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Leaders in demand

**Understanding leadership from
the Point of View of Gen Y's and
Gen Z's from the GCC region**





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Introduction

Interest in the notion of leadership, its definition and its significance is by no means a new one. In fact, some of the earliest contributions to the topic have been made by old-world philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato. Over time, the idea of leadership in the context of organisational behaviour and success, stole the limelight. Ever since, organisations have been determined to embed effective leadership within their organisational DNA and to offer it as a key employer value proposition.

Unfortunately, despite their investments in myriad initiatives and programs seeking to scout, nurture and reward effective leaders, many organisations are still failing to “hit the mark” and the wrong people are still finding their way into the highest ranks of organisations. This renders leadership programs to be no more than marketing tactics rather than sincere organisational ambitions. However, in today’s volatile and sometimes merciless world, entrusting leadership to the wrong hands isn’t a gamble any organisation can afford to take; getting leadership right is critical.



The drivers behind the amplified significance of leadership in the context of today's business organisations are numerous and understandably cannot all be delved into one paper alone. However, one of the key drivers, and the one which deserves attention particularly within the GCC, is a simple demographic attribute of the working population - it's age. In the GCC region, the overall population is becoming dominated by younger people and naturally this is also being reflected in the composition of the workforce that is comprising more and more members of Generation Y or 'millennials' (those born between 1981 and 1996) and increasingly, Generation Z (those born between 1995 and 2015).

Although having such a young workforce leads to many organisational benefits and opportunities, it also introduces new challenges particularly in understanding how to manage and lead these newest generations that are proving to be an unrivalled force of their own. They are more exposed, have endless demands, are more willing to take risks and are very independent and established in their ways of thinking. They also happen to be living in a world which offers them unfathomable opportunities to shape their own destinies. In today's world, one can become an overnight sensation (and millionaire) simply because of their visibility on social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok.



Key Questions & Research Approach

With this understanding in mind, the key question becomes:

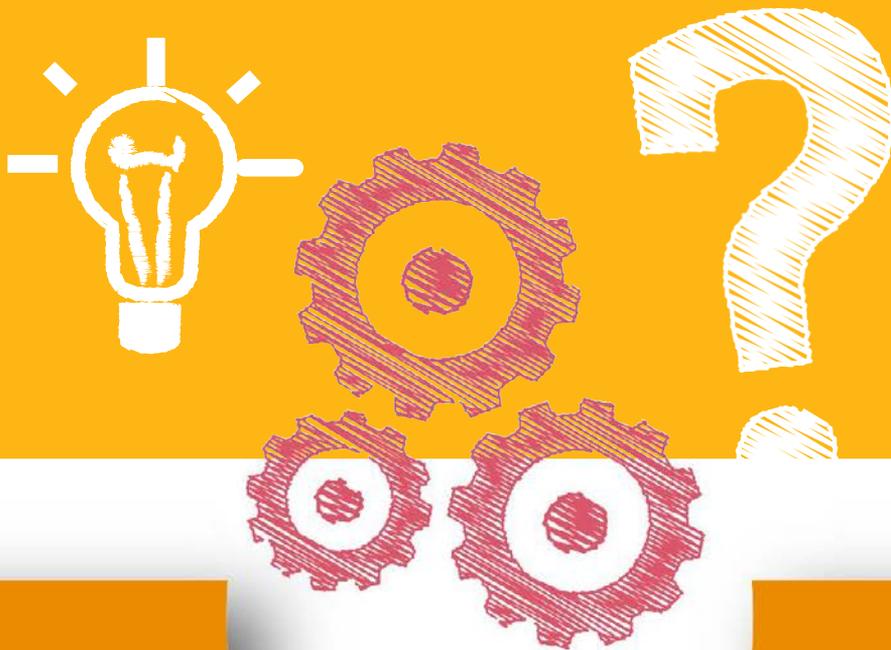
“What kind of leaders are needed to lead the growing working populations of young GCC Nationals so they can thrive and promote long-lasting success?”



Finding an answer to this question, or even a fragment of one is vital. Beyond providing insights on how to manage the performance of the present, it means understanding how to ensure today's leaders are successful at managing these youths and preparing them for a future, which lies in their hands. Understanding this is particularly relevant for government entities within the GCC that are prime employers of Nationals. Ultimately, they will have to rely on these youths to continue to drive social and economic national prosperity.



We set out to find an answer to this important question by trying to learn what leadership actually means for today's young GCC Nationals, how valuable it is to them and more importantly, how they envision their ideal leader (in terms of traits, abilities and behaviours) to be. We also sought to identify how they think organisations and current or aspiring leaders themselves can seek to bring their envisioned leader to life. The approach we took to answer this question was simple and entailed engaging in very candid and deep conversations with multiple Gen Y and Z participants representing the GCC. These participants were grouped randomly into smaller focus groups, giving them an opportunity to speak openly and safely whilst also giving them some sort of social excitement, another very important need of these generations.



Key Takeaways from our Research

The participants from our focus groups provided us with an array of insights. In particular, we grouped **5 major takeaways with regards to these youngsters' views on leadership:**

Takeaway

#1 Being a leader is much more than seniority or a title.

There was a clear consensus from participants that when asked to define what a leader is, "being the boss sitting at the highest hierarchies of an organisation" and being labelled by a fancy-sounding title does not make one a 'leader'. In stark contrast, a leader is defined as someone who has the right capabilities and can manage, take charge and offer guidance to help a group of people work cohesively in order to achieve a common goal. Leaders do this best by knowing how to allocate people to the right roles and by orchestrating their efforts behind the scenes, whilst empowering them to take the lead. They define a leader as somebody who motivates and inspires others and focuses more on creating leaders rather than earning followers. Finally, the most important attribute of a leader to Gen Y and Z is that he or she is someone who can be looked up to and perceived as a role model.

Takeaway

#2 Effective leadership in the workplace trumps many other factors including monetary rewards and compensation.

When we asked participants to rank how important leadership is in comparison to other critical features of the workplace, we found that leadership ranked as one of the top 3 factors contributing to engagement, and consistently triumphed against other factors such as compensation. Although not as important as the opportunity to learn and to grow, having a great leader that encourages you to come to work and apply your skills is highly valued by our participants. More importantly, our young participants are not willing to compromise their comfort and remain employed long-term with leaders that they don't trust or respect.

#3 There are certain traits, skills and behaviours Gen Y and Gen Z find desirable in their leaders.

Out of the many leadership traits and skills our participants highlighted are important to them, there were some that stood out consistently. We were able to prioritise them and group them into 5 distinct themes that describe the different 'facets' of the ideal leader the youth want to work with.

Selfless & Nurturing

Caring - Empathetic - Supportive - Protective - Altruistic

The selfless and nurturing facet of leaders means that they consistently focus on the team's holistic wellbeing and success, and firmly gain a deep sense of triumph and satisfaction from watching their team learn, grow and succeed. Therefore, these leaders are in tune with their team members' strengths and development areas. They harness an environment that is nurturing and encouraging even in the face of failures or set-backs, where they will always extend a helping hand so that the team can stand right back-up and push forward to attain their best.



"A leader creates an environment that builds confidence within the team and gets the best out of them."
"Leaders motivate employees to achieve and be more productive without putting any pressure."



'Down-to-Earth' & Relatable

Modest - Humble - Vulnerable - Self-Aware - Sincere - Approachable

Ideally, the youth of today would like to work with leaders who don't erect hierarchical barriers between themselves and their teams. In fact, the idea of hierarchy is not one which resonates well with Gen Y and Z. Today's young GCC Nationals want to feel like they are working with leaders that are also colleagues and who despite being more senior and having authority, are easy to approach and interact with and who create a more open and social atmosphere. In being down to earth and relatable, leaders can support their team in becoming more comfortable and secure in the workplace, whilst allowing them to express any fears that might get in the way of their performance. These leaders also show their own vulnerability, which is an admirable quality and just makes it easier for Gen Y and Gen Z to relate to them.



"Someone who understands the importance of consistent communication with subordinates without judgement." Gens Y and Z "don't believe in hierarchy; they believe in a team with a flat structure."



Vibrant & Stimulating

Driven - Energetic - Positive - Inspirational

Vibrant and stimulating leaders embody high and contagious levels of energy and drive that consistently help others maintain their own high energy levels and keep pushing others to persevere. They are also able to add an element of excitement and enthusiasm that overall helps establish a positive and constructive working atmosphere where individuals are relaxed and motivated to give their best. Such leaders are also able to help their team members overcome obstacles, remain optimistic and focus on the bright side particularly in the face of any failures or any other set-backs they face. These leaders are not quick to give up and push themselves and others to make the best of every single situation.



Authentic & Daring

Innovative - Pioneering - Courageous - Visionary - Entrepreneurial

Our young participants highlighted how important it is for them to work with a leader who is original and creative by nature and does things in unique ways without being afraid to take risks. This is a must particularly when the competitive business landscape demands entities to remain innovative and beat trends. Therefore, the authentic and daring side of leaders allows them to inspire their teams to come up with different ideas, even if they appear to be unrealistic or difficult to implement and helps bring the best of these ideas to life. The core mantra is to always push forward and strive to do better and bigger things.



“A person with a vision who drives the team into believing their vision and motivating them to achieve it.”



Conscientious & “Guru-istic”

Responsible - Accountable - Exemplary - Disciplined - Organised

This side of leaders, the conscientious and guruistic side, allows them to demonstrate excellence, responsibility and discipline and to adopt a smooth and seamless approach to management. This is in full contrast to leaders that may lose their team’s confidence by appearing lacking in competence, failing to remain calm and causing chaos due to a lack of organisation abilities. Leaders with this facet remain in full control and can always steer the team back on the right course, no matter what difficulties they face. And along the way, they can teach their team the right tactics to always be ahead of the game.



“A good leader has the ability to distribute work in an organised manner.”



#4 There are certain leadership behaviours that push Gens Y and Z away

It could be said that many employees are forced to deal with ineffective leaders that seem to do things and behave in ways that are off-putting and can contribute to their disengagement. Some of the biggest examples of these intolerable misbehaviours, which leaders should be careful to avoid demonstrating are:

Working in an ad-hoc manner without a clear or consistent sense of direction

Setting unrealistic deadlines or expectations that are difficult to achieve

Lacking the ability to give constructive and clear instructions and guidance when the team seek these

Controlling and micromanaging the team when they are fully capable

Not giving enough appreciation, recognition and credit to the team or taking credit for the team's efforts

"Pointing fingers" and blaming the team when things go wrong

Being unable to understand and empathise with personal circumstances

Not recognising individual personalities and working styles and preferences

Appearing unenthusiastic or negative and lacking energy resulting in negative vibes

Being 'out of reach' from the team



#5 It takes two to develop the right leadership

The reality is that the onus for establishing the right calibre of leadership is on both employers and those individuals holding, or aspiring to hold, leadership positions. Here we highlight the top 3 organisational and top 3 individual strategies that our participants agree should be used to strengthen leadership qualities and abilities.

Organisational strategies to strengthen leadership

1 **Include personality and personal values assessments when identifying and selecting leaders.**

Anytime an organisation is seeking to fill a leadership position, whether at the time of recruitment or when making decisions on promotions or successors, it is important to understand the inherent traits and values of potential leaders before selecting the final candidates. Although there are a number of available assessment tests that can be deployed for these purposes, their true value lies in the ability of organisations to invest the right time and energy to specify the right leadership traits and personal values they desire in line with their overall management philosophy and culture. Without doing so, trying to decipher the impact and effectiveness of different leadership traits and values on an organisation's success becomes challenging and meaningless.

2 **Use 'experiences' and assignments to observe and develop leadership qualities.**

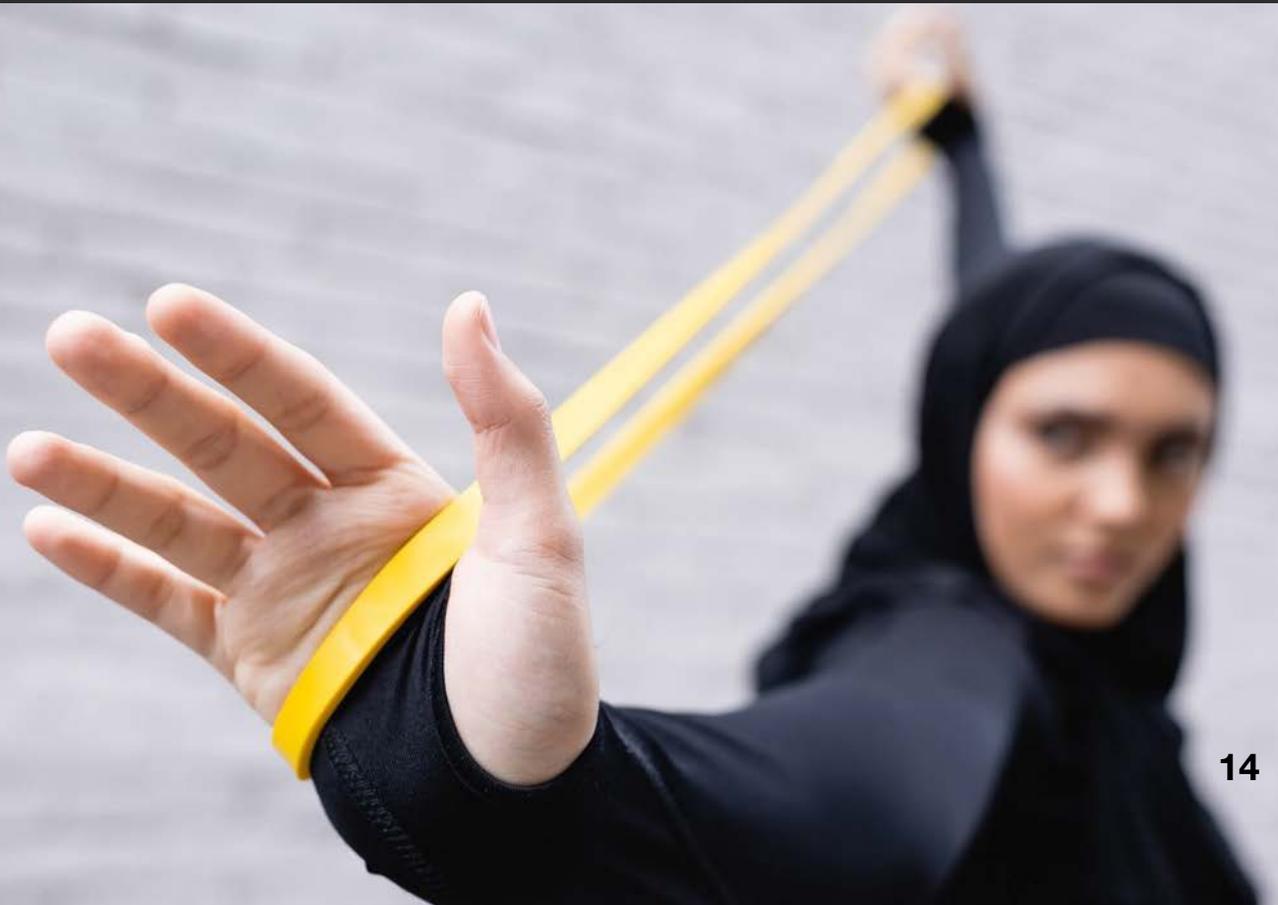
An excellent way to identify leaders and develop their skills is to assign them on 'stretch' assignments. These are allocations to different projects or assignments that push the leader (current or aspiring) into a situation which may be out of their comfort zone and hence requires them to identify new personal and business strategies to cope and handle their assignments. An example of an assignment could be to temporarily allocate the leader to a different geography or department.

3 Pay heed to ‘bottom-up’ feedback when evaluating leaders and rewarding them.

Often times, leaders are largely evaluated on and rewarded based on their financial contributions to the business or their performance against other key business metrics. Unfortunately, sometimes the way leaders behave and manage their teams to achieve their targets are neglected.

This occurs for example when feedback (formal or informal) from employees who are interacting with these leaders daily and thus have an intimate view of behaviours that may not be visible to the top, is not solicited or accounted for. This may result in some leaders having the leeway to abuse their positions, mistreat employees and create toxic working environments that lead to disengagement, fatigue and eventually attrition.

Hence organisations that are serious about developing leaders should ensure that all leaders are religiously receiving periodic feedback from their teams, and that this feedback is reviewed and considered when evaluating performance and determining bonus payouts. This should apply even where these leaders are or have been successful at ‘meeting the bottom line’.



Individual strategies to develop leadership skills

1 Have an open mind and embrace feedback

Many leaders are unable to accept developmental feedback or do not place enough value to it and hence fail to make any real efforts to change and develop the right leadership skills. This is further problematic in individuals that do not have the right level of self-awareness and who may not understand the impact of their leadership style on the people around them. Individuals that aspire to be effective leaders must learn to actively pursue feedback, especially from 'below', in order to understand how they are being perceived by others and to gauge a better understanding of their areas of development. The next step after soliciting feedback, and arguably the more important step, is being committed to take this feedback on board and to find ways to address it by changing for the better.

2 Find and mimic your own 'role model leaders'

One of the best ways for an aspiring or current leader to become an even better one is to find a mentor they look up to and to try and learn from them through observation, asking questions and where possible, through formal mentoring. Indeed, this serves as an effective means to develop on the job by seeing first-hand the effects that good leaders have on people and consequently, learning the same positive behaviours. Where a role model cannot be found internally within the organisation, there is no harm in reading about other leaders through articles or biographies, understanding their core strengths and taking initiatives to develop these same strengths.

3 Volunteer to lead others and situations

A key tactic that aspiring leaders can use to develop their leadership abilities is to put their hands up when any opportunities to lead projects, teams, or special initiatives emerge. Such opportunities provide real life situations to test leadership capabilities and to develop strengths before an individual is allocated or promoted into a leadership role. The benefits of participating in such assignments are even more visible when individuals volunteer to participate in programs that take them out of their comfort zone. For example, leading a project that requires the individual to develop new skills.



Conclusion

Today, the GCC national youth value the importance of leadership and appreciate its importance to their own engagement, development and success. However, they aspire to work with leaders who have mastered the art of leadership, demonstrating certain key qualities and behaviours that help bring the most out of them and make traditional employment worthwhile. With this understanding, both organisations and individuals serving as leaders or aspiring to become leaders should seek to develop the right leadership capabilities particularly those softer, behavioural elements that support leaders in adopting a fully rounded leadership style.

Organisations can help develop their leaders by assessing personalities and values, using stretch assignments and ensuring that performance feedback from juniors on leadership effectiveness is solicited and accounted for. On the other hand, individuals should seek to develop their leadership abilities by soliciting feedback on their leadership style and should wholeheartedly take measures to work on any development areas. They should seek to find role models they can learn from and mimic together with volunteering in programs to demonstrate and develop their leadership capabilities. This may not always be easy to do but it is not impossible to achieve. As long as organisations and individuals truly grasp the importance of effective leadership and its impact on the workplace, it is without a doubt that their investments and efforts will pay off.

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