Education changes the static facets of a person. It allows a person to improve his abilities, skills, outlook on life, and social behavior. In other words, when one is educated, he is taught a series of methods to fulfill his needs and the needs of others.

Some scholars emphasize the importance of the innate ability to manage. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that with the advancement of technology and the development of the means of communication, every manager should also have sufficient information about the scientific fields that are related to his job. He must implement the knowledge he has about these matters until he is finally able to enjoy a relative domination over his area of expertise and achieve a detailed knowledge of the issues related to management.

Notwithstanding, some scholars consider the management of education as the most important organizational action. They believe that in programs of education the effort that individuals exert, as well as their patterns of behavior, should be documented.

As many managers have discovered, when they educate their employees in different fields, the quality of the work increases and so does the satisfaction of the employees. As a result, the organization will react more quickly to the changing markets they are catering to.

In Islamic traditions, it has been emphasized that one should be educated and efficient with respect to the task one is assigned to. In *Nahj al-balagah*, Imam Ali (a) says: "O people! Verily, the most deserving of all people to the caliphate is the one who is the most competent and who knows God's commands concerning it" (sermon 172).

In addition, in the propagation of culture, there are many other issues that must be taken into account. For example, without forethought, no organization will be able to achieve its goals. Before beginning any project, all aspects of the project should be taken into consideration and the possible results predicted. The managers who think about matters before doing them and see what they need to accomplish will be able to make better decisions and to drastically increase the chances of their success and effectiveness (Khidmati 1384 Sh). The Prophet (s) said: "I

advise you to think about the outcome of an action before deciding to undertake it. If you find that it will lead to progress, do it; but if it is an aberration, do not do it” (Kulayni 1388 Sh, 2:149).

In fact, according to Islamic sources, knowledge and practice are complementary to each other. The most important thing that leads to progress and development is the application of what one knows, and the knowledge that is not used is regarded as only a burden. On the other hand, people who undertake tasks without proper knowledge will not be successful. In the education system of Islam, we find many traditions that advise people to exchange ideas with one another and to increase each other’s knowledge.

4. The Features of Good Management According to Islam

The features of a good manager in Islam include certain necessary qualities, such as education and experience, which ensure the manager’s success. There are also some necessary qualities for a good manager with regard to his communication with others. For example, he should respect the rights of other people, be in a good mood when dealing with them, possess good social morals, and so forth. The following are some of the most important features of good management from an Islamic perspective.

4.1 Trustworthiness

Every person, in whatever position he is in, should be trustworthy. He should try to protect the properties and prestige of others. Imam Ali (a) advised Malik al-Ashtar to consider the trustworthiness of the person he wants to choose as his agent. This is to be done by examining their previous actions (*Nahj al-balaghah*, letter 35). In another letter to one of his agents, Imam Ali (a) writes: “The person who does not like to be trustworthy and purify himself and his character from deceit will open the door of ignominy in this world to himself, and in the hereafter he will be even more ignominious” (Dilshad Tehrani 1377 Sh).

4.2 Meticulously Preserving the Rights of People

One of the most important goals of a manager is preserving the rights of others. He should strive to secure people's rights and make this a hallmark of his general plan of action. Preserving the rights of people is an axis around which the government and statesmanship should revolve. It is the only way that political power can be stabilized. In addition to this, preserving the rights of people should be a principle that rules over all governmental programs and proceedings. No government can carry out its programs of reform without the support and participation of its citizens. Undoubtedly, when a manager seeks to observe the rights of people and strengthens his plans and actions in this way, he will enjoy the grace of God and also gain popular support. In connection with this, Imam Ali (a) says: "When rights are observed, support will be strengthened" (*Nahj al-balaghah*, letter 62).

4.3 Forgiveness

Another positive feature of all good managers is that they forgive others and do not remind them of their faults. This quality attracts people and secures their loyalty. As a result, they will be drawn to the organization and system of management. In his advice to Malik al-Ashtar, Imam Ali (a) advised him to select for key positions those who magnanimously accept people's apologies. Also, in another part of the same letter, Imam Ali (a) says the following: "Befriend the generous and chose them to be your agents" (Quchani 1374 Sh).

4.4 Attraction and Repulsion

Managers and leaders should be able to attract a large number of people, and, if necessary, reject and take them out of their organizations. It is clear that a manager's power of attraction should be stronger than his power of repulsion. Those managers who, for various reasons, are aggressive, uncompromising, and unable to restrain their emotions cannot be successful. Imam Ali (s) says: "The weakest person is he who is not able to find a good friend. And weaker

than him is the one who easily loses a friend he has found” (Aqajani 1385 Sh).

4.5 Good Experience

The good experience of a manager is a source of encouragement for the authorities that select him as a manager. A manager should be well-known and should have achieved a level of relative success in the tasks he had been assigned to.

4.6 Love and Affection for the Masses

The Qur’an states,

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 thee: so pass over (their faults), and ask for (Allah’s) forgiveness for them; and consult them in affairs (of the moment). (Qur’an 3:159)

Here, the Qur’an describes Prophet Muhammad (s) as being tolerant in his task of guiding people. In this way, the barriers are eliminated and problems are solved. As a whole, this leads to people’s spiritual and material development. Sociologically speaking, the power of love is very effective, and the best society is the one that is controlled by the power of love.

A statesman’s love for his subjects and their love for him are an important cause of the stability and continuance of his power. Without affection, leaders cannot lead the community or educate people with justice and equality. When people see that a statesman is affectionate towards them, they are naturally drawn to him. It is this attraction that compels them to follow him and obey his orders (Mutahhari 1341 Sh).

4.7 Patience in the Face of Hardships

Another important feature of good management is patience. Actually, nothing substantial can be achieved without it. Imam Hasan (a) was once asked about the nature of patience. The Imam (a) replied, “To suppress (literally, “eat”) one’s anger” (Harrani 1383 Sh). In Islamic

management, anger should be displayed only at its proper time, such as to remove the barriers that hinder people from attaining their worldly and other worldly felicity.

Another necessary part of good management, which is only acquired by patience, is justice. A person who is not patient cannot be just; he will be unable to preserve the rights of others and stand up for them. In his advice to Malik al-Ashtar, Imam Ali (a) says, "Fulfill your duties towards God, the people, your tribe, and yourself. Be fair to those who are kind to you. If there is someone who has the ability to undertake a task, he should maintain it" (*Nahj al-balaghah*, letter 53). In another letter, the Imam (a) says, "Be fair when you look at, point at, or greet people. In this way, the powerful will not become arrogant, and the weak will not become hopeless" (*Nahj al-balaghah*, letter 46).

Also, if justice did not exist in a society, its members would not feel safe and would always be agitated. Imam Sajjad (a) said that the ruler and the people both have rights which are tied up with one another: "Therefore, they [i.e., the rulers] should be just and try to be like a father or mother to the people. They should forgive their faults and should not be quick to punish them" (Shahykh al-Saduq 1413 AH, 2:214). Imam Ali (a) also said the following to Muhammad b. Abi Bakr: "Be tolerant with people. Look at all of them in the same manner and observe the rights of friends and strangers equally" (Harrani 1383 Sh, 119).

4.8 Fulfilling Promises

Fulfilling one's promise is one of the main qualities of good management. This is because all healthy social, economic, and political relations are founded on the fulfillment of promises. If promises are not kept, these relations will become unstable. Distrust should be replaced with trust, chaos with order, and weakness with stability. The Qur'an states in this regard: "Fulfill (every) engagement, for (every) engagement will be enquired into (on the day of reckoning)" (Qur'an 17:34).

When people fail to live up to their promises, the trust between managers and their employees is broken. This is because fulfilling one's promise is a sign of truthfulness. When one fulfills one's promise, it has an effect on the hearts and minds of others. In his advice to Malik al-Ashtar, Imam Ali (a) says, "When you promise the people something, do not break your promise. This is because breaking one's promise leads to God's anger" (*Nahj al-balaghah*, letter 53).

4.9 Being Open to Criticism

When a community is healthy and properly managed, its members will be able to criticize one another freely. This leads to the discovery of disorganization, irregularity, and weakness, and thus positive qualities increase and capabilities blossom. This characteristic prevents deviation and closes the door to flattery and betrayal. In his advice to Malik al-Ashtar, Imam Ali (a) says: "The best one is the one who tells you the truth—even though it may be bitter—and who does not unnecessarily praise you—even though this may displease you. Befriend the ascetic, and do not allow people to praise you ... as praise makes a man selfish and arrogant" (*Nahj al-balaghah*, letter 53).

Managers have been advised to be kind to all people, even if they are financially weak or socially inept, and to try to solve their problems. Also, they are instructed to behave decisively towards those with power. In *Nahj al-Balagah*, Imam Ali (a) says, "So, for important and imperative matters, select a soldier of your army that is kind to the weak and forceful to the strong" (letter 53).

5. The Challenges of Management

A manager is usually faced with different challenges. A successful manager will always attempt to first distinguish the nature of the problem and only then take measures to solve it. The term, "pathology of management" refers to the knowledge of the problems that one encounters when managing political or social affairs (Nassaji Zavare 1387 Sh). Below, we will discuss some of the challenges of management.

5.1 Arrogance and Selfishness

The primary cause of a manager's failure is arrogance and selfishness. This is a malady that is often seen in managers who are given too much power. If one is able to overcome his selfishness and arrogance when he is given a high position, he can do great good for others. It is for this reason that Imam Ali (a) advised Malik al-Ashtar and all managers to shun arrogance and selfishness: "Do not be arrogant, and do not tell others about your good deeds. Avoid being praised by others. This is because arrogance and selfishness are ways in which Satan ruins the good deeds of truthful men" (*Nahj al-balaghah*, letter 53).

Accordingly, arrogance and selfishness are the greatest threats to good management. They drag statesmen and administrators towards dictatorship. In the end, they can only lead to abjection and abasement. Therefore, in the Islamic system, the authorities should not be plagued with meanness, satanic temptation, arrogance, or selfishness.

5.2 Inaccessibility

When managers and those who wield power distance themselves from the people, it leads to their deviation. When statesmen are separated from the people, they are not able to properly implement the solutions in their management. As a result, the connection between the statesmen and people weakens. Imam Ali (a) emphasized the fact that a good manager should always be connected to the people, and they should be able to speak to him frankly without any fear:

Do not hide yourself from the people for long periods of time, because when you do so, you will not know what is going on in the government, and the affairs of the state will be damaged. Thus, some important issues become unimportant and vice versa. Also, good deeds will appear to be bad and vice versa. What is more, truth and falsehood will be confused. (*Nahj al-balaghah*, letter 53).

5.3 Neglecting the Poor

Another factor that ruins proper management is not paying attention to the poor and the weak classes of society. Imam Ali (a) advises the

managers and agents to pay more attention to the poor and to provide for their needs. He writes to Malik al-Ashtar: “Do not allow the glory of your power to entrap you. Do not allow your preoccupation with important affairs to take you away from less significant ones. Always think about the problems of the people. Do not forsake them. Also, check on the poor and humble people, since they do not have access to you” (*Nahj al-balaghah*, letter 53). Further on in the letter, the Imam (a) mentions that he heard the following from the Holy Prophet (s): “The nation that does not take back the rights from the oppressor [and hand them over to the oppressed] will never be blessed” (letter 53). Therefore, a good manager should try to provide for the basic needs of his people. He should try to make up for the rights that have been trampled, and he is responsible to eliminate the illegitimate accumulation and misuse of wealth (Javadi Amuli 1366 Sh).

5.4 Monopolization

Here, the word “monopoly” means giving power and privileges to one’s relatives or friends even though they may not deserve them, and thus unjustly depriving others of those advantages. Imam Ali (a) advised Malik al-Ashtar to avoid the monopolization of goods and instructed him to avoid oppressing others by giving preference to friends and relatives. He also advised him to avoid gaining an advantage over others by means of his friends or family (*Nahj al-balaghah*, letter 53).

One should also avoid using public properties for one’s personal interests. A good manager should avoid such misuses of power, since it is not in their best interest and will only lead to humiliation in this world and the hereafter.

5.5 Cooperation with the Rich

When those in authority distance themselves from their subjects, they gradually lose their power and fail in achieving their political and social goals. One of the greatest achievements of Islam was that from its beginning, it was able to remove unfit people from power and make them

conform to justice. From the beginning of his prophecy till his demise, Prophet Muhammad (s) abstained from avarice and never sought to amass wealth for himself or his family. What is more, he was never biased in his dealings with others. When addressing the task of collecting taxes, Imam Ali (a) said: “When you reach a group of people from whom you want to take the tax, only stay at their watering place and do not enter their homes. Then go to them maintaining your dignity and prestige and when you are in their midst, wish them peace and blessings of Allah and show due respect to them” (*Nahj al-balaghah*, letter 25).

5.6 Lack of Prioritization

The failure of administration is often caused by a lack of prioritization and not knowing what should be accomplished first. Turning oneself to the performance of administrative tasks without prioritizing them beforehand can only lead to confusion. Also, when one preoccupies oneself with unnecessary and unimportant tasks, the performance of important tasks is delayed. Imam Ali (a) acknowledges the fact that the secret of successful management lies in not paying attention to negligible matters and concentrating on important ones. He says the following regarding this matter:

Concentrate on important issues and avoid being confused [as to what should be done first and foremost]. This is because the forgoing of inconsequential tasks allows the important tasks to be accomplished. Undoubtedly, weakness, negligence, and a lack of priorities will only lead to ruin and destruction. This is one of the most important principles of good management. (Muhammadi-Rayshari 1377 Sh)

Therefore, it is necessary for managers to forgo unnecessary issues and to prioritize what they must do based upon their importance. With concentration, tasks will be fulfilled more quickly and meticulously. The most important tasks are to be given priority. Also, when there is a good plan, it is possible to properly manage organizations. Thus, they rapidly move towards their goals.

5.7 Inconsistency and Incompatibility

When management in an organization is inconsistent, the efforts of human resources are neutralized, resources are wasted, and the organization will fail to attain its goals. It is not possible for one to create a compatible, concentrated, and compatible system without compatible and sympathetic managers. Thus, when the agents in a social system are sympathetic to it, this will lead to a systematic social structure in which everyone moves towards a common goal. In his letter to Malik al-Ashtar, Imam Ali (a) advises him to create a network of devoted, compatible, and responsible people. He says that his governors should help the soldiers of their army (*Nahj al-balaghah*, letter 53).

5.8 Lack of Supervision

When a leader does not supervise or control the actions of an individual or a group working under him, this can create grave problems. We believe that Islam is a perfect and complete religion. If this is true, it must encourage organizations within its total political system to be just and to meticulously supervise their workers. This is because the health and success of any organization depend upon proper supervision. Prophet Muhammad (s) and Imam Ali (a) used to delegate agents to supervise the actions of the officials (Dilshad Tehrani 1373 Sh).

In fact, this is one of the most vital dimensions of good management in Islam and what makes it direct and effective. It is not enough for one to hire healthy and eligible people. Rather, one must also supervise them and to check if they actually perform their tasks properly. This is necessary so that they do not forgo their responsibilities. In his letter to Malik al-Ashtar, Imam Ali (a) said in this regard: “Supervise the work of agents by sending truthful and loyal officers to inspect them. This is because continuous and hidden supervision motivates them and makes them trustworthy and patient with those they supervise” (*Nahj al-balaghah*, letter 53).

In his rule, Imam Ali (a) supervised his agents and their actions very carefully from afar. He wrote letters to his representatives and operatives in different cities and provinces, recounting to them their strengths and weaknesses. This implies that the Imam (a) had assigned people to secretly observe their actions and then report them to him.

5.9 Social Injustice

The last thing that can corrupt management is social injustice. Injustice irretrievably damages social values. When the needs of a society are not met in a fair manner, it results in problems that cannot be easily corrected. When we observe the life of the Prophet (s), we see that he was always moderate and just in his dealings with people. In his treaty with Amr ibn al-Hazm he says the following:

When a person of a high position committed an act of theft, he was left unpunished, but when a person of a lower position committed the same act, he was executed. I swear to God that if my daughter Fatima stole something, I would cut off her hand. (Ibn Hisham 1371 Sh)

One of the salient features of Imam Ali's character was that he constantly fought against oppression and sought to establish justice. This was something that was not limited to the time period in which he had political authority; rather, this was true even before it. The Imam (a) advised Malik al-Ashtar to behave justly and to avoid oppression and discrimination: "Establishing justice in society and attracting people's love are the best things that can please governors" (*Nahj al-balagah*, letter 53).

Therefore, people in administrative positions should never favor themselves or their relatives over others. They should not try to use their power for personal interests or to further their social status. If a manager is not just and oppresses others, his popularity will wane amongst the people. It is nothing but injustice that leads to the general discontent of the masses. In this way, the foundation of a leader's strength gradually diminishes.

Conclusion

In this article, an attempt was made to present the principles of good management and proper social communication. This was done using the verses of the Qur'an and the traditions of the Holy Prophet (s) and his family (a), especially the words of Imam Ali (a) in *Nahj al-balaghah*. The criterion for good management is the dignity that a manager gives to those who work under him and the preservation of their rights by him. The leader of society also has to try to establish justice and preserve the rights of all people, especially the rights of the lower classes of society.

The means of communication in societies is progressing at a rapid rate, and management has changed as a result. However, according to the Islamic vision, a manager must always have a divine perspective and objective in his management. This is something that must never change, and always the aim has to be achieving perfection in the light of divine revelation.

The Qur'an states: "For we assuredly sent amongst every people a messenger, (with the command), 'Serve Allah, and eschew evil'" (Qur'an 3:36). In fact, the reason why the Prophet (s) was sent to people was to manage their affairs so that he could lead them to their felicity in this world and the next. He wanted to guide them to the worship of God and to protect them against the things that deviated from divine values and morals.

Therefore, managers should be aware of the distinction between Islamic management and secular management. In the latter, more than anything else, management is focused on the betterment of the material life. This is while Islam simultaneously respects both the material and spiritual dimensions of existence in all areas.

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