



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

## **Striving Towards Leadership**

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This article is an edited version of an article originally published in the *Ismaili Canada*, December 2009, 2<sup>nd</sup> Issue.

### **Abstract**

The attributes of modesty, patience, humility, knowledge, forbearance and consultation are highlighted by His Highness the Aga Khan as attributes for good leadership, following a saying by Imam Ali. This article expands on the theme of successful leadership as a fine balancing act, where possession of these self-effacing qualities is a sign of someone who is a true master of him or herself.

*“No belief is like modesty and patience, no attainment is like humility, no honour is like knowledge, no power is like forbearance, and no support is more reliable than consultation.”*

His Highness the Aga Khan has frequently quoted this saying of Imam Ali in his speeches. Modesty, patience, humility, knowledge, forbearance and consultation are some of the key attributes of good leadership. History has many examples of individuals who have risen above their circumstances to become great leaders. These are people who, for the most part, have surmounted obstacles with faith, determination and hard work. One of the primary challenges a human being faces through life is to overcome personal limitations. Successful leaders tend to be those who seek to recognise their own negative tendencies and strive to rise above them. Imam Ali's saying identifies some of the positive personal characteristics that would serve well for the head of an institution, organisation, business, family or even an informal peer group in which leadership is constantly changing.

Modesty appears old fashioned in a world that constantly prompts us to sing our own praises. A leader generally finds it difficult to inspire others if his or her achievements are not known. On the other hand, talking about oneself turns people away. The answer may be in actions rather than in words. Among the most admired individuals are those who seek to lead by example. Their deeds and adherence to principles stir others to follow them.

Patience appears to be rare in a society that places enormous value on instant gratification. Technologies which are meant to serve human beings are instead changing

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our personalities to expect results at the push of a button. However, many of the natural rhythms of life flow slowly over long time-spans. Good leaders have learned to distinguish between those demands that require quick responses and those that can be dealt with only after careful thought. They also recognise that some of the most important processes in life need time to unfold.

“There is no attainment like humility.” Indeed, maintaining humility is not an easy task when one is engaged in the hustle and tussle of heading an organisation. There is a fine line to walk between false modesty and over-confidence. Constantly self-effacing oneself can be misinterpreted as obsequence and can damage the position of the institution that one leads. On the other side is pride and arrogance. The sincere and continual effort to attain humility is in itself a mark of integrity and true leadership. This struggle (*jihad*) is an ethical practice of high order and engages with our spirituality. *Din* and *duniya* have a close connection even in the leadership of worldly institutions, as His Highness the Aga Khan has demonstrated through his own example.

Knowledge is often misinterpreted as the mere accumulation of facts. True knowledge is a way station on the path to wisdom. It involves an understanding of the world as well as of oneself. It is also characterised by the humility to appreciate what one does not know and what one finds difficult to comprehend. Discerning leaders are aware that the “knowledge society” has multiple forms and levels of understanding and that we learn not only with the head, but also with the heart and the spirit. Successful heads of organisations recognise that leadership is shared, and that persons who have previously held office have an understanding of the organisation that continues to remain valuable. Indeed, as His Highness the Aga Khan has asserted, institutions should continue to treat them as leaders.

“No power is like forbearance,” because attaining this quality signals a triumph over one’s self. Forbearance requires patience and self-discipline. Leaders are constantly under pressure to lean one way or another. It is tempting to act out of emotion and to favour those whom we prefer over others. One may also be drawn to do what is easy and expedient rather than what is difficult and ethical. Ultimately, forbearance comes through understanding our own emotions and subjectivity. A person who has attained mastery of his or her self is indeed powerful; one is able to respond to various challenges and to changing circumstances with integrity and clarity of mind. It is a unique form of power that draws strength from our spiritual selves.

Consultation is an expression of respect for one’s fellows and of the recognition that one does not know everything. Even though a person may formally be at the head of an organisation, he or she remains accountable to others. The performance of leaders is inevitably judged by those upon whom their actions have a bearing. An astute leader seeks out others’ opinions – even at the risk of being contradicted. An important characteristic of leadership is the willingness to adjust one’s position following consultation. This is where humility can help to ensure that integrity and pursuit of larger interests hold sway over the ego.



A benchmark of effective leadership is the ability to make a decision, follow its course of action and to take responsibility for it. Some decisions are very difficult to make, especially when opinion is deeply divided and when serious risks are involved. A good leader tends to be at ease with her conscience if she has sincerely pursued the path of truth and integrity in making choices.

However, even the best leaders make errors in judgement. They usually follow through by analysing the mistakes carefully and using the knowledge to improve their methods in a constant loop of feedback. There is no final destination on the path of good leadership; some of the most successful people in the world continually strive to better themselves. In the words of Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah, Aga Khan III, “Struggle is the meaning of life. Defeat or victory are in the hands of God, but struggle itself is man’s duty and should be his joy.”