

Sumreen Ahmad

Global Change Management Lead, Accenture

Keynote Speech: February 17, 2023

Brigham Young University Marriott School of Business

BYU MBA Case Competition: Faith and Belief @ Work

FOUR AREAS WHERE THE IMPACT OF FAITH IN SYSTEMS CANNOT BE IGNORED

Bismillah Ar Rahman Ni Raheem / Peace and Blessings to you all.

Thank you for the opportunity to be a part of this incredible event and to be in the beautiful state of Utah and your hospitality at BYU. Being here takes me back to my childhood where I lived 4 minutes away from the temple in Edmonton, Alberta and had the privilege of sharing my years as a student creating memories with the large contingency of my Mormon peers. The shared values of family, community, and service served as a mirror to my own influences, experiences, and expectations as a Muslim – making it so much easier to navigate the challenges that come with high school life.

As I stand here to share my thoughts and experiences on this very important topic of Faith at Work, I want

**4 Ways Faith
Impacts Systems**
Sumreen Ahmad

#1
**Purpose and
Belonging**

#2
**Operational and
Financial**

#3
**Getting beyond
Polarization**

#4
**Emotional, Mental, and
Physical**

to start with the reminder to myself first that I am simple one in a line of many. In his best-selling book, *Built to Last*, Jim Collins talks about the successful habits of visionary companies that allow for long term sustainability. I would take it one step further to say the work we do should be through the lens of “built to leave”. The opportunity to be here – with the next generation of trailblazers is such an incredible privilege in knowing that any small seeds that I have had a part in planting have the potential to flourish as a result of the work that you all go on to do - through sincere intention, prayer, and commitment to something much bigger than any one of us in this room this evening.

So, let’s delve deeper into this important topic of why Faith @ work matters – starting with the world as we know it today.

This past decade has seen an increased focus on building organizational cultures that prioritize inclusion, equality, accessibility and belonging. We now have a clear understanding that a commitment to building inclusive culture is core to talent strategy, has a direct correlation to organizational maturity, employee recruitment, retention & morale – but has also proven to have a significant bottom line impact – when considering the relationship between a sense of belonging and innovation.

Beyond the organization’s inner dimension, we can’t ignore the broader impacts stemming from the global events of the past few years. A global pandemic, a reinvigorated movement for racial and social

justice, and a harshly unbalanced economic dislocation – have changed the world of work and leadership forever.

The obvious impacts are significant and readily apparent: the continued predominance of remote work, a heightened focus on mental wellness and resilience and a strikingly high share of workers across all generations expecting to find psychological safety, belonging and purpose through their work. The world around us is constantly shifting, impacting lives both in and out of the proverbial office.

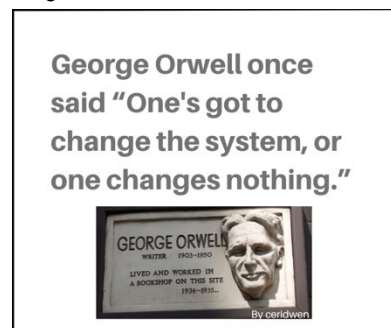
Specifically, the dimensions of what it means to work, let alone lead have blurred and, in some cases, erased the very borders that once defined it. These disintegrating boundaries are at the interface of business and society, corporate and private, people and technology, and the present and future.

For business leaders, there is a less obvious and more fundamental legacy of the past few years, one with more significant and long-lasting impact: the space within which they lead has itself shifted, generating new challenges and expectations, and requiring new skills to be effective. The intensified scrutiny on the moral and ethical obligations of leaders measured through corporate social responsibility initiatives have expanded the reach beyond shareholders' interests. The role of a business leader is thus not what it was even a few years ago.

Since 2020, business leaders, have been forced to engage – and take sides – on social issues as never before. The COVID 19 pandemic has been a compelling force behind the change. Faced with a health crisis of historic proportions, corporate leaders found themselves forced to engage publicly on topics that they previously thought were not part of their job description.

Soon thereafter, the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 and the ensuing widespread activism for racial justice in the US and elsewhere expanded further the perceived scope of corporate responsibility. Some of the resulting responses were moving, some stumbling, and some merely performative. And while the ultimate impact remains uncertain, one clear result is that social justice issues have moved squarely into the leadership space in which executives must operate. Social justice has become, in many parts of the world, every leader's business.

More recently, we have been confronted with the overturning of Roe V. Wade – exposing the range of sensitivities across deeply personal beliefs around reproductive rights and interpretations of when life begins.



These and other questions imposed on leaders are not just technical challenges but deeper questions of ethics and justice. The 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer reports that two-thirds of Americans believe that CEOs of large companies “have a responsibility to take a stand on important societal issues” regardless of whether the issues are related to their core business or not. Silence is no longer an option.

And while this commitment starts at the top, it is about actually about the individuals that make up these organizations. It's more than “just business.” It is about the underlying systems that make up business. And

it is about each of us as individuals who can influence these systems.

For people of faith, religious beliefs often form an inseparable part of our lives and quite possibly the most sacred part of what we hold true. Our faith and the lessons from our Prophetic traditions are key to driving a deeper connection that is so desperately needed in the world today.

And for those of us who have been both on the sidelines – but also in the eye of the storm – this transition and arguably transformation – presents incredible opportunity for each of us to be a force for positive change.

As the demographic makeup of organizations spans five generations and global influence of transnational corporations extends all facets of society - coupled with broader case for building inclusive culture as a backdrop - it should be no surprise that the foundation for faith inclusion at work is not only strong but a lynchpin to truly unleash the potential and power of our people, our organizations and society as a whole.

George Orwell once said, “One's got to change the system, or one changes nothing.”

When considering that religious influences are embedded in all dimensions of culture and our faith practices do not function in discrete, isolated, 'private' contexts rather show up in all parts of our interactions – we can come to appreciate that the virtues taught through our faith practices can actually be an enabler to influencing, reclaiming, and rebuilding the underlying systems we operate in to drive

sustainable change. Based on my work in this space over the past fifteen years – leading interfaith and faith initiatives – while driving global culture transformations – I have observed four key areas where the impact of faith in systems cannot be ignored. Consider this my wish list of what I hope you all will take forward to solve for as part of the next phase in this very important journey.

#1 - Purpose and Belonging: Focus on systems that prioritize aligning individual purpose with organizational purpose.

Companies are finding it increasingly hard to hide incongruence between their stated purpose and their behavior or desired impact to the communities in which they serve. Creating a mission statement with standard clichés to tick a box will no longer satisfy employers or customers. Boards are asking harder questions about purpose when they approve strategies and about character when they hire CEOs. Leaders will in turn need to ensure that those missions and values take tangible form, that they are ethically implemented, and that all employees are encouraged to act with courage when violations occur.

This past September, we all woke up to the news headline “Billionaire No More: Patagonia Founder Gives Away the Company to Mother Earth”. Yves Chouinard transferred his families ownership of Patagonia which was valued at \$3B to a specially designed Patagonia Purpose Trust and a nonprofit organization. This was created to preserve the company’s independence and ensure that all of its profits — some \$100 million a year — are used to combat climate change and protect undeveloped land around the globe. This news created quite a buzz – really putting focus on how serious organizations are about committing to their stated purpose – but also how it tied to individual employee engagement. Very quickly – on the heels of what we were calling the Great Awakening – people started to understand what was in the realm of possibility when it came to aligning individual and organizational purpose.

If leaders want to create an environment where people are not only incentivized to come work but also where they can thrive for the greater good, they need to start by understanding what matters most. Buyer values of Millennials and Gen Z have increased focus on finding meaningful connection to work, needing a higher sense of purpose and leaving a lasting legacy. The Patagonia example perfectly demonstrates what it means to get it right and yet – while so many were surprised – many of my peers across the interfaith community felt this as being very natural given the lens many of us were taught to approach our work.

To further elaborate, I have come to 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.

My individual purpose as a Muslim – to serve my Creator and His creation – drives me to a greater purpose to lead with excellence, integrity and a heightened consciousness beyond any title, ego or need for power. And whether I can influence one, a hundred or an entire organization, I know that my teachings are not in vain – rather exactly what is needed to solve for some of our greatest challenges.

#2 - Operational and Financial: Focus on building ethical, equitable and accessible systems for all.

While this one seems like the most obvious, it is unfortunately no longer the case. In an era of entitlement, greed, “do for self” behaviors, subjective truths, and insta answers to everything - we cannot take for granted the importance of the ethical, moral and virtuous teachings that are inherently in place when one holds themselves accountable to a higher power.

Last fall, David Green – CEO and Founder of Hobby Lobby, a devout Christian shared in an Op-ed his decision to give away ownership of his company to God. The business leader said he and his wife started Hobby Lobby with a \$600 loan, and they knew from the start that their bigger purpose "was to honor



God in all that we did." That bigger mission and purpose helped him remain grounded in realizing that he was just a steward, a manager of what God had entrusted him with – bringing forth an increased responsibility and stewardship.

I recall one of my earlier religious mentors reminding me that living through the lens of Ihsaan, which refer to the Islamic dimension that constitutes the highest form of worship through excellence in work and in social interactions – extends to something as simple as not taking a pen or a

paper clip from the supply room that is not mine.

With the rise scrutiny on equity, justice, and accessibility – we only have to look as far as our faith teachings to know that the solutions already exist – it is up to us to live, model and invite others.

#3 - Getting beyond Polarization: Focus on the Communication systems that foster trust, intellectual curiosity and understanding.

Communication systems that are built on the principles of engaging with relevant information when needed and delivering with empathy and transparency have untapped potential to combat the forces of polarization we all know too well.

For many individuals, the workplace is actually their first opportunity to communicate with somebody who speaks a different first language than they do, who grew up with a different socioeconomic background, who is a different race, ethnicity, or belief system.

We have been falsely convinced that bringing faith into the workspace is a bad thing – creating unnecessary friction that should be avoided. And while it is certainly true that our faith teachings are diverse – even a spectrum within faith groups – we also have more that binds us than separates us. Over the past few years, I have watched the culture narrative shift particularly through the pandemic– putting more emphasis on humility as a strength, empathy as the key to connection, gratitude as a basis for building resiliency and emotional intelligence to meet people where they are at. I hope you can all agree that these virtues are not secular or dreamt up by the corporate communications teams – rather the very core tenants of how the Prophets that came before us spread their teachings.

What is needed more than ever today is an insatiable curiosity and concern for one another. While such discussions can be uncomfortable, the openness helps build the relationships needed for strong teams and organizations. It drives the intellectual curiosity and humility to know what you don't know – but the desire to seek to understand more.

One of my personal inspirations and who I had the privilege to meet in 2019 is Hamdi Ulukaya – a Turkish Muslim who you might know as the CEO and Founder of Chobani, but more importantly leading the charge on why business needs to lead the path forward on refugee resettlement. He recognized that immigrants and refugees have been used as political weapons to polarize communities – often overlooking the unlocked potential that stems from the human spirit and inner resilience needed when one strives to preserve human dignity. Aligned with the Islamic faith teachings and the refugee struggle being very personal to him, Hamdi has leveraged his influence to create the Tent Partnership for Refugees, a non-profit organization that mobilizes the business community to improve the lives and livelihoods of over 36 million refugees forcibly displaced from their home countries. By rebranding the impact that refugees have on business and the communities that host them, and through a vision that puts people over profit, Hamdi has successfully elevated our individual and collective obligation to honor everyone's God given right to their human dignity.

Reframing the narrative on why and how to communicate about uncomfortable and difficult topics— while rebuilding the systems and frameworks for how we communicate can serve as a powerful impetus for building trust and creating positive lived experiences that spill over beyond our companies and into the broader society. If you still aren't convinced, check out Hamdi Ted Talk which is literally called The Anti-CEO playbook.

#4 - Emotional, Mental and Physical: Wellness and Resilience

Finally, I want to touch on the very important topic of wellness and resilience and the underlying systems that support our emotional, mental, and physical health. When considering rising rates of loneliness and mental health crisis - exasperated by the trauma felt by the COVID 19 pandemic, we understand there is a full-blown crisis of belonging that now demands the business imperative to create spaces needed for

Dating back to 1946, Chick-fil-A founder Truett Cathy committed to closing restaurants on Sundays purely based on Christian faith. Still true decades later, Chick-fil-A's remain closed on Sunday, giving employees a chance to recharge, while conveying a sense of caring and community to its customers. And despite being open for 14% fewer days a year than competitors, Chick-fil-A is dominating the fast-food industry.



their people to build resilience. Given the amount of time people spend working, the workplace has rapidly become a focal point for creating meaningful social and community interactions.

I remember in March 2020 – in the earliest phase of the pandemic in the US – when our Chief Leadership officer called and asked if the Interfaith community could take the lead on creating space for sharing and grieving in light of all the fear and death that surrounded us. It was a natural fit after all for us— however served as somewhat of a turning point for the naysayers to understand that there was only so much one could compartmentalize when faced with calamity. All of a sudden, people who I least expected started sharing how core their faith was in getting them through the uncertainty. This lived experience demonstrated the importance of permitting the appropriate expressions of an individual's spirituality as foundational to providing employees with a mechanism to satisfy their emotional needs.

For anyone who has ever attempted to get a Chick Fil-A sandwich on a Sunday afternoon, you will probably already know that it is absolutely possible to outpace the competition while still taking care of your people. Dating back to 1946, Chick-fil-A founder Truett Cathy committed to closing restaurants on Sundays purely based on Christian faith. Still true decades later, Chick-fil-A's remain closed on Sunday, giving employees a chance to recharge, while conveying a sense of caring and community to its customers. And despite being open for 14% fewer days a year than competitors, Chick-fil-A is dominating the fast-food industry.

Mental, emotional, and physical health is core to both individual and organizational resilience. This recognition is increasingly creating space to define the frameworks and structures that will be needed in the

future. Once again – no greater time than now to make sure that faith inclusion is part of the solution.

There is no question that given the incredible challenges that lie ahead – whether it's the impact of climate change, the inequities that exist around us, influx of refugee migration or the necessary interdependency across the government, for profit, non-profit and academia – the underlying systems must be revisited holistically and for the greater good – beyond the lens of utilitarianism and short-term gain.

Through the examples of Patagonia, Hobby Lobby, Tent for Refugees and Chick Fil-A, I hope you are able to see the potential that exists when faith is a driver to reconstituting the business practices necessary to inject consciousness, courage and compassion back into the system, fight 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.- As people of faith, we have an obligation to elevate the dialogue of what change is possible when we live from a set of shared core faith values.

As a Muslim, I believe that all actions start with my intention. And in the 81st chapter and 26th verse of the Quran, God asks us “So where are you going?” – with the answer inherently laying in the question itself. This intention, this vision, this path and ultimately the actions we take require finding the courage from within to live our faith to the truest of its teachings.

My own journey has found me in the most vulnerable of moments – tested by the burden of responsibility to look inward, hold myself accountable first, but having grace to grow – while also trying to lead others. This journey is not about me, or Fatima or even Rock Canyon – instead it is about what where we are able to take what we know and give it back to the world. And rather than letting the secular world re-package and often commoditize the most beautiful parts of my Islam – I am more inspired to find connections with my brothers and sisters in faith to collectively lean in and do the necessary work.

Thank you for choosing to be a part of this journey.