

Lessons in Leadership from the Life of the Prophet Muhammad

'The Leadership of Muhammad' is a new book by British management scholar John Adair that mines the life of the Prophet Muhammad to highlight his extraordinary qualities as a leader. According to Adair, success is a function of leadership, and his short work provides anyone interested in learning how to lead and motivate with a wealth of insight, according to this review by Muqtedar Khan, an associate professor of political science and international relations at the University of Delaware.

Over the years, Muslim and non-Muslim historians have written many books about Prophet Muhammad as a leader, highlighting the divinely guided qualities of his personality as the final messenger of God, according to Islamic beliefs. But in the past century or so, a modernist, rationalist school of Islamic thought has emerged, which focuses on examining Prophet Muhammad as a charismatic leader as well as being the messenger of God.

Developed by thinkers like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and Shibli Nomani in India and Sheikh Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida in the Arab world, this school seeks to minimize the miraculous nature of the Prophet's biography to explore the rationalist and humanist dimensions of his personality. Their interpretations are formed by many categories that guides modern thinking — the Prophet Muhammad as statesman, as a businessman, as a political leader and a spiritual guide. British management scholar John Adair's new book, *The Leadership of Muhammad*, joins this body of work, even though he is not a modernist Muslim.

But Adair's interpretation is different from most Muslim biographers of Prophet Muhammad in several key ways. First, Adair, who served with a Bedouin regiment in the Arab Legion, emphasizes the context in which he lived over abstract moral principle. His narrative is rich with discussions of tribal practices and the day-to-day habits and traditions that had an influence on Prophet Muhammad. If Adair's goal is to argue that leadership styles must conform to the cultural context in which they find themselves, he succeeds. In episode after episode, he shows how Prophet Muhammad's understanding of the tribal norms of Arabia helped him become an inspirational leader as well as an effective manager.

Leading from the Front

Adair is singular in his focus on Prophet Muhammad as a leader. Unlike other commentators, he does not aim to explain or glorify Islam and Islamic teachings, and this allows him to home in on the aspects of Prophet Muhammad's personality and cultural context to illuminate his leadership qualities. Metaphors, such as comparing leaders to shepherds, and adjectives like humble and courageous appear frequently throughout the book.

A good shepherd guides his sheep, unites them, works for their welfare without taking advantage of them and cares for each individual. Adair sees those characteristics in the Prophet Muhammad. Not only did he care for the well-being of each and every member of his flock, he was uncompromising in his determination to protect the integrity of his mission.

Adair conveys many nuggets of wisdom about what constitutes leadership, how it can be developed and understood, using a simple narrative style to tell the story of a very special man, one who was at once a business leader, a political authority, a community activist, a social entrepreneur, a divine source and a humane role model

Adair has strong views about what makes great leaders stand out. They lead from the front and lead by example.

They must eschew arrogance, exude humility, be truthful, be prepared to share any hardship with followers, and provide both vision and dedication to achieving a task at hand. Success to Adair is a function of leadership, and Muhammad -- as a prophet who transformed Arabia and much of the world with his teachings -- could not have achieved success without being a good leader. This is the unstated assumption that holds the book together. Based on that, Adair mines the life of Muhammad to highlight his extraordinary qualities as a leader and the acumen with which he deployed these attributes. One is an account of an encounter between one of his followers and the Prophet while he was drawing up the formations of Muslims before the battle of Badr, a key military victory for the fledgling religion: As Muhammad was walking up the line straightening it with an arrow in his hand, he came to one Sawadi Ibn Ghaziya, who was standing too far out of line. "Stand in line, O Sawadi," the Prophet said, gently pricking him in the belly with his arrow. "You have hurt me, O apostle of God," Sawadi cried, with a much-exaggerated cry of pain.