

Keynote comments at Dare to Overcome 2022

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[Video link](#)

Bismillah / Assalamualaikum / Peace and Blessings onto all of you.

“Honey, always remember that no matter what your paycheck or title, if you aren’t serving humanity, then you will not be serving your true purpose. Because it is only when you serve that you truly lead.”

The year was 1998 – with a bachelor in Commerce in hand and an offer letter from Anderson Consulting (now Accenture) in the other - these words of wisdom from my father still carry me strong.

Being someone 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. The teachings of Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, the last prophet according to Islam has served as my most comprehensive guide in matters of ones relationship with our Creator, ourselves, those around us and with all of creation.

While a career in public service or the nonprofit sector may have been an easier path to fulfill my parents expectations, I opted to pursue in the path the corporate sector instead. As I have come to learn from so many working tirelessly in this space – it is our faith brings to life the core values and leadership principles that are so often cited in our company mission statements and organizational cultures.

Specifically, my faith has taught me that 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 ones ego, is necessary to govern oneself as a pre-requisite to influencing others and ultimately be a force of positive change in society.

It is in our obligation to each other to foster a foundation of trust, mutual respect and understanding. That honoring dignity is not only a God given right but serves as the most powerful impetus to honor one another and 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.

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. Throughout my career, I fully took advantage of 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. This was particularly natural working in the corporate sector – where commitment to high performance was highly regarded. One might say a perfect marriage to the foundational teachings of how I am meant to work – with the work I was doing.

Fast forward to 2014. This was a period in both my personal and professional life that brought on onslaught of ‘character building’ experiences of grueling intensity and plethora of reasons to want to throw in the towel on a daily basis. My own leadership - like many at the time - firmly believed that inclusion and diversity initiatives were fluffy at best – and there was never ever a good reason to bring race, religion or politics into the workplace and often challenging me in my ‘side of the desk’ efforts to lead our faith inclusion priorities. *It wasn’t until I found myself one day in a feedback discussion where I was being*

promoted, where this same lead told me that he'd "never met anyone with so much tenacity, patience and perseverance". I seized the opportunity— taking advantage of the 'aha' moment to explain just how much those values were engrained in me – not because of any corporate training I'd received - but because of how my faith drove my leadership style.

More importantly, I came to the realization that my story was simply a simple microcosm of so many like me in the corporate world – with the added responsibility of being in a position to actually engage and influence the systems to drive impact in a meaningful way. For it is the changing the systems we operate in that drive sustainable change.

Let me explain.

As someone who spends much of their day job leading and executing global culture change – I have 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 crux of 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 2019, the Business Roundtable went so far to declare that the purpose of a corporation must extend beyond simply the interests of its' shareholders.

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.

With the commitment back to employees and shareholders alike, initiatives racing towards 'getting to equal' have been on the forefront of corporate agendas.

Now research tells us that these cultures of equality are built on bold leadership supported by comprehensive actions that influence policies and protocols necessary to create empowering environments. 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 to establish mutual trust and respect, inclusive of diverse perspectives, experiences and needs.

The impact is significant and pivotal to driving changing attitudes and we now have enough data to demonstrate the bottom-line impacts of this progress. 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.

When considering rising rates of loneliness and mental health crisis - exasperated by the trauma felt by the COVID 19 pandemic, we also understand there is a full-blown crisis of belonging that now demands the business imperative to create psychologically spaces needed for people not just to survive but thrive. Given the amount of time people spend working, the workplace has rapidly become a focal point for creating meaningful social and community interactions.

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.

All of this was a very long elaborate way of making the point that the foundation for faith inclusion is not only strong but a lynchpin to truly unleash the power of our people, our organizations and society as a whole – particularly when considering faith as being quite possibly the most SACRED part of what we hold true and what drives a deeper connection that is so desperately needed in the world today.

Leading interfaith and faith initiatives across a global organization over the past 12 years have only made it more evident that religious beliefs form an inseparable part of an individual's life.

Finally, let me wrap up with the third piece of the equation – beyond our individual commitment and the work we do in our respective organizations – to speak to the privilege and responsibility we have as business leaders in our quest for a better world.

I have come to naturally understand that faith is core to our work and perhaps even go so far to say it's one of the few forces strong enough to counterbalance the capitalist business way of thinking. Rather than seeing work through the lens of materialism – a utilitarian approach for people to feed themselves and acquire things – my work is anchored in my spiritual foundation. The intersection of faith in the workplace removes the assumption that these two domains are somehow separate.

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. Rather, it requires a revival of the true servant leadership principles that are a very natural part of our respective faith teachings.

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 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 recognize responsible leadership capable of listening deeply to the voices that often go unheard.

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.

We started with a simple act fifteen years ago– with small group of a few who came together to find affinity through bible study - to seeing the momentum of changing attitudes and willingness to openly draw on their faith as we confronted our fears stemming from the plethora of death and other unknowns of the pandemic – to now having the difficult conversations necessary to find solutions necessary to confront the social ills that drive the horrific xenophobic based hate crimes we are faced with in America.

Having personally seen and led Accenture's efforts, I have a DEEP conviction of what is in the realm of possibility, and it excites me!

This work serves as an expression of our inner desire to not only be productive, rather to excel in our service to our broader communities and to lead from a place of faith beliefs and values, while creating spaces for others to do the same. 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.