

Developing **Leaders**

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Leadership Skills for the New Iraq

A Program for College Deans

By Tony Nelson
and David Peel

My children remark that “all we ever hear about Iraq on the news is bad stuff - why aren't we hearing about the Dean's program?” I hope this narrative opens a window on a very special group of Iraqi leaders taking responsibility for creating their new future.

'As you are, so will be the rulers that will be set over you' (Arab Proverb)

How it began

Following the end of the 2003 war in Iraq, an initiative called 'Rawabit' was born (see Panel). Led by the Iraqi Foundation of Technical Education (FTE) and the UK's Association of Colleges the aim was to support the Iraqi technical education sector overcome 30 years of suppression and international isolation and play their part in building a new economy and a free society.

During its first five years, Rawabit focused on developing college twinning links, giving Iraqi FTE Deans (Principal equivalent) and senior staff a practical exposure to the management and delivery of further education (FE) in the UK. From this platform it was agreed that the next steps should include the development of an individual leadership program for the Deans. At that time I was in charge of an executive leadership development program for the Principals of English FE colleges and Iraqi-born UK Principal Ali Hadawi, Vice Chair of Rawabit, suggested this program might serve as a useful starting point.

In early 2009, I was invited to present to Dr Mahmood, president of the Iraqi FTE, accompanied by his team of policy makers. I spent two days in London with these distinguished visitors and Dr Mahmood asked for a version tailored to the Iraqi context. I set about designing a pilot program to equip selected Deans of Iraq's Technical Colleges and Institutes with leadership skills to help rebuild the technical education sector. This would be delivered as a priority Rawabit program funded by the then Department for Education and Skills and UNESCO.

The challenge was to deliver a culturally sensitive, relevant and challenging program which would help Deans develop the leadership skills they needed to build high performance teams, lead change, engage with key external stakeholders including employers, grow income.....and become reflective leadership practitioners. And all this in an environment of 'post-liberation reconstruction' (their description) in which Deans warranted bodyguards as representatives of the government. The Deans had stories of assassination attempts against them, repeatedly looted Colleges, students taken hostage, and subsequent negotiations with insurgent leaders to de-politicise the campus. These stories would come to us over morning tea ('chai') or during an evening walk. This was their life and they were sharing it with us.

The Deans said that what they most wanted was 'hope' as they had suffered decades of dictatorship and then imposed democracy – all of which had failed to live up to their

In Iraqi culture a group leader has palpable authority 'for the journey', a concept emanating from the Qur'an

The Deans Qualifying Program – at a glance

Module 1 & 2 (UK) 10 days induction and lectures on high performance, change management, competition/collaboration, action learning, leadership development plan (LDP). Week 2 was leadership shadowing in pairs in UK Colleges.

Module 3 (Iraq) Action Learning project in the workplace, submit LDP, undertake 360 feedback using Leadership Trust's 'Leadership Audit'.

Module 4 (Istanbul) 5 days Coaching skills, Innovation culture, experiential workshop on team building, receiving 360 feedback report. Update LDP.

Module 5 (Erbil) 4 days Consolidate coaching skills, tutorials, preparation for 5000 word assignment submission.

Module 6 (email) Assignment marking by UK assessors and feedback

Module 7 (Erbil) 5 days Switched from UK due to visa delays. Application for FCMI status. Preparation for competence based assessment process for CMgr. Further coaching skills. Update LDP.

Module 8 (Istanbul) 5 days CMgr assessment by professional discussion, Leadership Standards finalisation, evaluation.

Module 1 commenced Nov 2009

Module 8 completed March 2011



The program introduced Deans to a range of leadership theories and models including high performance; change leadership, motivation; innovation; competition/collaboration and teambuilding. Delegates gained coaching skills and received peer feedback ('360 ') to help them build a personal leadership development plan. Deans undertook a week-long leadership shadowing of English Principals in the UK. They managed an extended change project in Iraq to help apply learning in the workplace. They also undertook an intensive experiential workshop in small groups. Modules took place in England, Istanbul (twice) and Iraq (twice) between Nov 2009 and March 2011.

What was different to a group of English Principals?

In an Iraqi group the key to meaningful learning is to establish trusting, respectful relationships. We enjoyed a head start with the Deans due to the strength of pre-existing Rawabit relationships – it was as if Dave Peel (senior tutor on DQP) and I had been invited into an 'extended family'. Nevertheless, we still had to establish personal and professional credibility, developing our own bonds based around a profound respect for Iraqi culture and showing that we would learn alongside the Deans. Building those relationships was a layered process – for example, we noticed stronger attachments on each occasion we visited Iraq. We were placing our safety in the hands of our hosts and affording them a chance to show traditional hospitality.

The role of a group leader in Iraqi culture is very different. A group leader has palpable authority 'for the journey', a concept emanating from the Qur'an. It is essential to understand and acknowledge this, consulting the group leader for all important decisions and briefing them ahead of modules, changes and key activities. Faith is part of the Iraqi culture (mainly Sunni and Shia Muslim with some Christian communities) though some Deans are more overt in their faith than others. We were working with people from the land of the Tower of Babel, city of Nineveh and great biblical figures such as Noah, Abraham, Daniel and Esther. It was from here three wise men travelled to find a baby Jesus. We found spirituality to be an inseparable part of Iraqi leadership wisdom. The five calls to prayer each day were an audible reminder of this. The Deans were deeply moved to receive a personal copy of 'The Leadership of Muhammad' (Adair, 2011).

There is more collaboration and less competition in an Iraqi Deans' group. They search for 'the wisdom' in tasks, lectures and even ice-breaker exercises. And this is seen as a function of the group rather than the individual take-away it would be in the UK.

Planning is a good discipline but we learned to increase our personal flexibility – working 'in the moment' rather than to a fixed idea of what had to happen next. We found that Iraqi culture works more spontaneously than we did. The constant power cuts (which can happen every few hours in Iraq) were an irritation for us but taken in their stride by our Iraqi friends.

Delivery took twice as long as with a group of English Principals because of the need for translation and to give delegates time for discussion of new concepts. Group discussion (usually in Arabic) was very important. This meant adjustment to pace and content and the avoidance of UK colloquialisms.

We learnt to assume nothing – repeatedly discovering aspects of Western leadership development which are just not present in Iraqi culture. 360 feedback is new territory; corroboration of evidence of impact was unknown; CVs are set out differently; management theories we would regard as foundational are unfamiliar.

The dominant leadership style is benevolent patriarchy with strong tribal affiliations. A command and control style is not uncommon. With UK Principals there is a wide variation

of leadership styles more related to individuals' personal development than a systemic heritage. We noticed more subtle leadership styles in Deans who had significant Western exposure.

Deans made lateral connections *across* leadership models and theories (English Principals tend to drill down into one particular model to examine it in depth). Deans then created a new model out of the inter-connectedness. This was outstanding conceptualisation.

Feedback also flows differently within and from an Iraqi group. Even in high- trust groups it readily defaults to discussion of the positives and avoids things which might be seen as negative. This serves to protect the 'face' of the hearers. Reframing developmental feedback to 'it would be even better if....' could sometimes help. The quality of feedback was in inverse proportion to group size – small groups worked better than large ones; pairs better still and one to one feedback from the tutor gave the greatest scope for discussion of 'negatively perceived' issues, subject always to obtaining the permission of the hearer and watching closely for non-verbal reactions which might indicate psychological distress. It took many months to create the conditions in which delegates felt comfortable to give us developmental feedback as facilitators and for the program.

Arab culture values story-telling, so anecdotes were very well received. Symbolic gift-giving was very important and we used these opportunities to donate coaching and leadership texts to help create management libraries.

What was the impact?

Deans wrote a 5000 word assignment on their applied leadership learning on the program which was externally examined by assessors experienced in the English Principal's Program.

In a unique partnership with the UK's Chartered Management Institute (CMI), Deans successfully applied to become Fellows of the Institute (FCMI), which recognised their managerial scope and responsibilities over ten years and strategic experience over three years. The Deans were later assessed in Istanbul to become Chartered Managers (CMgr) – this required evidence of personal strategic impact in their Colleges over the last 18 months, focusing on the key areas of Leading People and Managing Change.

Rawabit (Arabic - meaning partnership or collaboration)

Once the 2003 war ended, vocational education was presented with the opportunity of re-connecting with the outside world after 30 years of isolation from new ideas and embargos of economic development. But as the country descended into post-war chaos, colleges were stripped by looters. Colleges faced the challenge of equipping young people and adults with the vocational skills desperately needed to rebuild local economies. Society was divided and infrastructure decimated. Few leaders ever face such challenges in their lifetime and Rawabit has been a lifeline to Iraq's Foundation for Technical Education.

Rawabit was set up in 2004 by the Iraqi FTE, a group of UK FE colleges, the Association of Colleges and other UK agencies. It subsequently attracted funds from the UK government (now Department for Business, Innovation and Skills) and UNESCO.

More than 600 senior managers and staff from across Iraq (including many women) have benefited from practical programs to raise skills, develop strategy and make the curriculum more responsive to market needs. Many of these have visited the UK on study visits to twinned colleges in England and N. Ireland or attended conferences in Istanbul or Jordan to share two-way learning and exchange ideas. The experience of N. Ireland resonated deeply with Iraqi colleagues who are working to overcome sectarian, political, tribal and religious divisions on their campuses. Iraqi colleges have supported former insurgents and prisoners to leave violence behind and learn trades to channel their energies productively.

For more info see www.rawabit.org

Helping Deans strengthen the Iraqi economy through local communities... helping professionalise senior management

We were joined in Istanbul by two CMI assessors. Each Dean underwent a Professional Discussion interview for up to 4 hours in support of their application. Assessors carried out additional corroboration to triangulate the offered evidence of impact, interviewing Iraqi colleagues.

Deans shared evidence of creating business impact including de-politicising their learning institutions; stabilising local communities through vocational education amongst former insurgents and prisoners; introducing new vocational and academic qualifications to Masters level; rebuilding Colleges destroyed in terrorist activity. They have experienced personal attacks yet demonstrated resilience, patience and faith. Gaynor Thomas a CMI assessor commented: "The most impressive stories were those of rebuilding the human soul".

It was with huge pride that we saw the Iraqi Ambassador to Turkey present Deans with their DQP graduation certificates at the 2011 Annual Rawabit Education Symposium in Istanbul.

All Nine Deans on the pilot have been awarded the triple personal accreditation of

- Graduate of the DQP
- Fellow of the Chartered Management Institute
- Chartered Manager

This triple award is a first for a leadership program in Iraq.

Dr Mahmood said: "We strongly supported DQP from the start. This is an accredited program which is helping Deans achieve our vision to strengthen the Iraqi economy through local communities. DQP is helping professionalise our senior management".

The DQP has achieved its aims of equipping participants with continuous and sustainable improvement in their personal leadership skills, knowledge and impact. The pilot program has now been customised for use by the Iraqi FTE, with supporting Leadership Standards. Many improvements have been identified in the evaluation.

Pilot participants have been trained to provide coaching support within Iraq for future participants. Some capacity has been developed for assessment of written assignments by DQP graduates. These steps will help ensure the sustainability of the program. We have EU/British Council funding to take a further 26 Deans and ten Head Teachers through the program from 2012.



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Despite much discussion about the need for leadership development in corporate and public organizations, and the considerable industry that surrounds it, this is the first authoritative periodical focused entirely on this area.

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