

To Lead is to Serve: Faith as a Path to Serve Humanity

Sumreen Ahmad

Sumreen Ahmad is Global Change Management Lead at Accenture. She focuses on leadership development, human capital and organization design, operational and business process improvement towards organizational maturity, and certifications and assessments. She is passionate about inclusion and diversity in the workplace, with a focus on women and interfaith relations in business.

Anchored in my Islamic faith teachings and further reinforced through my parents' lived example, I came to understand at an early age that my faith would be my path to serve humanity.

"I was only sent to perfect moral character"

The teachings of Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, the last prophet according to Islam after Jesus, son of Mary, has served as my most comprehensive guide in matters of one's relationship with our Creator, ourselves, those around us and with all of creation. As we strive in the path of continuous refinement, humility is a strength, not a weakness. Empathy is the basis for building connection. Gratitude and patience, even when one has little, is core to having perspective. Heightened consciousness, anchored in emotional intelligence, is necessary to meet people where they are at. Personal accountability, based on tempering one's ego, is necessary to govern one's self as a pre-requisite to influencing others and ultimately be a force of positive change in society. In our obligation to each other to foster a foundation of trust, mutual respect and understanding, honoring dignity is not only a God given right, but serves as the most powerful impetus to connect to a higher purpose. Finally, true leadership is not about power, authority or even titles – rather if you were called to serve – it comes with the burden of responsibility that should never be taken lightly. Understanding that we are one human family, these formative early teachings gave me a deep appreciation that when given the right surroundings, the untapped potential that exists within each of us can make all the difference we need to positively change the world in unimaginable ways.

A classic "type A", I went about my life checking every box in my inventory of "things to accomplish" not only to simply achieve – but to deliver nothing short of excellence. I took advantage of these opportunities to listen, learn and strive to always lead through the lens of *Ihsaan*, the Islamic dimension that constitutes the highest form of worship through excellence in work and in social interactions. More specifically, *Ihsaan* means worshiping God as if one can physically see God, knowing they while one cannot physically see their Creator, still having the utmost certainty that the Creator can see. All the while, recognizing the immense privilege of my experiences to not be entitled, rather to look for connections to unleash the same in others.

My Islamic faith has always been the vision for elevating our collective human character. It is the antidote to what divides us and necessary to elevate dialogue based on civility, empathy, humility, respect and trust by those driven by a higher purpose. By holding onto what was most sacred, my faith framework shaped my world view and served as foundational in my behaviors, decisions and interactions.

Twenty years ago when I accepted my offer to start my career in the corporate sector, it came with no surprise the reminder I got from my parents that "no matter what my paycheck or title, if I wasn't serving humanity, then I would not be serving my true purpose". The foundation had been laid - I had a responsibility to pay it forward.

FINDING CONNECTION THROUGH SHARED VALUES

This past decade has seen an increased focus on building organizational cultures that prioritize inclusion, equality and accessibility. Corporate social responsibility efforts have placed greater scrutiny on moral and ethical obligations of its' leadership back to the communities in which they serve. In turn, buyer values of Millennials and Zillennials have increased focus on finding meaningful connection to work, needing a higher sense of purpose and leaving a lasting legacy. Further, with rising rates of loneliness, we understand now more than ever there is a crisis of belonging. Given the amount of time people spend working, the workplace has rapidly become a focal point for creating meaningful social and community interactions.

The commitment back to employees and shareholders alike, initiatives racing towards 'getting to equal' have been on the forefront of corporate agendas. These cultures of equality are built on bold leadership, comprehensive actions influencing policies and protocols and creating empowering environments established on mutual trust and respect, inclusive of diverse perspectives, experiences and needs. The bottom-line impacts of this progress have proven to be immeasurable. In a post digital world, where innovation equals survival, cultures of equality translate into stronger employees' willingness and ability to innovate. This "innovation mindset" is six times higher than in companies where the factors are least common.

As someone who spends much of their day job leading and executing global culture change – I've had the firsthand privilege of working for a company that understands that in order to change the way in which the world works and lives, we would need to change the way our employees work and live. The success of a company's commitment to its employees to bring their 'whole and authentic' selves to work necessitates delving below the surface of traditional inclusion priorities. While equality is certainly a noble milestone, the aspirational objective is to build connections that fulfill one's deeper need to be heard, valued and feel belonging. At the very heart of this belonging is the deeply held belief that we are all connected by something greater than us, with the understanding that what we find sacred, in what shapes our values and beliefs can and will be honored, seen and heard.

My story is no different.

It was during the most grueling and intense period in my career, whereby experiences that could only be defined as 'character building' and with no shortage of moments of wanting to quit that this lesson truly came to life for me. Newly promoted, I was told by leadership that they had "*never met anyone with so much tenacity, patience and perseverance*". Although the more politically correct response might have been to accept the compliment and move on, it was in this moment that I dug deep and committed to bring to the forefront what truly drives me. **Accountability?** Belief in and to a higher power regardless of worldly success metrics **Integrity?** Living with purpose and being comfortable in the uncomfortable by honoring my beliefs and values in both words and actions **Stewardship?** The willingness to empower my team with the same degree of excellence core to my faith **Humility?** Steering clear from overt self-promotion with a sincere intention to be a voice for those that may not have the same influence or social capital.

My faith continues to be one of the few forces strong enough to counterbalance the business way of thinking. Rather than seeing work through the lens of materialism – a utilitarian approach for people to feed themselves and acquire things – I've always believed there is also a spiritual dimension. My work serves as an expression of my inner desire to be productive and to be service to my broader community.

The intersection of faith in the workplace removes the assumption that these two domains are somehow separate. My priority would always be to lead from a place of faith beliefs and values, while creating spaces for others to do the same.

Leading interfaith and faith initiatives across a global organization have only made it more evident that religious beliefs form an inseparable part of an individual's life. The value in demonstrating support via prayer spaces, halal/kosher food and other accommodations that honor faith inclusion is essential, yet transformational change demands that our journey pushes beyond that. It is about elevating the dialogue of what change is possible when we live from a set of shared core values. This includes reconstituting business practices based on morals and ethics necessary to inject consciousness, courage and compassion back into the system, fighting the urge to polarize rather seek to understand one another despite our differences, and to develop and recognizing responsible leadership by honoring the virtuous leader as foundational to long term organizational sustainability.

THE RISE OF THE VIRTUOUS LEADER

The quest for a better world falls on each of us. On the verge of the biggest mental health crisis and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the new breed of leadership will demand agility, resiliency, compassion and responsiveness like never before. Organizations ability to align with generational core values - while inspiring higher purpose beyond profit (considerations already understood by the faith driven individuals) – will serve as the new benchmark of success. Virtuous leadership – based on faith principles of prudence (making wise decisions), justice (giving everything and one their due), fortitude (courage to do what is right despite fear) and temperance (resisting temptation) – is even more critical to defy motivations built on self-interest, rather imperative in filling the voids and lead the charge towards collective healing.

At this pinnacle moment, I am even more convinced that our commitment to faith inclusion must extend across the business sector as we collectively raise the bar. In moving the needle towards understanding that - when done right - elevating the role of faith in business serves as a force for greater good for organizations, the communities we live in and for humanity.

And in doing so, I am reminded of my fathers' words, that it is only then that we can serve our true purpose.