

Servant Leadership towards Career Success: An Islamic Approach

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Abstract: The purpose of this exploratory research is to develop an Islamic approach for career success for Muslim managers through servant leadership. The theoretical foundation of this study is based on spillover theory. The extensive review of career literature showed that the Western secular approach for career success is found to be dominant for various reasons. However, as Muslims want to be successful in this life and in the hereafter, it is more appreciable if they can follow an Islamic approach. As Islam makes everyone shepherd and answerable with regard to his flock, it is actually reinstating the practice of servant leadership, the humanistic and spiritual way of management. In Islam, servant leader is a person who makes efforts to be useful to his customers. This requires every Muslim to emphasize five key parameters of Islamic practice: justice, trust, righteousness, the struggle within oneself towards self-improvement, and promise-keeping. Greenleaf recently reintroduced this Islamic leadership concept saying “The servant leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve...”. This concept is having huge attention in the Western society. The present study is exploratory and based on a literature review. It identifies how Muslim managers are applying servant leadership approach to observe their career success. It also outlines potential key factors.

Keywords: Career success, Human resource management, Islamic approach, Servant leadership, Spirituality

1 Introduction

The extensive survey of career related literature showed that the driving initiative for career development and success is from the employee own. However, it is facilitated and supported by manager and organisation. The first approach focuses on the individual to develop his own human capital and to maximize his education and skill investments for achieving success in careers. This concept is based on human capital and motivational theories. The second structural approach relies on the management theory hypothesizes that organisational factors such as organisational size and internal promotional practices are prerequisites to produce individual successful in careers. The third behavioural approach assumes that career achievement is related to organisational career strategies including political and socio-economic (Hassan, 2009). As such it is argued that career success is to be achieved through self-confidence, personal approach, high performance, high communication skills, and interpersonal competence. Plenty of empirical researches have been found in the body of literature which are written in the context of traditional career success (Dries, 2011). However, the link between career success and other perspectives such as workplace spirituality, spirituality from Islamic perspective, servant leadership, etc. is found to be missing. The concept of worldly career success is based on Western approach where a little or no relationship exists with religion. However, a weak link is observed between career success and Hinduism and Christianity as these religions believe in life after death. On the other hand, Muslim holds a strong relationship with the life in the hereafter due to their belief and practice of Islam. As such the career success based on Western concept is not acceptable in Muslim community or at best it can simply be a subset of their career success. This is because Muslim wants to be successful in this world and in the hereafter. In addition, Muslim holds a different perspective about success in the hereafter compared to others with Christianity and Hinduism belief.

As a result, it is more appreciable if Muslim can follow Islamic approach for their career success as a holistic approach. Muslims want to be successful not only in their career but also in their family and social life and ultimately in the hereafter. This holistic nature of career success can only be guarded if it is seen from Islamic perspective. As the purpose of life in Islam is to worship Allah where all activities can be treated as worship as long as it is according to Islam and the objective is to seek pleasure of Allah. This worship provides the believers dual benefits to contribute to both spiritual and worldly well-being. With this purpose of life, men and women no longer can define enduring career success by only the amount of money they make or the position and power they hold. So an enduring career success for Muslims relies on their level of spirituality and servicing the human in addition to traditional concept of career success. Comparing

views of spirituality from Islamic perspective, a common ground was observed which includes the realization of the existence of supreme power, relationship with Allah and helping people.

Savickas (1997) stated that traditional career development theories are valuable in explaining various aspects of underlying process of motivation, job satisfaction, and career success but do not adequately address career success from Islamic perspective. Islamic scholars have written many articles on spirituality from Islamic perspective to intensify the belief and ritual practices for the purpose of common good and to relief of stress or pain (Rulindo et al., 2011). Plenty of research has been conducted on workplace spirituality to improve workers wellbeing, higher performance, and job satisfaction (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000). The pool of literature on servant leadership argued about its construct, application, link to religion and spirituality, etc. (Fry et al., 2007; Patterson, 2003). This paper presents the exploratory research on career success with direct and or mediating effect of spirituality and servant leadership from Islamic perspective.

Career Success

Career success is the positive psychological or work-related outcomes or achievements one accumulates as a result of work experiences. A career can also be defined as "...the sequence of individually perceived work-related experiences and attitudes that occur over the span of a person's work life" (Hall, 1987). Arthur et al. (2005) stated that the career is "the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time". Herriot (1992) introduced a third idea which is called 'careers in the head' as an internal perspective which recognizes beliefs and values, expectations and aspirations, as important as sequences of positions held. Regardless the various definition, it is unanimously accepted that career success comprised both objective success such as pay or hierarchical position and it also comprises the subjective success, which is an individual's evaluation of his/her career (Arnold and Cohen, 2008). Organisational researchers have struggled to develop comprehensive models of career success using demographic, human capital, work-family, motivational, and organisational variables. These models provided considerable evidence regarding the determinants of career outcomes, the roles of informal interpersonal behaviours, etc.

Career Success in Traditional View

Objective career success may be defined as an external perspective that highlights tangible indicators of an individual's career situation. These may involve type of occupation, task attributes, income level, and job status either temporary or permanent. These indicators are observable outcomes, publicly accessible, and concerned with social and official position rather than distinctive individual understanding. These outcomes of career success do not include less visible indicators such as job or career satisfaction, perceptions of career accomplishments, career commitment and career mentoring (Hassan, 2009). It was stated that objective career success refers to the work experience outcomes, such as status, promotions and salary, which are objectively observable. It suggests that to achieve higher level of work performance and subsequently obtain higher organisational rewards, individuals need to invest the most in human capital such as education, training, and experience. The variety of investment is ever ending and depends on perspective. These investments are knowledge, set of marketable skills, attitudes, aptitudes, and other acquired traits which represent individual capacities contributing to production and growth. It also guaranty career success in terms of objective matters such as salary and position.

On the other hand, subjective career success is considered as an individual's internal apprehension and evaluation of his career, across any dimension that is important to his/her life. (Arthur et al., 2005). It takes an individualistic approach; (Hassan, 2009) which refers to individuals' evaluation of career progress, activities and expected outcomes, relative to their own goals. Subjective career success is often defined by psychological paradigm which mainly comes from the employee's feeling of pride and personal achievement of various goals in life such as success, internal peace, family happiness which are judged by the self rather than the organisation (Hassan, 2009). The change in focus to subjective career success is also reliable with the change in the career context where people are expected to self-manage their own careers rather than relying on organisational direction. However, traditional career success focused predominantly on objective measures of career success. Abele and Spurk (2009) also argued that there is a strong influence of subjective career success on objective career success.

Factors that Impact on Career Success

The present body of career success literature is based on Western secular concept founded on social cognitive theory, social exchange theory, and or social learning theory where career success was mainly assessed and determined based on salary, compensation package, position, recognition, etc. This concept is clearly stated in the social cognitive theory where two basic perspectives of career performance are highlighted for career success. The first factor is the level that an individual attains at work (e.g. promotion,

salary, other benefits). The second factor is the degree to which they persist to perform in spite of obstacles (e.g. job satisfaction). Roziah et al. (2009) identified four main sets of factors to develop a model for career success which are individual factor, organisational factor, managerial competency factor, and individual's environmental fit.

Organizational Support for Career Success

With the effect of globalization and competitive job market, recently a significant shift of career success is observed (Dries, 2011). Organisation needs to convince employees by providing more opportunities, challenges, compensation and rewards than their competitors to retain their talents. Therefore, organisations are seeking creative ways to address such attraction, motivation and retention challenge. Organisations may meet this challenge by supporting employees to plan and develop their own careers to increase their career satisfaction. In line with this, it was argued that organisations should adopt innovative strategies to improve employees' career satisfaction and potentially increase the organisations' ability not only to attract but also to retain employees by supporting employee's career development. It was argued that organisational commitment is the key in talent retention, as well as in obtaining higher level of performance and desirable behaviour. Organisations should provide efforts on increasing employees' career development and satisfaction, concentrating on the factors that determine this satisfaction such as progress, pay, improvement in professional skills and competence. However, facilitating the attributes of objective career success is not enough in all work groups or cultures. Recently organisation is also moving in a direction to support work-life balance, and practice of workplace spirituality towards job satisfaction and career success.

Career Success in Islamic Perspective

In career literature the Western secular approach is found to be dominant perhaps because of lot of published empirical research and academic curriculum which emphasized objective and subjective career success. However, as Muslims want to be successful in this life and after death in the hereafter, it is more appreciable if they can follow a third approach for career success from Islamic perspective based on the teaching of Qur'an and hadith. The present literature review showed that there is no extensive empirical research has been published in career success in this third approach but it can be derived from the holy Qur'an and the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) which are basically *maqasid al shariah*.

Maqasid is an Arabic word for goals or purposes. In an Islamic context, the term *maqasid* refer to the purposes of Islamic faith, *zakat* (charity tax), pilgrimage, or of the Qur'an's and *Sunnah's* text. Syed and Hasan (2015) advocated the purpose of Islam is to guide human beings to make them successful, individually and in a society in this world and in the hereafter. The purposes of all prophets to mankind had been to guide human through the *ayat* of Allah and teach them that they did not know. These are to provide wisdom, cleanse impurities of all kinds from humans and enhance them. The *Shariah* deals with legal issues (the basic dos and don'ts) with the purpose to provide protection of self, faith, wealth, intellect, and progeny to continue life and to qualify for the dooms day (*yaoum al-qiyamah*). Two attributes of *Shariah* such as *hikmah* (wisdom) and *tazkiyah* (purification of souls) are significantly relevant to servant leadership and career success. *Hikmah* is more related to moral values, enhancement of collective life, and understanding of the basics of *Shariah*. It pertains to development, refinements, and enhancements of true success in this world and in the hereafter. It teaches us how we should act in our collective life based on our common understanding of *Shariah* in taking care of each other's psychology and position in the society. *Tazkiyah*, on the other hand, deals with individual souls, cleansing them physically, mentally and spiritually so that it provides enhancement and growth of human nature. It can be collective only in the sense of aggregating over individuals.

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) declared that man's good deeds live on in this world after his death, through the benefit that future generations derive from them. Abdullah bin 'Umar (May Allah be pleased with them) reported: Messenger of Allah took hold of my shoulders and said, "Be in the *world* like a stranger or a wayfarer". Ibn 'Umar (May Allah be pleased with them) used to say: "When you survive till the evening, do not expect to live until the morning; and when you survive until the morning, do not expect to live until the evening; (do good deeds) when you are in good health before you fall sick, and (do good deeds) as long as you are alive before death strikes" (Al- Bukhari, Book 1 Hadith 471). The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), as well as his companions, have taught by their practical examples that in order to reach a high spiritual and moral rank one should in any case maintain simple life style. The Qur'an clearly says that no one can forbid the good things of life, which Allah has created for His servants as "Who has forbidden the adornment which Allah has brought forth for His creatures or the good things from among the means of sustenance? Say these are for the enjoyment of the believers in this world, and shall be exclusively theirs on the Day of Resurrection. Thus do We clearly expound Our revelations for those who have knowledge" (Qur'an, 7:32). Human must trust that Allah will reward His slave with success if he

works with full sincerity and devotion. As such, Muslim should perform every challenge to the best of their abilities and be humble to Allah in their achievements and be patient in defeats.

Allah said in the holy Qur'an "Kill not your children for fear of want: we shall provide sustenance for them as well as for you: verily the killing of them is a great sin" (Qur'an, 17:31). In line with that a hadith narrated by Umar ibn Al-Khattab from the Prophet (peace be upon him) who said: "If you were to rely upon Allah with the required reliance, then He would provide for you just as a bird is provided for, it goes out in the morning empty, and returns full" (Jami' at-Tirmidhi 4(10), 2344).

Reliance on Allah is one of the most important reasons of getting sustenance in this life. Allah said: And whoever fears Allah, He will provide him a way out and will provide for him from an unforeseen direction. And whoever relies on Allah, He is sufficient for him (Qur'an, 65:2-3). However, reliance on Allah does not mean not working or not striving for sustenance. The bird flies out in the morning in pursuit of its sustenance instead of being idle. The true reliance in the pursuit of acquiring something that benefit and avoiding something that harms and leaving these issues up to Allah along with the belief that no one gives or refuses and harms or benefits except Allah. Allah orders us to rely on Him and to strive for our objectives as "And prepare against them all that you are capable of in forms of strength and ranks of horses (Qur'an, 8:60)" and "And, when the [Friday] prayer is finished, go forth in the land and seek from the bounties of Allah and mention/remember Allah much that perhaps you may be successful" (Qur'an, 62:10).

Servant Leadership

The old concept 'servant leadership' has been revived as one of the most provocative discoveries in the evolution of leadership theory. Servant leadership is a radical approach to management because it is humanistic and spiritual rather than rational and mechanistic. Servant leadership is transcendental not only because it is concerned with a higher influence and a higher power, but also because it transcends self-interests in the service of others. To practice servant leadership, leaders need to empty themselves and their pride, their selfishness and worldly aspirations. In other words, acquiring attitudes and behaviours of humility is not enough. Servant leadership demands the radical step of sacrificing self-interest and dying with Christ on the cross (Wong and Page, 2003). As such there are attributes of servant leadership to promote spirituality. The focus is not leadership style rather to foster spirituality and peace of the service provider Muslim managers. Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2010) argued that there is a link between spirituality and servant leadership and stated that servant leadership is positively related to spirituality to go beyond one's own self-interest which begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Khaliq (2011) stated that servant leadership is a moral management approach founded on values, ethics, principles, virtues, morality and spirituality to ensure maximum effectiveness. Dennis and Bocarnea (2005) stated seven constructs that comprise the servant leadership in Patterson's model. These are: serves with love, acts with humility, altruistic, visionary for the followers, trusting, serving, and empowers followers. The summary of servant leadership research is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of servant leadership research (Adopted from Franklin, 2010, p. 27)

| Topic related to servant leadership | Remarks / Explanations |
|--|--|
| Benefits Winston (2004) | The concept is highly appreciated for long term benefit as it is having positive influence on society. It creates higher level of engagement for change and innovation. |
| Criticism and barriers Wong, and Page (2003) | The concept is also criticised as it is slow, feminist and requires long-term application. It is also thought that it is paradoxical where the weak shall be strong; the last shall be first, leading through serving, winning through losing, and gaining through giving away. The concept is flawed through hypocrisy. Many leaders who claim to be servant leaders actually seek power and abuse rather than serve followers. |
| Leadership paradigm comparisons Farling et al. (1999) | In the context of leadership, it aligned contemporary leaders' behaviours and beliefs with a set of universal or consensus values. Concept of ethical well-being, organisational culture, consistent values, attitudes, and behaviour across the individual, group, and organisational levels are emphasized. Practice of spiritual leadership provides high levels of human well-being and |

rewards of servant leaders and followers. In addition, it exhibit values and attitudes of spiritual leadership through their legacy leadership.

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| Models and attributes Patterson (2003) | The servant leadership researches identified its attributes which are love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and service, introversion, commitment, self-efficacy, and intrinsic motivation. |
| Morality and ethics Patterson (2003), | Morality and ethics are considered as the central core of servant leadership approach. This approach is to serve people, not to use people; to help people grow and to care about everyone in your organisation with foresight. |
| Practices Russell and Stone (2003) | Research also revealed that in servant leadership approach of management self-awareness, listening, coaching people in the organization with foresight. |
| Religious traditions Russell (2003), Wallace (2007) | It was also revealed that religious tradition has a significant influence on servant leadership because wisdom, purpose, divine favour, and reconciliation with God are also enriched from religious boundary. For example, eightfold path of enlightenment (Buddhism), five pillars of faith (Islam), repentance, and obedience (Judaism) are also to enrich servant leadership. |

Servant Leadership in Islamic view

Similar to career success from Islamic perspective (as discussed in sub-section 2.2), *maqasid of shariah* is a prime guideline to be a servant leader to be successful through serving people. The greed of power, status or wealth cannot demotivate a servant leader. He wishes to do what is morally right and refrain from doing things that are not right. Neither status nor wealth is an important matter but benevolent to the people. This is based on the basic teaching of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) who did not bring any change to his life due to the change of social status from a trader in Makkah to head of the state in Medina. Anas also reported the Prophet (peace be upon him) saying: "I am God's servant; I eat like a servant and sit like a servant." It has been narrated on the authority of Ibn 'Umar that the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "Beware. Every one of you is a shepherd and everyone is answerable with regard to his flock. The Caliph is a shepherd over the people and shall be questioned about his subjects (as to how he conducted their affairs). A man is a guardian over the members of his family and shall be questioned about them (as to how he looked after their physical and moral well-being). A woman is a guardian over the household of her husband and his children and shall be questioned about them (as to how she managed the household and brought up the children). A slave is a guardian over the property of his master and shall be questioned about it (as to how he safeguarded his trust). Beware; every one of you is a guardian and every one of you shall be questioned with regard to his trust" (Sahih Muslim, 20: 4496).

The literature search of spirituality and servant leadership found that there are common attributes for both. Greenleaf (1977) stated several attribute of servant leadership which are service before self, listening as a means of affirmation, creating trust, lend a hand, and focus on what is feasible to accomplish. In addition, servant leadership also attributed to the followings:

1. Foresight: Well developed sense of intuition about how the past, present, and future are connected.
2. Stewardship: Holds an organisation's resources in trust for the greater good.
3. Commitment to community: Responsible for serving the need of others and help to create a sense of community among people.

Servant Leadership and Spirituality

Servant leadership and spirituality are coupled in a complicated way. Spirituality is the individual inner source that naturally drives us to accomplish our commitment in a humanistic way to create diversity, work-life balance, high performance, etc. In servant leadership, it is the ability to facilitate the employee both individually and collectively. Fry et al. (2007) argued that there are four issues that are not addressed by Patterson's (2003) servant leadership models are:

1. The universal or consensus values that are necessary for servant leadership;
2. The role of servant leadership in achieving congruent and consistent values, attitudes, and behaviour across the individual, group, and organisational levels;
3. The personal outcomes or rewards of servant leadership for both leaders and followers; and

4. The apparent contradiction for organisational performance when the servant leadership places the highest priority on the needs and purposes of individual followers above the goals and objectives of the organisation.

These four key issues can be addressed by integrating framework of spiritual leadership theory (Fry et al, 2007) to provide insight of servant leadership theory. Whittington et al. (2005) have developed spiritual leadership model which is known as “legacy leadership” to incorporate and extend the characteristics of servant leadership and at the same time is consistent with spiritual leadership theory. The most basic feature of legacy leadership indicates that the legacy leaders must possess and exhibit the values and attitudes from spirituality.

2 Conclusions

The present body of literature showed that most of the career success studies are mainly based on Western secular culture and socio-economic context. The potential of viewing career success from Islamic perspective has not been investigated yet. The extensive review of career success literature, holy Qur’an and hadith suggests that the traditional career success and career success from Islamic perspective are distinct although they are appeared to be related. As such study of career success with the effect of servant leadership and spirituality to explain the Muslim’s view of career success is crucial. This exploratory research showed:

1. No comprehensive research has been reported that addresses the effect of servant leadership and spirituality towards career success. Dimensions and factors of servant leadership and spirituality from Islamic perspective that are playing important role for career success have not been identified.
2. The questions that are pertinent to the servant leadership towards career success from Islamic perspective are as follows.
 - How do Muslim managers view their career success from Islamic perspective?
 - What factors contribute to the career success of Muslim Managers?
 - Do spirituality from Islamic perspective and servant leadership play any role on each other?
 - Is servant leadership playing any role as a direct and or mediating factor on career success?

Among many career success theories, spillover theory (Hill et al., 2003) is found to be more appropriate to study career success through spirituality and servant leadership. If an individual is satisfied with his spiritual domain, it is supposed to affect the career success domain. Similar relationship can be happened between servant leadership and career success. In addition, spirituality and servant leadership both are having significant common areas in concept and practices. So it is very likely that satisfaction or dissatisfaction, success or failure can be spilled over from each other. As such they can mediate each other.

Three variables found to be significant for this study are spirituality from Islamic perspective (independent variable), servant leadership (mediating variable) and career success (dependent variable). In this study of career success servant leadership is considered as a mediating variable although servant leadership is being widely used as independent and dependent variable in the studies of leadership. The concept of independent and dependent variables is straight forward; however, a mediating variable influences the independent variable which in return influences the dependent variable.

Moreover, there is a huge community of Muslim people all over the world and especially in the Muslim world such as Middle East and South East Asian countries. Organisational support for this Muslim workforce should be specially designed and practiced. Practice of servant leadership in Muslim organisations could impact positively on career success.

3 References

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