THE SHEIKH CEO

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP

From **Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum**

By **Dr Yasar Jarrar**

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“Many have pursued a model similar to Dubai’s. The special ingredient is the Sheikh CEO. Understanding how he works is essential for anyone who wishes to replicate his success”

Dr Yasar Jarrar

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Lead with courage and vision

The Sheikh Ceo

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates, Ruler of Dubai, is – by any measure – the best known and admired leader in our region. He has created an extraordinary legacy through his bold vision and ability to deliver, often against all odds.

Between 2001 and 2008, I had the privilege of working inside The Executive Office of Sheikh Mohammed, most recently as Director of Strategy. During that period, Dubai underwent a phenomenal transformation. This remarkable story, with all its successes and challenges, created a brand for Dubai that is synonymous with superlatives and dynamism, and put it among the world's leading cities. As a result of its connectivity, bold futuristic projects, ease of doing business, hub status and robust trading networks, Dubai has emerged as the Hong Kong of South Asia, the Miami of Africa and the Singapore of the Middle East. But this book is not about Dubai! It is about the Sheikh who built it into a global hub, his leadership style and the way he operates.

This book distils the lessons I learned from observing Sheikh Mohammed first hand, along with tens of interviews capturing insights from other members of the team which worked in his Executive Office over the past two decades.

It gives an insider's view of the Sheikh CEO who runs Dubai, his personal approach and how he delivers. Whether or not you aspire to be a political or public leader, any leader or manager can improve his or her capabilities by studying Sheikh Mohammed's lessons in leadership. These lessons are especially poignant to emerging markets where the conditions and context are not always conducive to learning the leadership lessons that are distilled in management books with a Western context.

Since I left The Executive Office, I have done a lot of teaching, consulting and public speaking around the globe. One question which consistently comes up is how does he do it? How did he transform Dubai into the business hub of the region in such a short span of time? What are his secrets? Underlying all these questions has been the desire to emulate some of Dubai's success in economic development, especially in countries and cities in the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

Sheikh Mohammed is not a magician, a global economic guru or a leading academic. He is a great leader. He delivers on his promises, he is passionate about moving forward and he is always one step ahead. He takes risks, he believes in nurturing human capital and developing leaders around him, and he knows how to fail fast and succeed quick.

He is a unique blend of a government leader, a corporate CEO and a public value creator. He is the Sheikh CEO.

Author’s Foreword

In 2001, I was a Research Fellow at Cranfield School of Management in the United Kingdom (UK). I was enjoying life in the UK and had just been promoted to Senior Fellow. My colleagues and I had written a report for the UK Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) benchmarking the productivity of firms in the UK and the wider European Union with those of the United States. Our objective was to analyse the so-called ‘productivity gap’ and propose policies to close it.[1]

When the report was published, I received an email from Dubai requesting more information. A couple of weeks later, The Executive Office invited me to spend a few days in Dubai. They wanted to learn more about my work at Cranfield and how my studies of organisational performance could help Dubai.

A young Jordanian scholar, due to gain permanent British residency in 18 months, I had a clear career path and planned to become one of Cranfield’s youngest professors of international management. I had never visited any city in the Gulf Cooperation Council, and – quite frankly – had no intention to. The whole Middle East region, with all its political problems and economic challenges, was behind me.

I accepted The Executive Office’s invitation to attend the Dubai Strategy Forum, which was in its inaugural stage. I loved Dubai from the moment I landed in the city. The energy was contagious and my hosts were extremely welcoming. Although small, the city had a buzz one would expect to find in New York or London. As I engaged with The Executive Office's team and the Dubai Strategy Forum, I was expecting the typical political leadership discourse we grew up with in the Middle East, where politics trumps development and attention and resources are allocated to security, leaving economic development to suffer. However, I found instead a bold vision, sky-high ambition and a charismatic government leader. Even my interview with the Chairman of The Executive Office was positively different. He asked me one question: “What is your dream for the region?”

Taking the first step of an exciting journey which would see the rise of the emirate, I decided to take a year’s unpaid leave from Cranfield University to head to Dubai. During that time, it became clear to me that we were part of a historic moment for the Middle East, and for Dubai in particular, so I left my career plans in the UK behind and settled in Dubai.

Department of Trade and Industry, United Kingdom, REACTE Report – Benchmarking the Member States of the European Union: A Report to EU Policy Makers, April 2002

Chapter 1

The Rise of Dubai Inc

The Dubai Model

The story of Dubai has been told in many books, articles and case studies. It is a fascinating tale, full of lessons, superlatives, fans and detractors. Love it or hate it, Dubai is a phenomenal development story in a region that has its fair share of challenges.

Between 1995 and 2015, Dubai increased its GDP from $11 billion to $101 billion. It raised GDP per capita from $16,000 to $42,500 during the same period, all while reducing the contribution of oil revenues to its GDP from 18% to 1.2%. These numbers are akin to a development miracle when it comes to economic diversification and growth. Every single country in Asia, Africa, Latin America and now even Europe is chasing such development goals.

Dubai’s economy today is mostly driven by services, including trade, transportation, logistics, retail and tourism, as well as light manufacturing and real estate. The population increased from 700,000 in 1995 to more than 2.75 million in 2017. Dubai’s exports saw a 645% increase over the same period, while gross fixed capital formation increased by 733%.

Dubai’s position as the leading regional city is confirmed time and time again by many rankings including the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Global Liveability Index, which has ranked it for many consecutive years as the number one city in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The same applies to Mercer’s Quality of Living City Ranking and fDi Intelligence’s Global Cities of the Future report, which in 2016 ranked Dubai ahead of Tokyo, Beijing and Seoul.

In 2016, 70% of Fortune 500 companies had regional headquarters based in Dubai, and Dubai was named in the top eight globally ranked cities for flows of goods, services, capital, people and data. The other seven cities were San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, London, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Singapore.[1]

With more than 200 nationalities living in Dubai, it has established itself firmly as a bridge between East and West, served by more than 120 shipping lines and linked via 150 airlines to at least 220 global destinations.

This kind of economic transformation and growth is only a dream for many developing, and some developed, nations. While each country and city is unique and has its own circumstances, the rise of Dubai holds many lessons. In fact, governments from Africa, Asia and the Arab world today visit Dubai in an effort to understand how it works, and how they could copy some elements of its model.

In 2015, the World Economic Forum[2] featured Dubai among a small group of globally competitive cities that could lay a decent claim to be setting an example for best practice. The incredible speed of its development and the ambition of Dubai's vision have amazed the world and spurred other cities in the region to raise their aspirations. They all looked to Dubai as a beacon and either aspired to copy its model and emulate its success, or at least differentiate themselves by referring to it – no matter where you were in the Middle East and wider region, you felt the Dubai effect. In fact, whenever a city or state showed signs of development and fast growth, headlines across the region would liken them to Dubai. Whether it was plans for a new city like Neom in Saudi Arabia or Eko Atlantic in Nigeria, the headlines would claim the rise of a 'new Dubai'. Some states, like Djibouti,[3] even designed their development strategy around becoming the 'Dubai' of their region.

In 2004, Sheikh Mohammed decided to set up the Dubai School of Government (now known as the Mohammed bin Rashid School of Government) to ensure continual innovation in government modernisation. He wanted this to be a school that would help Dubai stay ahead, but also one that would capture the Dubai experience and share it with other countries. His directions at the time were to work with the best of the best to set up this new school. We partnered with the Harvard Kennedy School, which was as excited as we were about improving governance in the region and, like us, wanted to build a centre of excellence for the Middle East. We held classes and seminars in Dubai, as well as at the Kennedy School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, under a new Harvard programme titled the 'Dubai Initiative'.

The Harvard Kennedy School team saw the potential that Dubai had and its impact on the region. In many conversations, they used phrases like the 'Singapore of the Middle East'. Dubai had just enjoyed a great decade of exciting developments, from the growth of Emirates airline, to the construction of The Palm Jumeirah, and it was clear to the faculty at Harvard that this was a case study worth watching, studying and – in the longer term – possibly sharing with others as a development story. However, they did not see it as a model – yet!

"They say that luck smiled at Dubai; I say that when they want to undermine and devalue your efforts, they attribute your success to luck"

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

In one of the sessions, we were working with the then director of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Graham Allison, to run a conference in Boston on the topic of commercial hubs and port cities. We had enthusiastically designed a session to showcase the 'Dubai Model'. Allison paused and suggested we change the title to the 'Dubai Experiment'. An exciting and promising experiment in development and diversification, yes, but he was doubtful that we had enough years and results behind us to claim a model. We agreed.

Fast forward to 2019, having re-emerged from the global financial crisis, I would suggest that Dubai has earned its claim. It has become a true model for development in the region, and it is possible to deconstruct and study its individual elements. Dubai is a city of cities, with more than 28 free zones by 2017. It has a modern and efficient government, dynamic labour regulations, one of the world's most competitive tax systems even after introducing VAT and an apolitical outlook. Dubai is all about business and growth. It is an open, tolerant and dynamic city.

When looking at what this model has to offer, many experts saw it with different lenses. Rami Khoury, a Beirut based scholar, said that the people and leaders of Dubai might consider defining their model not in terms of what they have built with concrete and steel, but rather in terms of what their new urbanism can now contribute to the rest of the world in the realm of ideas, knowledge, culture and universal human norms. "I, for one, am cheering for them to succeed," he said.[4]

Prominent journalist Jihad Al Khazen said that Dubai had become a role model for the whole region. "The whole of the GCC region has undertaken impressive development initiatives and Dubai has taken pole position. When it [Dubai] established a media city (media cluster), many cities in the region followed suit. When it launched a successful airline, many cities followed suit. Whenever Dubai does something or launches a new project, you see versions of it in regional cities after a while. Whenever I want to have a glimpse of what might come up in the MENA region by way of new projects and initiatives, I go visit Dubai to see what new things they have to offer."[5]

Afshin Molavi, a senior fellow at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies Foreign Policy Institute, maintains that Dubai has a central role to play in today's tectonic shift that is resulting in global geo-economic realignment. In the 21st century, China, followed by India and many other Asian states, are part of a rebalancing of economic power from West to East, and Dubai is at the heart of that shift. In 2017, China surpassed India as Dubai's largest trade partner, while a staggering one-third of all international flights from India are destined for the UAE, according to Indian aviation authorities. Chinese tourism to Dubai saw a whopping 46% growth in 2017, and the number of Indian visitors reached nearly 2 million.[6]

No matter which lens you use to study the Dubai story, it is a model that has valuable lessons for the emerging markets. The Dubai model usually refers to fast growth, bold expansion, creative ideas, rapid implementation of plans, efficient service delivery and openness to the world. This is always footnoted by a key ingredient: they have Sheikh Mohammed. In many ways, the Dubai model today has become synonymous with the name and leadership style of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum.

Many elements of the Dubai model have been copied in neighbouring countries with varying degrees of success. Since the establishment of Dubai Media City, at least three other media cities have emerged, Dubai International Financial Centre was a beacon for four new international financial centres in the GCC alone, and the same applies to Dubai's other free zones, airlines, airports, policies, initiatives and programmes. This is all a testament to the Dubai effect and its impact. Dubai welcomes its neighbours to learn from it, and has set up institutions ready to help, should the nations be willing to learn. By 2017, the Dubai Government Excellence Model had been replicated in four Arab cities, aiming to modernise their governments, and the Arab League launched the Arab Government Excellence Award, modelled on and supported by the UAE's Government Excellence Model.

However, while many in the region have pursued a model that has a similar set of ingredients to Dubai, they often did not yield the same results. Something about Dubai's DNA is different.

That special ingredient is the Sheikh CEO. Understanding how he works is essential for anyone who wishes to replicate his success.

Before looking at the main elements of the Sheikh's leadership style, the word cloud below is a good summary of how he is seen by people closest to him. It was created using the simple exercise of counting the frequency of the words most commonly used in the interviews undertaken while writing this book.


Dubai
Results
Excellence
Trust
Positive
Delivery
Inspiration
Delivery
Bold
Endurance
Courage
Bold
Excellence
Vision
Number One
Vision
Hope
Results
Delivery
Trust
Endurance
Results
Trust
Endurance
Endurance
Hope
Hope
Fair
Dubai
Delivery
Courage
Dubai
Courage
Positive
Future
Number One
Delivery
Trust
Inspiration
Courage
Delivery
Hope
Positive
Bold
Vision
Bold
Grit
Future
Hope
Fair
Vision
Grit
Endurance
Inspiration
Inspiration
Grit
Future
Trust
Fair
Vision
Fair
Bold
Bold
Inspiration
Number One
Excellence
Vision
Positive
Endurance
Positive
Number One
Inspiration
Grit
Positive
Results
Courage
Fair
Future
Hope
Dubai
Trust
Future
Courage
Excellence
Dubai
Results
Future
Fair
Courage
Fair
Grit
Grit
Dubai
Number One
Number One
Results
Excellence
Vision

The Al Maktoum Tradition

Generations of leaders in his family have shaped Sheikh Mohammed's idea of what a leader should be, and as such it is useful to understand the core principles and lessons his forefathers have taught him.

The Al Maktoum family descended from one of the most influential tribes in South Arabia, the Bani Yas tribe, which had been present in the region since the 1580s.[7] The Al Maktoums come from the Al Bu Falasah subsection, and these tribal rulers have long been known as great warriors and charismatic leaders.[8]

It is with the Al Maktoums that Dubai's story began in the early 1900s. Sheikh Mohammed's grandfather, Sheikh Saeed bin Maktoum Al Maktoum, began his rule in 1912. He was a leading figure in the emirate and headed a progressive movement which started to shape the Dubai we know today. During his time as ruler, the pearling industry thrived in the Gulf and Dubai established itself as the leading port in the region. As early as 1904, Dubai established a free trading port that was extremely enticing as people migrated from all over the area, including Bahrain, Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan.

In the 1920s, the souk, or market, on the Deira side of the creek was the largest on the coast, with 350 shops and a steady throng of visitors and businessmen. By the 1930s, Dubai's population was nearly 20,000, a quarter of which were expatriates.

However, the pearling industry had been facing major challenges since the 1910s and had all but disappeared in Dubai by the 1940s. The whole region was facing economic hardship. Some states discovered oil – Saudi Arabia found it in 1938 and Kuwait in 1946. Dubai was in a difficult economic situation. It had to ‘sink or swim’. This prompted Sheikh Saeed to seek economic diversification and to transform Dubai into a trading hub. He governed wisely and was an inclusive leader. From those days, Dubai’s leadership focused on diversification and the need to continually re-invent their economy. That is now part of the Dubai leadership DNA.

Setting out on a journey to economic diversification, Sheikh Saeed knew that the government couldn’t do this alone. He formed a majlis from the local figures in Dubai to give them a voice in managing the local affairs. Traditionally, Arab tribes or families would each have a majlis, which was a place in their home where guests would come and visit to discuss and debate the issues of the day. As a ruler and tribal leader, the Sheikh would have a formal majlis where senior figures from the emirate, along with anyone who had an interest in public affairs, could meet. Hosted periodically, people would use the opportunity to present ideas, share concerns and file complaints. The ruler would start to use this gathering in some instances as an advisory council, searching for ways and means to further economic growth and diversification.

“The greatest influence was my father. From him I learned to be patient and to deliberate before passing judgment”

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

In 1958, Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum, Sheikh Mohammed’s father, took over as Ruler of Dubai. He continued, and strengthened, the majlis concept and started holding it almost daily at his home, meeting people from all over Dubai, listening to the aspirations and grievances of the people, and personally responding to every one.[9] Sheikh Rashid, who ruled Dubai for 32 years and was fondly known as the ‘father of Dubai’, was very hands-on, making twice-daily visits to the town to speak with the residents. He had tremendous enthusiasm and powers of persuasion, as well as a clear hunger to develop Dubai.[10] He was known for his projects – major infrastructure achievements that have had a significant influence on Dubai’s future.

During that time, Dubai Creek began to silt as a result of the increasing number of ships using it. Sheikh Rashid decided to have the waterway dredged. It was an ambitious, costly and visionary project for which he set up a special fund, mainly by raising special levies, collecting donations from merchants, and a loan from Kuwait. The works widened and deepened the creek to allow more types of ships to enter Dubai’s markets and encourage commerce and trade. The move resulted in increased volumes of cargo being handled in Dubai, which strengthened its position as a major trading and re-export hub.

Promoting trade growth in a city of merchants was the ruler’s main focus. He then turned his attention to other development projects like Dubai’s phone company, electricity company, Dubai Airport, renovating Al Maktoum Hospital and so on.[11] In the mind of young Sheikh Mohammed, this was what a ruler does. He acts, innovates, builds and is always serving the people.

Mohan Jashanmal, an Indian businessman, once said, “The society created here in Dubai has been shaped by the Al Maktoum family for several generations. Dubai’s story can truthfully be called the story of the ‘Maktoum Tradition’.”[12]

It is characterised by a belief in free enterprise, self-confidence, fairness, risk-taking, and rapid decision-making, and it is based on a simple idea that the government should create an enabling economy in which private enterprise can flourish. This is another element of the Dubai leadership DNA that stayed with Sheikh Mohammed. He repeated, on many occasions, that we should focus on the economy and help businesses flourish. “What is good for business is good for Dubai. The story of the making of modern Dubai is a story of free enterprise led by the government. If you go to some other countries in the developing world, who fights for free enterprise? Not the politicians. They don’t want it, they want state control. It is business and industry that fight for the free enterprise. But in Dubai, the government is fighting for free enterprise, which is a unique part of our story.”

Under Sheikh’s Rashid’s rule, Sheikh Mohammed took up his first position in public office – Head of Dubai Police and Public Security – in 1968, at the age of 19. When oil was discovered in Dubai, he was also appointed Director of the Department of Oil, which required him to closely manage a growing number of foreign companies and advisors in his emirate. It was then that his business acumen started to flourish and his intuition for financial intricacies was developed. The characteristics of the Sheikh CEO were obvious to all from those early days.

At the time, Dubai was still a stand-alone emirate and one of seven Sheikhdoms known as the Trucial States.[13] On the 2nd of December 1971, six of the seven emirates came together and formed the federation known as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with the seventh joining soon thereafter.[14] The agreement was signed in Dubai and Sheikh Mohammed was then named a General and the Minister of Defence, making him the youngest Minister of Defence in the world at the age of 21.

In 1991, Sheikh Mohammed’s father passed away and his elder brother, Sheikh Maktoum bin Rashid Al Maktoum, became the Ruler of Dubai. From that day, Sheikh Maktoum relied heavily on Sheikh Mohammed, who served as Crown Prince between 1995 and 2006, to steer Dubai forward as a regional business hub.

Sheikh Mohammed succeeded Sheikh Maktoum in 2006 to become Ruler of Dubai and Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE, by which time he was already widely known as ‘the CEO of Dubai’.[15]

Affectionately called ‘Sheikh Mo’ by Dubai residents, or ‘the Sheikh CEO’ by those in development and government circles, he is known as the man in charge of Dubai Inc, and the leader who transformed his city from a small trading port in the 1980s into one of the world’s commercial hubs in less than two decades.

While innovation is in his every breath, Sheikh Mohammed has remained true to the core lessons and beliefs passed down by generations of his family before him. In his latest book, My Story, the Sheikh details four tenets that he calls the emirate’s ‘unwritten constitution’. These are the preservation of justice, balanced relationships with all, a firm belief in free trade, and a diversified economy. He goes on to share three turnkey lessons he learned from his father, Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum: you always have more to learn, surround yourself with strong leaders and stay out of politics.

On the 4th of January 2019, Sheikh Mohammed’s golden jubilee of engaging in public life, he elaborated on these tenets, adding his own lessons, and officially documented eight core governance principles. He called upon all those in a position of responsibility in the emirate of Dubai to abide by them today and in the future. He published the announcement on all his social media accounts, in an initiative he said will ensure “the wellbeing of our people, the sustained progress of our nation and the welfare of our future generations”.[16]

The eight principles offer a great insight into how he thinks of governance and leadership.

The first principle is about the Union of the UAE. It is called “Union is the foundation” and leaves no doubt that the Union’s policies and priorities are also Dubai’s policies and priorities. While much is said about Dubai’s vision and transformation, the Sheikh made it clear that Dubai is an integral part of the UAE and a pillar of the federation. He understands the power of unity, and as Prime Minister of the UAE, the Sheikh declared his commitment to working hand in hand with the other emirates to drive the rise of UAE Inc, just as he masterminded Dubai Inc. The coming decades in the Dubai story will be shaped by the rise of UAE Inc. This will be the march to increase the UAE’s GDP from billions (of UAE dirhams) to trillions and the solidification of a true global economic hub.

His second principle is critical, and arguably the cornerstone of what made Dubai stand out in the region as an oasis of stability and growth. “No one is above the law”. In a region fraught with challenges, power struggles and governance issues, this principle caught the most attention and is a unique differentiator for many who move to Dubai, be it businesses, investors or individuals. The Sheikh’s exact words were: “Justice is the basis of a strong and proud nation and guarantees prosperity and stability. No one is above the law in Dubai, starting with the ruling family. The law does not discriminate between citizens and residents, rich and poor, male and female, Muslims and non-Muslims. Justice delayed is justice denied. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Development literature around the world talks about the importance of the rule of law as the basis for sustainable development. Sheikh Mohammed detailed that concept and made it a way of life in Dubai.

If there was ever one principle that can summarise Dubai's fabric and success, it is the tolerance, openness and rule of law – all of which he captured in this principle.

The third principle is one that he has lived by and witnessed from the early days of his grandfather. Dubai needs to own its economic model and destiny. It can't rely on pearls or oil or any resources. It must be a hub, and hence the third principle is "we are business capital". This is indeed the basis of Dubai's development model. The government of Dubai is all about strong economic performance and it is apolitical. He said that Dubai "does not invest or involve itself in politics and does not rely on politics to ensure its competitiveness. Dubai is a politically neutral, business-friendly global hub that focuses on creating economic opportunities". This focus on business goes hand in hand with another principle that focuses on Dubai's deep-rooted belief in economic diversification. "Economic diversification has been the foundation of our unwritten constitution in Dubai since 1833," the Sheikh said in his announcement, and it is true that generations of the Al Maktoum family have learned this lesson. "The changing times and the rapid developments make our commitment to this principle everlasting. Our new goal is to create at least a new economic sector every three years that will be productive, contribute to our GDP and generate jobs," he said.

The fifth principle lays out the core pillars behind Dubai's growth and the cornerstones of this economic diversification. These 'pillars' are the factors that delivered the Dubai model as it is today, got Dubai out of the global financial crisis and will shape its next phase of development. These pillars are "a credible, resilient and excellent government; an active, fair and open private sector; and public and government-owned flagship companies that compete globally and generate an income for the government, jobs for its citizens and assets for future generations". As simple as that sounds, betting on those three horses and managing the delicate balance in terms of how they compete and cooperate is the Dubai secret sauce. In many countries around the world, these sectors compete and cannibalise each other. Either government suffocates the private sector or the private sector weakens and corrupts government. There are many lessons to be learned and books to be written about this unique and balanced development model.

Closely linked to these pillars and public-private collaboration is the make-up and uniqueness of Dubai's society. The principle covering this notes that "our society has a unique personality". Many would argue that this uniqueness is a core competitive advantage for Dubai. Sheikh Mohammed wrote that Dubai's society is based on tolerance and openness, with no room for discrimination. "We are modest about our successes, perseverant in dealing with challenges, charitable and generous in achieving the greater good and open to everyone."

This society is at the heart of Dubai's success in attracting global talent, which is the topic of the following principle that notes that Dubai is 'a land for talent'. Diversification, growth, new sectors and the core fundamentals of Dubai's model need fuel, and the Sheikh CEO is clear that the fuel is talent and human capital. No other resource comes close. Not only does Dubai value and nurture local talent, but it aims to attract skilled people from around the world. His seventh principle said, "The emirate's prominence, sustainability and competitiveness depend on its capacity to continue attracting skilled and talented people, and nurturing the brightest minds to generate innovative ideas." He promised to continually review policies to ensure Dubai remains a magnet for the world's most talented minds.

With all that focus on development, the Sheikh's final principle encapsulates his legacy: "We care about future generations". This principle emphasised his forward-looking stance and vision. "The destiny of our future generations must not be affected by the fluctuations of regional politics and global economic cycles. We invest and create valuable assets for them," he said, laying down a rule that the government should, under all circumstances, own economic assets worth at least 20 times the value of its annual budget.

These principles have been the foundation of Dubai's early development and continue to underpin the decisions that drive the emirate forward. The story of Dubai’s development holds many examples of how staying true to these core beliefs has differentiated Dubai. The Sheikh’s leadership model is an embodiment of these principles.

Dubai Was Founded On Three 'T's

Doing business has always been part of Dubai's DNA. For over a century, it has been considered a 'City of Merchants'. In fact, the first law ever published in Dubai after it established its first formal government was related to business. While most other countries' first laws might have related to governance or social issues, Dubai's first law, published in the emirate's formal record of laws and legislation, the Official Gazette, on the 1st of August 1962, related to the customs placed on transit goods.

It was a law for a commercial hub. A merchant city at the crossroads of East and West. It demonstrated Dubai's clear focus on logistics, trade and establishing itself as a meeting place for the region.[17]

The law was issued to reduce customs tariffs on transit goods. It stated that goods arriving by boat at Dubai's shores and heading to Abu Dhabi by ground transport would only pay 3% customs fees and no other charges, apart from the cost of the Goods Declaration Bill. This was an early example of competitive manoeuvring. The law demonstrated the mentality that has put Dubai ahead of the MENA region for ease of doing business for most of the past decade, according to World Bank's Doing Business reports.

The 1962 law allowed ships to submit all their paperwork a week before arriving via a designated private sector third party called Gray Mackenzie. Speeding up and facilitating business were to become future hallmarks of the Dubai model. The law itself was on a single page and straight to the point. This business-focused, competitive government model is something many countries still aspire to today.

Central to running a pro-business government, and a guiding principle of the Al Maktoum Tradition, is Sheikh Mohammed's apolitical approach to management and governing. He knew from day one that development and prosperity needed a strong economic base. He knew that the world favoured economic success over political dealings, and – unlike many leaders in the Middle East – he decided to let the economy take the front seat, with politics coming second (or third).

He learned this lesson from his father who taught the young Sheikh Mohammed that playing politics never did the Arab world any good. In fact, when Sheikh Mohammed asked him about the true leaders of the world, his father said that today's leaders are the silent giants who run – and own – the economy. They are a far cry from the politicians who produce a lot of noise.[18]

In 2007, Newsweek highlighted this drive in Dubai. "In a region where everything is political, Dubai's greatest distinction – and the secret of its prosperity – is that it is almost utterly apolitical. Here, globalisation's triumph has been almost complete."[19]

The rise of Dubai did not happen overnight, but it did happen fast by historical standards. And if the past two decades are a guide, one might expect the next 20 years to bring us more surprises from Dubai, a city that has emerged as the unofficial hub of the New Silk Road, extending from China to Africa and beyond, and one of the most global actors in the world today.

During the past decades, Dubai was doing more than just building skyscrapers, although these were the most obvious feature to the average observer. Dubai was building the three 'T's of its success story: transport, trade and tourism.

“What’s good for business is good for Dubai”

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

Consider this: Dubai International Airport surpassed London Heathrow as the busiest international air hub in the world in 2012, and it has stayed at the top of the rankings, lengthening its lead each year. In 2018, around 89 million passengers went through it, compared to 80.1 million travelling through Heathrow. Spend some time in Dubai International Airport and you will see history being made before your eyes as multiple revolutions converge: the emerging markets revolution with the rising Asian middle class, the air travel revolution, the connectivity revolution and the Asian-African new silk roads. Every day, an average of 245,000 passengers flow through Dubai International Airport, connecting to old and new destinations across the world.

Dubai’s major container terminal port, Jebel Ali, handles more containers than any port in Europe or North America, and ranks in the top 10 worldwide. Spend some time in Jebel Ali and witness the trade revolution, the container shipping revolution, the consumer revolution and the technology revolution reshaping how we connect with the world. Every minute of every day, 100 containers land in Jebel Ali, totalling some 15 million TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units) for 2018, often headed for re-export to cities in Asia or Africa.

As for tourism, the city of Dubai attracts more international tourists than New York, Singapore, Istanbul or Amsterdam, according to the Mastercard Global Destination Cities Index, ranking fourth worldwide. In 2017, 15.7 million tourists visited Dubai to shop, to go to the beach, to visit historic sites, to dine at world-class restaurants and to enjoy theme and amusement parks. Indians are the number one travellers to Dubai, Chinese tourists are the fastest growing, and

African travellers are rising.

Indeed, Dubai has become a global crossroads of trade, tourism and transport.

This model of three ‘T’s required a sharp focus from Dubai’s leaders. A focus on building the infrastructure of the three ‘T’s, even at a time when everyone else was focusing on politics and geopolitical investing. It also needed a somewhat contrarian focus that was against all odds and counter to conventional wisdom. At the time, some of these investments were seen, and often criticised, as too bold or even out of place. Back in 1980, The Wall Street Journal noted this trend and wondered if it makes sense. The headline asked, “Is dry dock in Dubai to be high and dry and pie in the sky?”[20] The article noted that Dubai’s oil-wealthy Sheikhs were investing in risky ventures and called them the ‘entrepreneurs of Dubai’. In those days, Dubai was building the foundation of its sea trade by investing in a dry dock that was so large that no ship afloat (those days) could fill it. This was a time when the global shipbuilding industry was witnessing a global recession, and when the six countries of the GCC met and decided to build a regional dry dock in Bahrain to serve them. Today, those dry docks are a cornerstone of Dubai’s position as a trading hub. Since it opened in 1983, the yard has repaired more than 6,000 vessels, with a combined tonnage of 500 million. It has built 70 new ships since 1994 and contains the Middle East’s largest floating crane.

The Dubai leaders, according to The Wall Street Journal in 1980, also invested $1.4 billion in an aluminium smelter whose power plant had five of the largest gas-fired turbines in the world. They also invested $1.6 billion in a 66 berth seaport where freighters would steam into a 1.25 mile-long basin carved in the desert. Described by the short-sighted article as an ‘edifice complex’, these projects are now at the heart of the global trading hub that is Dubai and are witnessing expansion. In fact, this ultra-strategic, long-term vision and contrarian approach to national investing became one that would be repeated by Dubai in the future in aviation, tourism and other sectors. It is an approach that was ‘made in Dubai’ and perfected by the Sheikh CEO.

Fortune Is A Selective Disadvantage

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the pearling industry thrived in the Arabian Gulf's relatively calm seas, providing both income and employment to its people. It became a good economic resource for the people of Dubai, offering a major, if seasonal, source of employment. While many of those engaged in the pearling industry would return home to tend date plantations in inland oases and herd camels between seasons, there were others for whom it was a full-time occupation.

British historical records from the late 19th century, for example, refer to divers from the Emirates travelling to Sri Lanka to work the pearl beds there once the season in the Gulf was over. Over time, many families moved to live permanently in one of the coastal settlements, increasing the size and importance of Abu Dhabi and Dubai. By the beginning of the 20th century, there were, according to one calculation, more than 1,200 pearling boats operating out of the Trucial States, each carrying an average crew of 18 men. This meant that during the summer, most able-bodied men, numbering more than 22,000, were absent on the pearl banks.[21]

The industry reached its peak shortly before the market was undermined by the cultivation of pearls in farms in the 1920s. The First World War had a severe impact on the pearling industry, but it was the Great Depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s, coupled with the Japanese invention of the cultured pearl, that all but destroyed it. The industry eventually faded away shortly after the Second World War, when the newly independent Government of India imposed heavy taxation on pearls imported from the Gulf.

The decline of pearling affected the whole local economy, with suppliers catering for the pearling fleets, boat-builders and more all losing out. It also meant that there was little opportunity to build any infrastructure. Dubai experienced an extended period of economic hardship and poverty.

This boom and bust, good fortune and subsequent times of hardship, became ingrained in the leadership's mind, and they recognised that to depend on any one sector – just like a species evolved to eat from a single food source – was a selective disadvantage. But understanding this dynamic turned it into a competitive edge.

"The diversification of resources is a legacy passed down through my family. It is the guarantee that the lessons of our arduous journey over the past 185 years haven't been taken for granted"

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

In 1966, oil was discovered in Dubai. The Emirates granted various concessions to international oil companies, and this was followed by a large influx of foreign workers, mainly from the Indian subcontinent. Between 1968 and 1975, the population of Dubai quickly increased by 300% to 175,000 people.[22] The years that followed witnessed improving economic conditions and enabled Sheikh Rashid to invest in infrastructure projects and facilities to serve the region, but little dependency was created. History had taught its lessons.

Identifying during the good times that they had a selective disadvantage enabled the Sheikh to deliver a consistent message: we can only rely on a diversified economy, not on a single commodity or source of income. Although the UAE is ranked sixth in the world for its proven oil reserves and seventh in terms of its natural gas deposits as of 2018,[23] Dubai's oil reserves comprise a mere fraction of the country's total.

The first message I recall from 2001 when I joined The Executive Office's team was one of urgency. Dubai has little oil and it is running out. We must diversify, innovate and invest. In fact, since the early 1990s, Sheikh Mohammed has repeatedly warned that Dubai would run out of oil and that the only way forward is economic diversification. It was a tone of urgency, and a clear 'sink or swim' mentality. There was no room for complacency or dependency.

This ability to recognise a selective disadvantage has proved a credit to various successful models such as Singapore and Japan. Lee Kuan Yew, the founder of modern Singapore, has always acknowledged that Singapore is a price taker not a price maker. This was a message he would repeat in government meetings, at private sector engagements and in general community communications. He was making sure his entire team was clear that Singapore needed to be agile, move fast, react to global trends and never be complacent. Japan's clarion call following the Second World War was, "We are an island nation with no natural resources." This prompted one of the most spectacular industrial revolutions in the island nation. Understanding your selective disadvantage has a critical role to play in building a nation's competitiveness.

It is indeed the exact opposite of the 'Dutch disease' that seems to plague many resource-based economies. In economics, the Dutch disease is the apparent causal relationship between an increase in a resource-dependent sector, such as oil or timber, and a decline in other sectors, like manufacturing or agriculture. The putative mechanism is that as revenues increase in the growing sector, the nation's currency becomes stronger compared to the currencies of other countries. This results in the nation's other exports becoming more expensive for other countries to buy, and imports becoming cheaper, making those sectors less competitive. The term was coined in 1977 by The Economist to describe the decline of the manufacturing sector in the Netherlands after the discovery of the large Groningen natural gas field in 1959.[24] In the model, there is a non-tradable sector (which includes services) and two tradable sectors: the booming sector and the lagging (or non-booming) tradable sector. The booming sector is usually the extraction of natural resources such as oil, natural gas or gold or the production of crops, like coffee or cocoa. The lagging sector is usually manufacturing or agriculture. This resource boom affects this economy in two ways. It increases demand for labour, which causes production to shift towards the booming sector and away from the lagging sector. This shift in labour from the lagging sector to the booming sector is called direct-deindustrialisation. The other effect occurs as a result of the extra revenue brought in by the resource boom. It increases demand for labour in the non-tradable sector (services) at the expense of the lagging sector. This shift from the lagging sector to the non-tradable sector is called indirect-deindustrialisation.

The Sheikh CEO was adamant that Dubai would not fall prey to this disease, which affected many other economies in the region. He said, “It would be a mistake to wager the future of our countries and our people on [an oil pool] since undoubtedly the day will come when the pool dries [up] or when oil is no longer a crucial global commodity. It would also be a mistake to link the future of our people, and generations to come, with fluctuations in oil prices and financial markets.”[25]

His aim was, and still is, to diversify Dubai’s economy and reduce the emirate’s dependence on oil revenues. In 1985, oil revenues made up 50% of Dubai’s GDP. In 2009, it was just 5% and it has continued to decrease, with a Bloomberg report in 2018 putting oil production at less than 1% of GDP,[26] while tourism (to mention just one example) contributes close to 20% of GDP.

Competition Is Key For Success

The story of Dubai's airports and its development as an aviation hub demonstrates one of the fundamental beliefs of Sheikh Mohammed: competition is key for success. That belief and drive led to the success we see today.

Dubai International Airport (DXB) first opened in 1959. It was based on blueprints from Singapore, and was funded through a public-private partnership with deferred payments. When Sheikh Mohammed took the project over in 1965, it had an asphalt runway 1,800 metres long and only a small number of a specific type of aircraft could land. But the journey had begun and expansion continued step by step, gradually transforming the airport into a major refuelling destination between East and West.

Since its inception, the airport has maintained an open-skies policy, a strategy that lies in direct contrast with other regional airports, some of which still remain protected by national competition rules. In fact, it is in defence of this open-skies policy that Emirates airline was launched.

By December 2014, Dubai International Airport had overtaken London Heathrow as the world's busiest airport for international passenger traffic. A total of 68.9 million passengers had passed through DXB that year, compared to 67.8 million at Heathrow, according to data from the Airports Council International.[27]

In 2016, that number reached 83.6 million, an increase of approximately 15% per year since the airport opened in the 1960s. In 2018, DXB welcomed more than 89 million passengers – more than enough to retain its title as the world's busiest air hub for international travel for the fifth year running.[28]

The airport itself was a major piece of the puzzle in establishing Dubai's position as a global aviation hub. The other piece was Emirates airline. In the 1980s, Gulf Air, operating out of Abu Dhabi, was the main airline serving the UAE. In those days, it was not an obvious move to start a new airline in the region. Sheikh Mohammed recalls the story from 1985.

Gulf Air, owned by four of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, was using Dubai Airport as a hub and sought to put an end to the open-skies policy, to its own commercial benefit, by limiting competition.

"They wanted to protect their market share and even set us a deadline of a few weeks to comply [with cancelling our open-skies policy]," said Sheikh Mohammed. They requested special treatment and clearly told Dubai that if they did not receive it, Gulf Air would decrease its services to Dubai. That threat, in hindsight, was the end of Gulf Air and a blessing in disguise for Dubai.

Sheikh Mohammed did not waste a moment. "We refused their request for a simple reason: we believe that competition, and not protectionism, is healthiest for our country. We rented two aeroplanes [from Pakistan] and created an airline that we called Emirates."[29]

The Sheikh provided $10 million for this new airline to lease a fleet of Boeing 737s. He called it Emirates and set up a small team to produce a concept plan and strategy blueprint. Within a short time, in October 1985, the first Emirates flight landed in Pakistan. Here comes the best part: the specialist advisors who had designed the initial strategy for Emirates also advised the Sheikh to drop the open-skies policy to allow the new airline to grow. Sheikh Mohammed refused.

In 2017, Emirates had a fleet of 255 planes, 61,200 employees and operated the world's largest Boeing 777 fleet, with 262 more planes worth $120 billion on order. In 2016, Emirates circled the globe 20,561 times and announced 26 years of consecutive profit. It flew to 155 destinations in 83 countries and carried 55 million customers on more than 860,000 passenger flights.

In July 2018, the UAE Ambassador to Pakistan honoured the pilot of the first-ever Emirates flight, Captain (Retd) Fazal Ghani Mian, who led the airline's inaugural journey from Dubai to Karachi on the 25th of October 1985. Captain Mian recalls, "I came to Dubai on the 1st of October 1985 and met with Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al Maktoum and the Emirates airline Managing Director Maurice Flanagan and their teams. We discussed the tasks ahead and how we wanted to proceed." On the 18th of October, a group of 100 pilots, flight and aircraft engineers and maintenance staff, among others, all came to Dubai to initiate the planning stages. "I was also tasked to train UAE national pilots. They were trained in Dubai and got their commercial licenses from the Civil Aviation Authority in Pakistan."

"Competition always makes you stronger and better. Competition is feared only by the weak"

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

In 2016, Emirates was named the World's Most Valuable Airline Brand in the Brand Finance Global 500 report, valued at $7.7 billion.[30]

The success of the airline was so phenomenal that competitors started questioning its success. Some accused it of being a subsidiary of the Dubai Government, hence getting preferential treatment. In fact, at one point, the CEO of Qantas, Geoff Dixon, said, “Anybody that can control the airline, government policy and the airport can make a lot of money.” Needless to say, that was not true, and Emirates executives openly denied the allegations. Their books were audited by an international firm, PricewaterhouseCoopers, which said that the auditors attributed Emirates’ strength to its business model rather than any special treatment.[31]

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Emirates benefits from the same business-friendly policies as all companies in Dubai. Dubai International Airport is open 24 hours a day, while many other hub airports are limited to daylight hours. It pays no corporation tax and has access to low-cost, skilled labour from across the region, meaning its labour costs are a lower proportion of its overall budget compared to other major global airlines.

Thanks to Dubai's open-skies policy, more than 100 airlines operate out of Dubai International Airport and the playing field is level. Fast forward to 2012, and Qantas acknowledged that Emirates was simply a well-run airline in a great location with an ambitious strategy. Not only did they accept those facts, but Qantas went on to form a global aviation partnership with Emirates. Imitation and collaboration is indeed the sincerest form of flattery.

Like most of Dubai's major projects and initiatives, Emirates prompted the creation of many regional airlines trying to emulate its success, from Doha to Abu Dhabi, Istanbul to Addis Ababa.

The success of the airline and airport resulted in the many successful adjacencies, from one of the world's largest duty-free shops, to a global flight catering and airport operations company and a regional airport cargo hub.

To cater for its own operations and exponential growth, Dubai needed to create a company that moved just as fast, so the Dubai National Air Transport Association (dnata) was formed. Founded in 1959 with five employees to offer in-flight catering and travel services, dnata has grown to offer ground handling in 76 airports, cargo services in 45 airports and catering services in 61 airports, winning many international awards for its services around the globe. It grew organically and via global acquisitions, and in February 2018 dnata co-founded the Airline Catering Association, which is based in Brussels, Belgium.

Dubai also managed to build an impressive airport retailer called Dubai Duty Free, which was brought to global fame for raffling luxury cars and offering million-dollar rewards. Dubai Duty Free opened officially in 1983 and an Irish company called Aer Rianta was invited to manage the few shops. Once the contract was finished, Dubai invited their general manager to stay on. In 1984, Dubai Duty Free recorded first-year sales of $20 million and has since grown into one of the biggest travel retail operators in the world with sales turnover of $2.015 billion in 2018. In that same year, it had more than 6,100 employees from 47 nationalities, including 25 of its original 100 staff recruited in 1983. It has also created hundreds of millionaires since 1999, when it launched its Millennium Millionaire raffle.

More importantly for the logistics and trading hub that is Dubai, in 1996 the government launched the Dubai Airport Freezone to facilitate air-freight trade to more than 220 destinations across six continents. In 2012, the Financial Times's fDi Magazine crowned it the best airport free zone in the world.

Building on its aviation success, Sheikh Mohammed started a short-haul airline, called flydubai, to complement Emirates' long-haul strength. Several members of the Emirates management team were moved to flydubai and assigned the task of building it from scratch. With long and short-haul connections, Dubai has firmly established itself the undisputed regional commerce hub. Dubai launched flydubai in 2008 and by 2016, the carrier operated 1,700 flights per week to 90 destinations.

That might be enough for many aviation hubs, if they could achieve it, but not for Dubai, and not for the Sheikh CEO. In 2013, Dubai opened Al Maktoum International Airport, which aims to accommodate more than 150 million passengers a year. To enable that airport to take flight, Dubai is now building a whole new district of the city called Dubai South. Dubai also won the rights to host Expo 2020 in that location.

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Six of the seven emirates (Abu Dhabi, Ajman Dubai, Fujairah, Sharjah and Umm Al Quwain) united on that date. The seventh, Ras Al Khaimah, joined the federation on the 10th of February 1972

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Chapter 2

Lead with courage and vision

One thing almost everyone agrees on when it comes to Sheikh Mohammed is the consistency of his message. If you hear his speeches, read his plans, follow his social media and analyse his talks, you will find consistency in the overall direction. He takes a long-term view, with an amazing consistency of vision. He builds and builds, learns from mistakes, adjusts the tools and refines his messages, but the long-term direction remains the same. He is a man of genuine, courageous, positive and consistent vision.

Strive For Number One

Ohood Al Roumi, UAE Minister of State for Happiness and Wellbeing and Director General of the Prime Minister’s Office, recalls that in the first meeting for setting the key performance indicators (KPIs) for the UAE National Agenda, just after the Sheikh became the Prime Minister of the UAE, he would not accept numbers and targets in the top 20, top 15 or anything similar. His words were: “We only aim for number one.” She noted, “For him, nothing is impossible. He pushes himself and pushes us to beyond what we think we can deliver. His belief in us and his vision and courage drive us forward and make us achieve and deliver. He never changed his belief, course or vision over 30 years. Consistency is a hallmark of his leadership style.”

Sheikh Mohammed’s vision for Dubai and the UAE is simple: to be number one in everything they do. As he told CBS journalist Steve Kroft during a 60 Minutes special entitled “Dubai Inc”, “I want my country to be number one, not in the region, but in the world. Number one in everything: higher education, health, housing. I want to give my people the highest standard of living.”

The Sheikh does not miss an opportunity to remind everyone that it is possible – that anything is possible with imagination and determination. And his simple words inspire a nation. In his first book, My Vision, he made sure everyone understood that he does not like the word ‘impossible’, saying it was coined by people who do not want to get out of their comfort zone.

“We, in the UAE, generally do not have the word ‘impossible’ in our dictionary. This word is used by the weak and the lazy who fear challenge and progress. If someone doubts his abilities and lacks self-confidence, he loses the path to success and excellence and will not reach his goals. I ask you to insist on number one. I and my people love the number one."

It has become accepted now in Dubai and the UAE that being number one is the goal. This is not just a motto or an attempt at grabbing headlines. It is a target.

In a brainstorming workshop with the Prime Minister's Office, part of the UAE Federal Government, on the 4th of March 2014, the Sheikh told his team, "The only limits to what we can achieve are the limits of our imagination."

That, in a nutshell, summarises how Sheikh Mohammed sees the world. "Everybody starts small. We all begin life as a single cell. Every business starts as one person with an idea. How fast you go, and how far you get, is in your hands. The bigger your vision, the bigger your achievement will be. Will you stumble on the way? Perhaps, but we cannot let fear keep us small. We have to be brave to be big."

The Sheikh has a big vision and endless ambition, and he never lets his teams settle for the conventional or average. Just look at the story of building the Burj Khalifa, the tallest tower in the world. Had it been built to its original design, the burj, or tower, would have had just 90 floors, according to Mohamed Alabbar, Chairman of Emaar Properties, which developed the skyscraper.

Alabbar remembers that when he visited Sheikh Mohammed and presented the original architectural renderings, he was excited to build a 'magnificent' skyscraper, taller than anything else in Dubai. He needed a plot of land for the tower and proposed a land-for-shares swap with the Dubai Government. He had identified a prime building plot in the centre of the city.

Upon reviewing the drawings, Sheikh Mohammed asked about the height of the planned tower and was told that is was 90 storeys, something considered ‘very tall’ by global standards. However, the Sheikh immediately noted that while very tall, 90 floors was not the tallest!

That design was finished there and then. Sheikh Mohammed pointed out that there are buildings around the world that have more than 100 floors, such as Taipei 101, so named because it has 101 floors. What was the point of Dubai doing something average? How would this very tall, yet average, building add to Dubai’s allure, attractiveness and economic plans? Alabbar was clearly told that the design was not approved and he needed to do much better. The Sheikh CEO’s direction to him was clear: “Review the tallest buildings in the world and then come back and see me.”

A few weeks later, Alabbar was back with a determined look on his face and a new packet of drawings. First, he showed Sheikh Mohammed pictures of a handful of the world’s tallest buildings: Taipei 101, the Petronas Towers in Malaysia and the Sears Tower in Chicago (now called Willis Tower). Then he produced a rendering of a silvery spire that looked like something out of a 1950s science-fiction comic book. It was a dramatic tower unlike any of the others, and unlike anything that Sheikh Mohammed had seen before.

Alabbar pointed first to the pictures of existing skyscrapers. “These are the old tallest buildings in the world,” he said, then shifting his pointer to the futuristic spire. “And this is what we’re going to build.”

“Interesting,” Sheikh Mohammed replied. “How much taller is it?”

“This building is 20% taller than anything else on the planet,” Alabbar said.

Sheikh Mohammed said with a smile, “I think we can do this land swap. But go back and see if there’s any way to make it even taller.”

That was how the Burj Khalifa started.[32] The final version had 163 floors – 73 more than originally planned – making the Burj Khalifa far taller than any other building when it opened in 2010.[33]

This is a key lesson from the Sheikh: if you want to do something, make sure you are doing something spectacular and worthwhile. What is the point of doing something average? Always strive to do something better than the others around you.

In another example, the Sheikh recalled a discussion he had with his executive team in Dubai, who came to him with plans to expand Dubai International Airport. They had a well-researched plan to ensure the airport increased its capacity to serve the demand they anticipated that Dubai could generate. True to form, the Sheikh’s vision was much more ambitious.

“Do not think of small starts; dream of big finishes”

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

“I do not want an airport for Dubai, I want to transform Dubai into an airport for the world," he replied. The Sheikh CEO's message was loud and clear: "Opportunities are made, they do not just lie around waiting for someone to grab them."

For Sheikh Mohammed, the only option is to aim for the moon. "Your determination and energy will be proportionate to your goal. Therefore, set a high goal for yourself and do not settle for anything less than the very best. The best is exactly what you will get if you accept no less," he says. What is the point of having average goals in life? Every goal should be a moonshot.

On the 20th of November 2013, Jihad Al Khazen, a prominent Arab journalist, wrote in the United Kingdom-based Arabic daily newspaper, Al Hayat: "I recall one day in the 1990s when Sheikh Mohammed took me for a drive to show me around Dubai. The first stop was The Palm Jumeirah. The Sheikh was showing me this mega-project while telling me that his main focus was human development, not infrastructure. He then stopped at the airport to show the major expansion project which was to build the capacity for 130 million passengers per year. I was amazed by the enormity of the plans and asked him what he was trying to achieve. I live in London, home of Heathrow, one of the world's largest airports with capacity for 60 million passengers. Where is Dubai going to get double that number of passengers? He smiled and said that his issue with my question was that I was asking about today and he was talking about 2020 and beyond."

His vision is genuine, and genuine vision is contagious. Yasser Hareb, an Emirati author who worked in the Sheikh's Executive Office, talks about this contagious vision and confidence. "People say that a successful leader is the one who inspires people to trust and follow him, and the distinguished leader is the one who inspires people to trust and believe in themselves. Sheikh Mohammed did both."[34]

This is the same visionary mentality demonstrated by his father in 1980 when

The Wall Street Journal asked about the feasibility of the 66 berths in Jebel Ali. A true leader aims for moonshots and understands that what we build today can’t be limited by our present ideas. There is no point setting goals in life with the aim of producing average results.

Shape Your Own Future

His vision for the future is probably the most crucial element of the Sheikh's style. John F Kennedy wrote in his book Why England Slept (1940), "Any person will awaken when the house is burning down. What we need is an armed guard that will wake up when the fire first starts, or better yet, one that will not permit a fire to start at all". Sheikh Mohammed has that ability to see things ahead of their time and work towards them. Born into a house in Dubai with no running water or electricity, he now presides over a city that boasts the world's tallest tower among a string of other achievements. He once said that a trip to New York as a child gave him additional inspiration to build big. His motto has always been to "never fear scale or vision".[35]

And his ambition is not limited by the geography of his city. From the very early days, Sheikh Mohammed defined Dubai's region as much wider than simply the GCC or MENA. The Sheikh saw those as political borders, and he was more interested in trade and business within and beyond. He knew instinctively that when the history of the 21st century will be written in the year 2100, the rise of China, India and vast swathes of Asia and Africa will occupy a starring role in that narrative. He also strongly believed in creating his own opportunities. Drawing his own region for Dubai was therefore a natural decision.

Dubai aimed to become the commercial capital of a region defined as anywhere within a seven-hour flight from Dubai, which covered the Middle East, Africa, South-East Asia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) group of former soviet countries in Eurasia. This view put Dubai at the centre of a region of about 3 billion people in 50 countries, with a combined GDP of more than $7 trillion. This is a lesson in foresight and scenario planning.

The seven-hour flight radius was not selected through an exact science or an economist's formula. It stemmed from ambition, opportunity and Sheikh Mohammed's courageous leadership. The Sheikh simply looked at the world's financial and commercial capitals. To the west, we find London, Paris and Berlin; to the east is Hong Kong, Singapore and Shanghai. In between, there is a vast region with billions of people, a huge wealth of resources and ancient civilisations, but virtually no hub for commerce, business or logistics. That was what Sheikh Mohammed termed, in 2001, the 'Dubai Region', rebranded for 2019 as the 'Dubai Silk Road'.

One of Dubai's early projects that shaped his thinking along those lines was Dubai Drydocks (now known as Drydocks World – Dubai). Designed as early as 1971 as a regional shipyard and ship repair facility, it become central to the Dubai hub model. At that time, Sheikh Mohammed was asked to oversee the project, and it was this that made him see Dubai not just as another city, but as a regional trade capital.

Alongside the Drydocks, Dubai was also building a very impressive hub for sea trade. It started with Mina Rashid, a man-made commercial port which opened in 1972 with two gantry cranes and a capacity of less than 100,000 TEUs.[36] It expanded in 1978 to include 35 berths, five of which were suitable for use by the largest container ships at the time. In 2018, the port had a capacity of 1.5 million TEUs and is indeed the smaller port in Dubai.

The real sea-trade powerhouse today is Jebel Ali Port, which opened in 1979 to supplement Mina Rashid. It was commissioned in 1976 by Sheikh Rashid, with instructions to construct the world's largest man-made harbour.

Jebel Ali Port was geared more towards industrial development and soon attracted major aluminium and cement projects. It is the world's largest man-made harbour and connects Dubai with more than 150 ports worldwide. In 2019, it was the largest seaport in the Middle East and ranks among the top 10 in the world, handling over 19 million TEUs and with further plans to expand. It has also been voted Best Seaport in the Middle East for 24 consecutive years in the Asian Freight, Logistics and Supply Chain Awards.[37] The port is home to the Jebel Ali Free Zone, which houses 8,600 companies from 100 countries.

"A true leader does all he can to create and shape his own destiny and his nation's future, and does not wait for regional and global events to shape that future for him"

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

After The Wall Street Journal criticised some of the projects in 1980, it came back to praise in 2006, saying, "Dubai has aggressively leveraged its role as a crossroads to develop a diversified economy."[38] There is another lesson in this story. Do not be distracted by naysayers and those who are critical of ambition and future vision. Many suffer short-sightedness and can only see the world as it is today. Being able to imagine tomorrow's world is a critical leadership capability. So much so that the Sheikh CEO dedicated a whole ministry for this function in the UAE Federal Government, the Ministry of Cabinet Affairs and the Future.

Sheikh Mohammed's new Dubai region was also a tough region that has its fair share of political instability, corruption, complex labour regulations and sub-standard infrastructure – a situation that would discourage many to bet on this region, let alone invest in it. But to Sheikh Mohammed, this was the potential opportunity, and Dubai was at the physical centre of it.

Professor Kees van der Heijden, the Dutch scenario planner, once said, “There are winners because there is uncertainty. Without uncertainty there can be no winners. Instead of seeing uncertainty as a problem, we should start viewing it as the basic source of our future success.” That is precisely how Dubai has succeeded where others have failed. Driven by the Sheikh CEO, Dubai has managed to survive, and thrive, in an uncertain world and a turbulent region. Even in the most uncertain times, the Sheikh keeps Dubai moving forward, fast. The ability to think ahead, imagine potential future scenarios, identify the opportunities in them and pursue them aggressively is the hallmark of a great leader.

At the heart of his challenging region, Sheikh Mohammed imagined a city with advanced infrastructure, world-class facilities, a dynamic business environment and virtually no corruption – the UAE today features lowest in the region in all corruption-related indices. It would also have flexible labour regulations, low – or no – taxes and a tolerant and open mindset. He imagined the amount of business such a place could serve to this vast region – logistics, air transport, financial services, trade, tourism and so on – and continued to repeat his mantra, “What is good for business is good for Dubai.”

From that early vision, the Dubai we know today was born.

In the early 2000s, despite some initial success, many pundits did not endorse that vision and the huge possibilities and still thought of Dubai in the context of the Middle East region and its historic relations with the West. With the power of hindsight, we can chart the growth and wealth creation over the decades, and it is easy to see that the real flow of business, trade, capital and labour has always been within the Middle East, Africa and South-East Asia region.

Mohammed Cetic, Chief Operating Officer of the Indian Farmers Fertiliser

Cooperative Limited (IFFCO) in the UAE for more than 25 years, saw this potential early on and was a major proponent of such a vision. Back in 2002, he said that Dubai does not need to worry about the West or even the Far East. “Dubai can survive, grow and thrive simply by serving its immediate neighbours and being the commercial hub for four core economies centred around New Delhi, Islamabad, Tehran and Riyadh.” As a businessman, he knew this first hand from being present in the market. As a leader in touch with his businessmen and women in Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed saw this opportunity. Build it and they will come.

Dubai has indeed thrived on serving as a hub for these neighbours, and it widened its reach to include Tashkent, Belgrade, Lagos and Cape Town. In fact, one can trace the growth of Dubai’s region simply by tracing the new flight routes of Emirates. In the last few years, the airline has doubled down on Australia and China, again broadening our view of the region. One may expect many trade, labour and capital links to follow.

Omar Al Olama, UAE Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence (AI), has seen first hand how the Sheikh focuses on the future and does not listen to short-sighted detractors. “In one incident, we were working on the AI leadership development programme for the UAE Federal Government. We wanted to launch quickly based on our mandate at that time. We had designed the programme and sat with Sheikh Mohammed to present it, and with him was Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed, the Crown Prince of Dubai. We presented what we were planning to do, how we will build capabilities in the government and what we want to direct our national efforts towards. I found myself diving into the details and getting a bit too technical. He stopped me and held my hand and said, ‘You can teach them [government leaders] all you want about concepts and tools of today, but I want our teams to speak the language of tomorrow’s technology’. I was not sure what this meant, so I asked him.

“He said. ‘I want our people in government to be informed in depth about what will shape our future and be able to talk in technical detail with the people who are designing the future around the world. I do not want our teams to be only technology aware and tech savvy for today. I want them to be ready to lead this new world tomorrow'."

So Omar went away and worked more on the programme, armed with this difficult, but very clear direction. When the launch time arrived a month later, the Sheikh made it a point to call Omar again and he asked, "Did you do what I asked you? Will the programme prepare them to lead in our digital future and cooperate with global leaders?" He has this ability to see the future and prepare for it. Just like he prepared for a growing Asian market back in 2000, he is now eyeing the future digital market.

Dismantle Barriers, And If It Works, Repeat It

In the early 1980s, around the same time Emirates was set up, Sheikh Mohammed wanted to improve the business environment in Dubai to encourage economic activity. In those days, he faced drawbacks such as outdated regulations and complex labour laws. To overcome these, Dubai focused on setting up free zones – designated areas in which companies are subject to regulations that are more business friendly than the mainland.

Free zones were not a Dubai invention, but Dubai has built a whole model around this concept and pushed it to the max. In 2017, there were more than 28 free zones in Dubai alone.

The concept of adopting free zones was simple. Instead of spending decades trying to improve the overall business environment and change economy and labour market regulations, which were subject to federal law, Dubai could set up a zone that had the best regulations for doing business from day one. As the ingenious 20th century inventor Buckminster Fuller once said, “You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.”[39]

This is a key lesson from the Sheikh CEO on how to handle barriers and challenges. Do not try to solve the problem with the same minds and resources that created it. Build a new system, outside the box, and create pressure from the outside-in. It is much easier to change a whole system when one demonstrated success comes from outside the system and creates pressure for change, instead of spending years debating and negotiating change from within, where resistance to change from incumbents would always be high.

The Sheikh made sure that the free-zone model was – and still is – very simple. Foreign firms can enjoy 100% tax exemption for 50 years or more, retain 100% ownership of their business, compared to 49% in the rest of the UAE and the GCC, avail of flexible labour laws such as faster processing of foreign labour work permits, and benefit from purpose-built infrastructure.

"A positive leader can alter the course of the nation's history if he has enough confidence and creativity to overcome obstacles"

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

Jebel Ali Free Zone (Jafza) was a successful trial. It opened its doors in 1985 with 19 companies, and by 2019, had grown to accommodate 8,600 businesses. In 2019, trade happening in Jafza accounted for 23.8% of Dubai's GDP, as well as almost 23.9% of all Dubai's foreign direct investment (FDI). It is one of Dubai's best-kept secrets, the main re-export hub for the region. In 2019, the only way for Jafza seems to be up as it is poised to take advantage of the rise of e-commerce in the region.

There was no reason that this model would not work in other sectors. If it works, repeat it! Another lesson to be learned from Sheikh Mohammed is the repeatability of successful models. By 2001, Dubai's strategy for the coming decade had at its heart diversification – at supersonic pace – via the free-zone model.

The first specialist free zone to be replicated under this model was Dubai Internet City, a cluster focusing on information technology businesses. By the year 1999, the global internet boom was at its peak. While the actual investment (stock market) bubble burst in the early 2000s, there was no doubt in the mind of a visionary leader like Sheikh Mohammed that the future was going to be technology driven. He was adamant about creating a technology cluster in Dubai to ensure it was a central part of that future.

Armed with the idea of a free-zone model, the Sheikh sent members of his team to hold private conversations with top executives from the world's leading technology companies and ask them what they wished to see offered in Dubai that would encourage them to relocate to the emirate. He did not ask for studies, reports or consultants. He wanted to go straight to leading technology firms and design Dubai's offering according to their needs. This customer-centred design came natural to the Sheikh. If you want to attract business, capital and talent, ask them what they want and design the offering around that. A simple formula in principle, but incredibly hard to implement in practise.

For these technology firms those days, their needs ranged from state-of-the-art office space to world-class ICT connectivity, from the freedom to bring in employees and source equipment to having 100% ownership of their business and the freedom to repatriate its profits.

It was a tough list, as many of their needs did not align with the laws and policies of the land at the time. Most companies in the UAE needed to have a local partner owning a share of at least 51%, recruitment of foreign employees was restricted by various labour laws and the ICT infrastructure was limited. The Sheikh knew that the only way to succeed was to put the customer at the centre and overcome these barriers. A key lesson he liked to remind us of again and again was that it is all about the customer, and satisfying customer needs – in this case those of the mega corporations investing in Dubai – is the ultimate measure of success for government efforts in economic development.

Given his vision of a technology-driven future and based on the needs of global technology firms, Sheikh Mohammed set up the Dubai Internet City (DIC) free zone. It allowed companies 100% ownership, and through local by-laws he gave the free zone the freedom to grant working visas. He even set up a dedicated telecommunications and ICT provider for the free zone, which has since grown to become the UAE’s second telecommunications operator, du. When construction of DIC was finished, most of the companies that had been consulted ended up opening offices there. Microsoft was an early arrival, and today the city has over 7,000 companies representing all major brand names in the sector.

One of the latest entrants to DIC was Twitter. In 2019, the company’s CEO, Jack Dorsey, was doing a global tour and stopped in Dubai. He was given a stamp in his passport by immigration officers that was definitely not standard issue. The stamp was a sticker with the Twitter logo and the Dubai skyline. He enjoyed it so much that he tweeted a photo of his passport and UAE entry stamp, and he wrote a greeting in the local language (Arabic): ‘marhaba Dubai’. That focus on the customer and attention to detail is the hallmark of Sheikh Mohammed.

A year after Dubai Internet City was inaugurated, Dubai Media City (DMC) was launched following the same free-zone model. DMC soon became the undisputed media hub in the region, home to companies like Thompson Reuters, CNN and regional media leader MBC. By 2017, DMC accommodated in excess of 20,000 staff in more than 2,000 firms, and its success led to the creation of Dubai Studio City, an even larger free zone focused on media production.

Soon after in 2004, Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC) was created. The Sheikh set a target of 15 companies to move to DIFC headquarters in the first year. By 2005, after the first year in operation, Dubai had 104 companies registered and by 2017, it had more than 2,000 active registered companies, with a combined workforce of some 22,800 people. In October 2019, DIFC was ranked in the top 10 global financial centres by the Global Financial Centres Index, the only one in the top 10 from the Middle East, Africa and South Asia region, and in the ranks of London, Hong Kong and New York. The model was similar to Dubai Internet City and Dubai Media City in its free zone status, but it was much more ambitious in that it set up its own regulator and independent courts. Repeatability works when done well, and fast.

DIFC has since thrived and has been copied across the region from Riyadh to Doha, Manama to Abu Dhabi. Today it stands firmly at the heart of the financial services industry in the region and is looking to the future, as Accenture's Senior Managing Director for Financial Services, Sushil Saluja, said, "DIFC is uniquely positioned to become the regional hub for FinTech."

Following the same model of a specialist free zone, and around the same time DIFC was being planned, the Sheikh was planning a similar cluster for the healthcare industry, and the Dubai Healthcare City (DHCC) concept was born in 2002. Just like DIFC, it set up its own regulatory body. Some of the world's largest global healthcare providers have joined DHCC, including Novo Nordisk, Johnson & Johnson, AstraZeneca, Sanofi Aventis and many others. Looking forward, DHCC is now targeting medical tourism. In the first half of 2015, Dubai witnessed an annual growth of 18% in medical tourism, generating about $300 million for the emirate. By 2020, the city is expected to attract a million medical tourists per year.

By this time, the model of economic cities and clusters was becoming a core tool in the Dubai development and diversification story, and there was more to come. Education was the next frontier for this model. Established in 2003, Knowledge Village was set up to respond to the altered dynamic of overseas education and to develop and retain skilled professionals, whose talent was needed to create a knowledge-based economy. The thinking was, why should Dubai expats, who formed more than 80% of the society, send their children who have been raised in Dubai back home to study? Why not bring their branch campuses, from India, the United Kingdom and elsewhere, to them in Dubai? And why couldn't Dubai become the place where students from the region fly to for their higher education?

In 2007, Dubai International Academic City (DIAC) was set up as an extension to the initiative to accommodate the growing student population. In 2016, Knowledge Village, now known as Dubai Knowledge Park, hosted more than 400 institutions and served more than 6,000 students. In 2017, DIAC was serving 25,000 students from 149 countries around the world, accessing more than 500 higher education programmes offered by 25 academic institutions from nine countries including the United Kingdom, Canada and India.

In all these cases, the Sheikh's ability to carefully manage the role of government was central to the free-zone model. Government, in his approach, laid the foundations for the future of Dubai, shaping opportunities for the private sector to pursue. The government built the infrastructure and laid out the business-friendly regulations. It built it, delivered on its promises, and the private sector came. In the mind of the Sheikh CEO, this is the critical, and limited, role of government.

In an interview with Steve Kroft on CBS's 60 Minutes, Sheikh Mohammed said, "We believe that government should be restricted to legislation and regulation, in addition to continuous development of the infrastructure, thus making the private sector the engine of the development process."

In fact, Dubai's government institutions planned most of the city's mega-projects. The role of foreign investors was to come in and take advantage of the lucrative opportunities these projects unleashed.

With this model, Dubai was able to become a city of opportunity to all with great ideas and ambition, regardless of their nationality. It became known that Dubai was fertile ground that can yield high rewards with its flexible, encouraging environment.[40]

Act Fast

Another lesson Sheikh Mohammed learned from his father was speed, even before speed become the determining characteristic of our age today.

When the young Sheikh told his father he wished to grow Dubai’s aviation industry and invite more airlines to fly in and out of the hub so they could start marketing Dubai and putting it on the map. Sheikh Rashid looked at his son and said, “Get me a plan within two days.”

This urgency has remained with Sheikh Mohammed and to this day he does not wait to take action. Many years ago, the sports company Nike came up with the slogan “Just do it”. Well, if Sheikh Mohammed were to use that slogan, he would say, “Just do it, now.”

The Sheikh does not like people to avoid doing things now. When asked about this sense of urgency in his plans for the future while on stage at the 2013 World Government Summit in Dubai, his quick, gut reaction was “there is only now, tomorrow never comes”.

Mohammad Al Gergawi, now the UAE Minister of Cabinet Affairs and the Future and Chairman of The Executive Office, tells the story of when The Executive Office’s team was planning Dubai Internet City. The team, led by Al Gergawi, was allocated a plot of desert land south of the main city of Dubai, along Sheikh Zayed Road. It had no real infrastructure, and the plot was close to the beach, giving the sand a salt-encrusted texture. Many doubted the initiative.

Could this piece of desert, surrounded by a few beach hotels, really become a cluster of technology companies?

Moreover, to add to the challenge, the Sheikh insisted that the project should not be funded by public money. It should operate on a commercial basis, starting with a bank loan. The free zone should be operated like a private sector cluster and should maintain its own operations. If that was not challenging enough, there was one more element to this assignment. The Sheikh wanted the ‘city’ to open in 365 days.

Al Gergawi explains how it all happened: “Sheikh Mohammed took me for a ride in his car and we drove down to the Dubai-Abu Dhabi Road near Jebel Ali, part of which was sabkha.[41] We stood on the shank and he said: ‘Mohammad, in this region we want you to build an area focused on technology and media’. And just like that, we started setting up Dubai Internet City and Dubai Media City. In those days, the internet was nascent and there was a heated debate about whether governments should ban it. Today, this is not even imaginable as the internet has become as essential to our lives as electricity. Switch if off, and you switch off access to knowledge.”

“We started that project with virtually no budget and managed to get a $200 million loan from HSBC based on our business plan. We set up the operation in old offices with second-hand furniture, and we started working.”

But a few weeks after announcing the project, Sheikh Mohammed drove to the site and saw that construction had not yet started. He called Al Gergawi to see what was causing the delay and was told that they had not yet secured any tenants so the team was reluctant to spend the loan on what looked like a risky proposition.

“In life you’ve got to take risks,” Sheikh Mohammed told Al Gergawi. “If you don’t build it now, nobody will believe in you or the project. Nobody will sign up.”[42]

They went ahead and Dubai Internet City was launched in 2000, on time and in record time. It was introduced as a new hub to serve as a strategic base for companies targeting emerging markets in the Middle East and wider region. Spreading over 30 million square feet, the first phase offered a million square feet of leasable space for businesses.

With pride, Al Gergawi notes now that, “Today, we look at the achievements in this sector and can visibly see how the Sheikh created a knowledge economy. Dubai and the UAE are today an unrivalled hub for technology companies. We host Intel, Google, Microsoft, Facebook, Twitter and another 5,000 companies.”[43] Beyond just hosting, Dubai is fast becoming the regional hub for technology startups and tech unicorns like Careem, Souq.com and Media.net.

In 2013, the then Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, visited Dubai Internet City to discuss collaboration between London and Dubai and said, “When choosing where to locate in Europe, big name companies are opting for London, which is boosting plans to rival the best of the world’s tech centres. Global promotion and international collaboration are key elements in achieving this goal, which is why this link up with the Middle East’s premier silicon success story, Dubai Internet City, is such welcome news.”

In March 2019, the Middle East’s premier silicon success story proved itself to the world. Less than a year after global giant Amazon bought Dubai’s home-grown e-commerce business Souq.com for $700 million, two more Dubai-based tech companies were the subject of major deals, with Network International negotiating a $300 million investment from Mastercard, which paved the way for its IPO on the London Stock Exchange, and Careem, Dubai’s local ride-hailing app, being acquired by Uber for $3.1 billion.

That week in March 2019, Sheikh Mohammed tweeted: “In 1999, many people questioned our idea to establish Dubai Internet City in the desert. Two years ago, Amazon acquired the multi-billion AED Souq.com, and today Uber acquired Careem for AED 11 billion. These giant companies flourished from the ‘desert’ of Dubai.”

“We must finish our projects on time because time is our most precious commodity. Everything else can be replaced, but not time”

[44]

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

Be Decisive And Don’t Look Back

Decision-making is difficult to codify in a system. Sheikh Mohammed could look at many ideas, and like a talented orchestra conductor listening to many tunes, he would simply point and say, “This, now.”

From shortening queues in the airport to launching Dubai International Financial Centre, the Sheikh would immediately switch on to some ideas and say ‘done’. That means the idea is approved, now go make it happen – as simple as that.

Mohammad Al Gergawi, UAE Minister of Cabinet Affairs and the Future and Chairman of The Executive Office, reflected on one of the Sheikh’s visionary decisions from back in 2000 when real estate ownership in the UAE was largely limited to UAE nationals. Until that year, all expats in Dubai rented their office and home and had a ‘temporary status’ to their presence here. The real estate and construction sector was a local one, catering for the limited supply that was built by government and a few local investors. In those conditions, the Dubai Marina was designed. Al Gergawi recalls, “In the year 2000, Sheikh Mohammed called us to discuss a project called ‘Dubai Marina’.” Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al Maktoum, President of the Dubai Department of Civil Aviation, Chairman and CEO of Emirates and Chairman of Dubai Airports, and Emaar Properties’ Chairman Mohamed Alabbar, were also present that evening in the vicinity of Dubai Marina, as well as a real estate specialist called Abdul Nasser al-Khayat. Sheikh Mohammed was discussing prices and plots. There and then, at the end of the discussion, he made the decision to accelerate the project by reducing land areas, lowering prices and setting a condition for anyone buying land there that they had to build on it within two years. Done. The project took off very quickly, and started the freehold model that spawned a thriving multi-billion dollar construction industry.

Al Gergawi explained, “Sheikh Mohammed was not only looking at this project, but was focusing on a bigger vision. He was building a global city. Today, 18 years later, we look around the world and see what we have achieved. Hundreds of billions of dirhams of foreign investment was invested in this area and the private sector was unleashed. The whole shape and nature of the country’s economy changed, all based on one decision – a decision that had a major impact on real estate transactions.”

Dubai unleashed a real estate sector boom that was second to none in the region. At one point, the city became known as the ‘Crane Capital of the World’, with 24% of the world’s 125,000 construction cranes operating in Dubai in 2006.

“I watch, I read facts, I take decisions and I move fast, full throttle”

[45]

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

In 2018, Al Gergwai noted, “In the last four years, the number of real estate transactions has topped AED 1 trillion, according to Dubai Land Department. This is ‘cash in the bank’ and very positive for the economy.”[46] While not the main driver of the Dubai economy, the real estate sector captured the world’s imagination given its visible outcomes of fancy marinas, unique skyscrapers and man-made islands.

In the late 1990s, Dubai's growth had been happening at such a rapid pace that the emirate was running out of prime coastline. Fortunately, it had a decisive and courageous leader who was able to keep pace with the progress. Instead of accepting this natural limitation, Sheikh Mohammed decided he needed to expand Dubai's coastline, and he set up a team to investigate the possibility of doing so.

Sultan bin Sulayem, Group Chairman and CEO of DP World, looks back on the day he presented to the Sheikh the plans for an archipelago, which was to be created by dredging sand up from the sea floor. Not only would it increase Dubai's coastline, it would be the world's largest man-made island.

He presented a simple concept note for what is now known as The Palm Jumeirah. Architects had been consulted and some experts involved, but there was not much more than a technical construction note, with drawings to show the full potential. Once Sultan had presented it, the Sheikh just said, "OK."

There was silence from Sultan's side, so Sheikh Mohammed followed up by asking, "Do you know what I mean?"

"No," replied Sultan.

"I mean – let's go ahead and start construction!"

Sultan would be in charge of overseeing the horde of heavy dredges and dump trucks and the quarry blasting that would turn the sketch in Sheikh Mohammed's hand into kilometres of solid land covered in homes and resorts.

Construction commenced in 2001, overseen by state-owned developer Nakheel, and basic infrastructure was completed in 2004. The Palm Jumeirah has of course been a huge success, giving Dubai 78 kilometres of new shoreline, of which 62 kilometres is beachfront. Buyers from 75 different countries now own property on The Palm, and at the start of 2019, 18 hotels were operational, with another 17 in the pipeline.[47]

It was the beginning of a range of projects that tested the limits of the day's engineering and construction capabilities, leading also to the creation of the World Islands, a collection of 300 man-made islands shaped into the continents of the world, located off the coast of Dubai.

"It still astounds me when I dwell on the achievement. We created a $23 billion asset for our city essentially by piling a billion tonnes of sand and rock on the sea floor," Sheikh Mohammed says.[48] Many cities in the region, and the world, attempted similar ventures, only to be caught up in delays, challenges and the lack of a coherent plan. In Dubai, the Sheikh made sure he took bold decisions, secured first-mover advantage and delivered fast. Done!

The ability to focus on his long-term vision steers Sheikh Mohammed away from short-term decision-making and naysayers. In 2005, he was presiding over The Executive Council of the Government of Dubai when the subject of Dubai Metro was raised. There were a lot of objections from many council members and some called it a white elephant. They claimed Dubai did not have a public transportation culture and that no one was used to riding trains or metros. Moreover, the project was very expensive – in those days, at AED 19 billion, it was equivalent to the entire budget of the Government of Dubai. To The Executive Council members (the leaders of Dubai Government Departments), it simply would not succeed.

Sheikh Mohammed heard the arguments from both sides, but was keen to start a new paradigm. He instructed the Roads and Transport Authority to start the project and to finish it as soon as practically possible. This reinforces the themes of the leader's forward vision, decisiveness and speed.

Throughout all these stories, it is clear that Sheikh Mohammed has his eyes set on being globally competitive and believes that nothing is impossible. His vision goes all the way to being number one: "In Dubai, we consider the future our ally, and we do our best to shape it. I had begun to envision Dubai rising up through the ranks of the community of nations until it ranked among the world's most developed. London and New York won't lead the financial world forever."

Indeed, Dubai Metro was delivered in four years – one of the fastest metro projects to be built around the world. By 2018, it was being used by a billion people a year, with a rate of 600,000 passengers per day, and had returned cumulative benefits to the economy of AED 66 billion since its launch.[49]

When it is comes to making decisions, Sheikh Mohammed is one of the most decisive and agile leaders. He is fast, to say the least, but he does not rush in. His approach has a lot of speed, but not haste. Ohood Al Roumi, UAE Minister of State for Happiness and Wellbeing and Director General of the Prime Minister's Office, recalls when she asked him how he makes such decisions: "He told me walks 10 kilometres every day. When people come to him with a big decision, he does not make the decision on the spot. He said to me, 'I walk in the desert. I meditate and let my mind roam and relax. I make my decision just after that walk.'"

Take Risks

Governments often have to make big decisions and develop plans and policies under conditions of incomplete information and uncertain outcomes. It is not possible to prepare exhaustively for every contingency. Sheikh Mohammed's approach has always been to reduce uncertainty where possible, but after that, it is necessary to take a risk and move forward.

The Sheikh is a risk-taker extraordinaire. His philosophy is that doing things 70% as good today is a million times better than aiming for 80% tomorrow, and infinitely better than 100% next year (which in the Sheikh's book will be too late). Aiming for a 100% risk-free decision in the future simply means being slow and missing the opportunity that is present today. It is a recipe for lagging behind.

Opportunities do not wait. He always says, "I will never abandon one opportunity and wait for another. We have not reached the goal we are striving for. What you see now is nothing compared to our vision… just tiny parts of what lies ahead."

This lesson was passed on to Sheikh Mohammed by his father, Sheikh Rashid, who taught his sons that the best returns could only come by taking the right kind of risks.

Sheikh Mohammed recalled the opening of Dubai International Airport, after which his father called the then representative of the British Overseas Airways

Corporation (BOAC) and asked them to start flying between Dubai and Mumbai. The operator said no, arguing that they did not think the route was feasible nor that it had sufficient demand. Sheikh Rashid did not take no for an answer, however, and asked them to start the route, pledging to pay for any vacant seats.[50] The route was very successful and took off very quickly. Sheikh Rashid did not have to pay for any vacant seats, but without taking that risk, there would have been no flight.

Sheikh Mohammed takes calculated risks, without researching them to death. He has the ability to find the right balance between studying an opportunity, assessing the risk and reward, and then going with his gut feeling based on those inputs.

“Everything has risk. Everything! That should never stop anything. We can, and should, deploy good risk management frameworks for better outcomes, but never stop moving forward and innovating”

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

In 1987, a major war raged between Iran and Iraq, threatening all logistics and ports operations in the Arabian Gulf. At the same time, Dubai was trying to grow its presence in that industry and increase the capacity of its ports and maritime business. The war discouraged many cargo ships from entering the Strait of Hormuz, the water between the UAE and Iran, preventing them from coming to Dubai. The Sheikh took a calculated, but huge, risk: the Dubai Government would pay the maritime insurance premium for all cargo ships using these waters to come to Dubai's ports. It was an expensive and high-risk move, but it was crucial to defend Dubai's maritime industry and its market share of the global sea-trade routes. It paid off! Today, Dubai's ports lead the region by a huge margin, and DP World is the world's third-largest port operator, covering almost every continent in the world.[51] Without taking that risk at the right time, this position could have been easily lost to regional competitors.

Bold dreams and their big rewards come with risk. Imagination alone is not enough. It must be coupled with the courage to take bold actions, as well as having a thick skin to withstand failure when it does happen. The winning combination in the Sheikh's book is bold dreams, risk-taking and resilience.

Thinking big and taking the 'right' risks became a signature trait of the Sheikh CEO. For many of the mega-projects that he led, Sheikh Mohammed made his own rules and sometimes went against professional advice, like in the case of Dubai Media City.

When the Sheikh wanted to establish a free zone for the media industry, he instructed his team to hire a leading global strategy firm to investigate the feasibility of such a venture. But in those days, Dubai was not the natural choice for a media hub and the firm's report was not very encouraging. It said that Dubai did not have the right ingredients and could not offer the success factors needed for such a cluster. It included detailed sets of data and analysis and reasoned that the majority of Arab media talent resided in either Cairo or Beirut, both of which had good production facilities and were very cost competitive compared to Dubai.

Some media outlets, such as Arab Radio and Television (ART), had just joined forces with a new media city set up on the outskirts of Amman in Jordan, while others, like the popular newspaper Asharq Al-Awsat, had set up shop in London and elsewhere where they could enjoy greater press freedom.

On paper, a media city in Dubai would not succeed. Why would these media firms come to Dubai, and – more importantly – how could Dubai attract the human capital and talent required by the industry. These seemed like strategic and discouraging challenges.

But Sheikh Mohammed did not see it that way. He wanted to see the report to understand which factors had attracted media firms to other countries. He aimed to design these factors into Dubai Media City, only 10 times better. He thanked the consulting firm for its advice and instructed his team to launch Dubai Media City on a prime piece of land in Dubai, facing the beach. He told them to go out and talk to all the media firms to understand the challenges they face in the countries they work in, what incentives they enjoy and which elements make them profitable and successful. He listened to his future customers, understood what made them successful and offered them a value proposition that they could not refuse.

He noted that growth was vital for business: "As I look across the region at today's existing media capitals, I see trade legislation and practices that inhibit the growth of business. The UAE has understood that to flourish, media needs to be unshackled from policies and practices that limit its independence and creativity. This awareness and practice of freedom is the foundation of the creation of Dubai Media City."[52] It was a risk to challenge Cairo, Beirut and Amman, but it was a risk based on a bold vision and swift action and centred around customer need. It worked and worked very well.

Not only does he take 'project' risk, but he also makes bold bets on people, and his biggest bet has been on the youth of the country and the region. While other nations tried to manage their nation's youth, the Sheikh took a risk and invited the youth to manage themselves. He is one of few leaders to offer a real focus on youth in the whole region. While others talked about them, he took big bets and brought them into leading positions, and gave them challenges to work on. He appointed a 22 year-old Minister of State for Youth Affairs and a 27 year-old Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence, among others, which was a calculated risk in governance systems – one that will prove invaluable in the coming years.

Don’t Be Deterred

In parallel to building specialist economic clusters, the Sheikh set his sights on making Dubai a tourism destination. This was something that, again, many doubted would succeed. In the 1980s, when Sheikh Mohammed first started promoting airlines and tourism, today’s level of success was simply unimaginable. Many in the region, and even in Dubai, thought he was foolish for even targeting industries such as tourism and hospitality.[53] One day, he brought up the subject of his vision for tourism at a meeting of GCC ministers in Kuwait.

When the Sheikh tells the story, he notes that the other ministers preferred to discuss politics, but when it was his turn to talk, he was keen to change the subject to business. He asked the ministers, “Why don’t we try to develop this region, and particularly Dubai, as a tourist destination to attract people from all over the world?” Nobody replied. He added that he planned to establish Dubai as one of the world’s leading tourist destinations. The ministers laughed and one of them asked, “What is there in Dubai to make it a tourist destination? You have nothing but humidity, red-hot sun, burning sand and barren desert.”

Sheikh Mohammed recalls, “I was sorry I’d asked the question. These ministers had the opportunity to help me realise that vision, but instead they threw cold water on the idea.”

But the Sheikh does not accept rejection. Rejection pushes him forward.

Dubai enjoyed year-round warm weather, pristine beaches and a beautiful desert.

It did not possess Oman's natural beauty, Jordan's archaeological history or even Saudi Arabia's site diversity. Nor did it have any major tourist attractions, like museums, major retail outlets or theme parks. But this was all about to change under the Sheikh CEO.

Not one to be deterred by natural limitations, Sheikh Mohammed started sowing the seeds for a tourism industry, with announcements and mega-projects that captured the imagination of the world. These ranged from the iconic Burj Al Arab hotel, termed the world's only seven-star hotel, to the launch of the Dubai Shopping Festival in 1996 – something Dubai copied to perfection from Singapore, and which in 2015 attracted some 56 million visitors who spent approximately $30 billion.

Alongside ultra-luxurious beach hotels, retail played a major role in the tourism sector, offering exciting and unique shopping experiences in a region that was missing such outlets. In the early 1990s, Dubai had a small and unknown retail scene, and then – encouraged by the Sheikh – major shopping malls started popping up, from City Centre Deira in 1995 to the Mall of the Emirates in 2005 and the iconic Dubai Mall in 2008. The Mall of the Emirates welcomed 42 million visitors in 2014 and The Dubai Mall attracted 80 million in the same year. In that period, it was estimated that Dubai's fashion retail market was worth $2 billion per year, with tourists accounting for 60% of the luxury and premium market. In fact, Dubai ranked second to London as the city with the highest percentage of international retailers.

The plan to build a whole tourism industry worked well. In 2017, Dubai attracted more than 15.5 million tourists,[54] a number projected to rise to 25 million by 2023. This tourism demand drove a boom in hotel room supply, which – in turn – drove a boom in the construction sector. In 2017, Dubai ranked one of the highest internationally for hotel occupancy, averaging above 75% and reaching 95% at peak times, compared with Sydney (76.6%), Tokyo (73%) and London (71.5%). In 2005, Dubai recorded the highest per capita hotel investment in the world, overtaking Las Vegas. It was attracting tourists from source markets ranging from India to Russia, the United Kingdom to Saudi Arabia, and China was also rising very fast in the ranks. Fox News commented that Dubai had a “New York business atmosphere and Cancún’s tourism – combine the two and you get Dubai, the hippest city in the world”.

“When confronted with difficulty, a person has two options: to stop and admit defeat, or to innovate and triumph”

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

Mohammad Al Gergawi, UAE Minister of Cabinet Affairs and the Future and Chairman of The Executive Office, said, “I recall that since we were kids, if you had asked any of us would there be a tourism industry in the UAE, we would all have said, ‘No way. Why would anyone come?’ But thanks to his vision, diligence, persistence and the dedicated teams he put together, we find the UAE today welcoming over 21 million tourists per year,[55] more than any other country in the region. We have 142,000 hotel rooms, which is equivalent to all the hotels in our region combined. For comparison, India has 114,000 hotel rooms. In the UAE, this sector has revenues of AED 70 billion, and we are in the top-ranked countries globally in terms of average spend per tourist at around AED 1,972. The sector also employs over 300,000 people. The Sheikh’s decisions to pursue a tourism hub in Dubai raised the bar.”[56]

In 1979, Dubai built the tallest skyscraper in the region – Sheikh Rashid Tower at the Dubai World Trade Centre. Standing 39 storeys high, this was the main landmark that my internet search produced when I was researching Dubai from my office in Cranfield School of Management in 2000.

Today, Dubai boasts the world’s tallest building – Burj Khalifa. Built at a reported cost of $876 billion, at the centre of what is now called Downtown Dubai, it took 47 months to build and stands above 800 metres tall with 163 storeys! Its construction was completed faster than a regular road expansion project can be finished in some countries. The land on which it stands is now home to The Dubai Mall, the region’s largest and most impressive mall, Dubai Opera, the Dubai dancing foundations and thousands of apartments and offices. In 2003, this was barren land used as a military training camp. We knew it as the big empty piece of land beside Defence roundabout. Today, it attracts more tourists than Egypt’s pyramids and Jordan’s Petra combined. The Sheikh was not deterred by natural limitations. He knew there was a niche market in the region for luxury shopping and globally for sun and sand tourism. With a clear target in mind, he created a purpose-built offering. It was not an average offering because a leader’s goals should never aim for average. He built some of the best offerings for that market,and went against the odds to make Dubai a global tourism hub.

Dubai’s rise was so fast compared to other nations that we spent most of the decade between 1998 and 2008 entertaining many theorists and naysayers who were uncertain about the sustainability of Dubai and its development approach. It had become a pastime for some to predict the ‘coming fall of Dubai’. Today, in 2019, I am happy to say they were all proven wrong. Yes, Dubai had its ups and downs like all other global cities and economies, but it has proven to be resilient, agile and – for many in the region – a source of inspiration and hope.

According to Arab author and journalist Turki Aldahkil, over the past two decades, all those who predicated the fall of Dubai have been proved wrong. Not because Dubai has a magic wand, but because it has a leader that is an action-oriented, long-term thinker, one who perseveres and is not afraid of failure. In fact, as Sheikh Mohammed would say, failure is not an option, even when it does occur.

This is key lesson for all leaders, especially when attempting something new or something that goes against conventional wisdom. If you have a clear view of what you want to do and why you want to do it, do not be deterred by momentary failure or bumps along the way. The only risk comes from not knowing what you are doing. If your goals are clear and you see a need that can be fulfilled, failure is not option. If failure does occur, it is simply a lesson that you learn from and then carry on.

Aldahkil wrote, “The success of Dubai is beyond question or doubt. This city is no longer an experience or a project, but rather a self-sufficient civil entity and anyone can have his own opinion about it. Those who admire the city attributed its success to several reasons, but they were wrong. Some people said Dubai succeeded because it valued the importance of Arab and foreign investors and opened doors for them to do the job and put the city on the map. It’s true that foreign investments played a key role in the growth of Dubai, but this isn’t the reason behind its ultimate success as such investments are available from the shores of Beirut to Morocco, and yet these places didn’t create anything as seen in Dubai.”[57]

Lessons In Leadership

Always have great ambitions and aspirations. Strive to be the best you can and aim for number one in everything you do. Do not plan for or accept mediocre goals. Why plan to be average? Michelangelo once said that the greater danger for most of us lies not in setting our aim too high and falling short, but in setting our aim too low and achieving our mark.

Time is your most important resource. Use it well and act fast. Doing something well at 60% today is better than 80% great in a month’s time, and infinitely better than 90% excellent in a year’s time. Do not waste time and do not allow your competitors to gain a time advantage. Start quick. If it works, refine it, repeat it and perfect it. Repeatability is core to speed.

Manage attention, not time. Attention management is the idea of examining the amount of attention given to certain tasks and distractions. It helps you stay focused on essential tasks while attempting to avoid distractions in order to increase efficiency. When it comes to productivity, research indicates that time management is not a solution, it’s actually part of the problem.

Imagination alone is not enough. It must be coupled with bold action. Take risks and take ownership of those risks. Take risks and be willing to fail. Keep in mind, though, that there are good risks and bad risks. Do not jump in too quickly, but when you do jump in, take ownership. Experience shows that the odds are usually better than you think.

Look forward and carry on. Do not be distracted or deterred by naysayers if you believe in your vision and have done your homework. Imagine your tomorrow and work towards it. Do not let short-sighted people slow you down, and do not let bumps along the way dampen your reserve. When you have a clear vision, failure is not an option, even when it does occur. It is OK to fail, as long as you have a vision and learn from all the stops in your journey. A leader always focuses on the long term. Life is a marathon, and there will be many bumps along the way. Do not let one failure, or more, bring you down. Failing is fine, as long as you see it as one step in a long journey towards where you are heading.

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Chapter 3

Action trumps everything

Results, Not Reports

Almost without exception, every government in the world has recognised the opportunities and challenges around them and formed some sort of a plan to address them. Many of these plans have been prepared with the aid of expensive consultants and produced in very fancy designs with aspirational titles aiming for a better future in 2020 or 2025 or 2040. Most have set ambitious goals to meet or exceed the rising expectations of their citizens and achieve world-class infrastructure, diversify the economy, improve wellbeing, and so on. More often than not, it is difficult for citizens to believe that such plans exist. Plans frequently fail to turn into anything tangible or beneficial and goals remain unmet. While some countries have made progress, the United Nations Public Administration Network (UNPAN) has documented many studies over the years which conclude that most people have been disappointed with their governmental reforms and developmental plans.[58]

The reason that such disappointing government performance prevails is that most believe failure is related to the content of the government reform, whereas typically, it is a result of failed implementation. A good number of government agencies and organisations are littered with potentially promising plans, strategies and reforms that were not pursued, not sustained, not implemented and not delivered.[59]

This ability to deliver on plans is the Sheikh CEO's hallmark. He made promises that at times seemed unachievable – from building The Palm Jumeirah in a few years to making Dubai's the world's busiest hub airport – and he delivered on them.

A leading Saudi businessman once told me, “I used to think that Dubai [and Sheikh Mohammed] were crazy when I heard their announcements of building a palm-shaped man-made island, the tallest tower in the world and an airport that would beat Heathrow. They would announce these things and we, in the region, would roll our eyes with scepticism. Today, after we have seen them actually delivering these and more, I am ready to believe anything they say, and I am a big fan.”

Sheikh Mohammed’s ability to deliver has gained Dubai a lot of credibility. Its citizens, businesses and neighbours now have faith in its capability to grow, to deal with challenges and to exploit opportunities.

In 2018, the UAE ranked as the second most-trusted government in the world in the Edelman Trust Barometer, which said it was one of six countries to have achieved ‘extreme trust gains’ over the years. The UAE has been ranked among the top five globally for seven years in a row, and when it topped the survey in 2017, Edelman said, “The United Arab Emirates continues to build on high levels of trust, topping the 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer as the world’s most-trusting country in government among informed publics, as the UAE’s leadership presses on with ambitious investment development plans in tandem with a broad economic diversification strategy that charts the post-oil future of the country.”[60]

“Credibility of leadership can only be established through action and not words”

[61]

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al

Sheikh Mohammed commented on Twitter in 2018, “After seven years, our government is still among the top. The trust has been earned over the years through working and giving. This trust is our greatest asset and most important achievement.”

He continued, “The UAE adopts a unique development model through which the government and people work together as one. The government trusts the people, and the people trust the government,”

Not one to be satisfied with praise and achievement, the Sheikh CEO continued by saying, “I would like to tell the people of the UAE that we are looking forward and that our current focus is on the implementation of the recently launched National Agenda. Ahead of us are years filled with hard work, and we have great aspirations that have been included in the agenda, and which will hopefully be achieved before 2021.”[62]

This trust was not built on future plans, legacy or aspirations. It was built on tangible results and promises delivered.

Consider It Done

Deliverology is the systematic process for driving progress and delivering results in government and the public sector. The term was coined in the British civil service as a gentle and light-hearted expression for the process developed by Tony Blair's Prime Minister's Delivery Unit (PMDU). Deliverology is also an emerging science in government and public administration, and it is all about reaching the desired status.[63] Way before the term was coined, it was a way of life in the Sheikh's Executive Office. We simply called it 'done'.

In the year 1999, Sheikh Mohammed, then the Crown Prince of Dubai, established his own special delivery unit, The Executive Office. The Executive Office is a specialist strike force, living up to its name to become one of the most instrumental tools in the Dubai story and executing the Sheikh CEO's plans. The most common word in that office in its first decade was 'done'.

Sheikh Mohammed established The Executive Office as a unique entity to push ahead his projects and initiatives through what I call the 'Power of 10'. This is one of the secret weapons Sheikh Mohammed deploys from his delivery arsenal.

The Sheikh says he has learned to go 'all in' when he is convinced something is worthwhile. Do not just do it, do it to the power of 10. This is something he learned from growing up with horses, his personal passion. "I learned from my horses that if you believe in something, push it all the way to the end. If you want a certain achievement, give it all you have, unless you are someone who is content with half an achievement or half a victory."[64]

The Power of 10 is also about staying 10 years ahead of the game by having an operating model that allows the leader to overwhelm a certain goal with resources to move it forward (to the power of 10). In this sense, 'resources' refers to people, leadership support and knowledge, not simply funds and tangible resources. In fact, The Executive Office is neither the richest entity in the region, nor the biggest spender. It was all about talent, speed of decision-making, freedom to experiment, a positive and rewarding culture, and unparalleled focus and leadership support. He needed an executive arm that would allow him to move quickly, experiment, take risks and be free from bureaucracy. More importantly, he needed an executive arm that could overwhelm any challenge with the Power of 10.

One of The Executive Office's early projects was to draft the Dubai 2010 Strategy. The strategy was very ambitious and was developed after carefully studying the competitive landscape of Dubai, as well as the stories of global trade hubs like Singapore and Hong Kong, and of established business cities like London and New York.

The Dubai 2010 Strategy stipulated (back in 2001) that by 2010, Dubai would stand among the league of developed cities with a diversified economy and a GDP of $30 billion, up from just below $20 billion in 2001. The non-oil economy would account for 96% of GDP and 70% of that would come from the service sector. This was a challenging – some even said impossible – set of targets crafted by The Executive Office of Sheikh Mohammed and under his direct leadership. It was essentially saying that in the decade to come, we would deliver economic growth faster than the fastest global case study ever seen, while diversifying away from oil at a growth rate that was beyond current infrastructure and capabilities.

It was not a vision or a dream, it was a rallying cry for unparalleled development – one that captured the imagination of the whole office, then the city, the nation, the region and eventually the world. It was Sheikh Mohammed's way of saying "you ain't seen nothing yet".

The 2010 strategy was simple in its main focus. Strengthen the core economic sectors in Dubai (the three ‘T’s of Dubai) – trade and logistics, transportation, and tourism – and start to build a new knowledge economy focused on financial services and information and communication technology. To do that, Dubai would need to continue to improve quality of life and make the city the location of choice for regional talent to live, work and play. This would all be underpinned by a strong, efficient, technology-enabled and agile government. These were very logical aspirations, but not easy to accomplish.

This was called Dubai 2010 Strategy, but the Sheikh CEO saw it as his own promise to his people and his city. He took it to heart, led it personally and applied the Power of 10. Anyone who lived in Dubai during that decade remembers the positive energy, the global newspaper headlines, magazine covers and the unprecedented number of cranes in Dubai’s skies. An American academic visiting the UAE in 2004 asked me, jokingly, “Is the crane the national bird of Dubai? The Dubai sky is full of them.” That intensity was the Sheikh’s deliverology, and it was done!

By the end of 2006, most of the key targets set for 2010 had been achieved. Dubai’s GDP grew to $37 billion, GDP per capita jumped from $23,000 to over $30,000 and non-oil revenues accounted for 96% of GDP, with the service sector contributing 78%.

The objective of The Executive Office is very simple. Bring good things to Dubai, and make them happen fast. It involves two key components. One is getting the policy right, or identifying a great new idea. This can be recognised as only 10% of the job, with the other 90% being the time, sweat and tears of relentless implementation. This was done with Sheikh Mohammed leading from the front, on the ground, driving around Dubai in his own car, visiting construction sites and breaking down any barriers before they became showstoppers.

In his poetic way, Sheikh Mohammed said that the “world will not listen to the UAE poem [story] unless it is punctuated by actions and woven on a rhythm of innovation and uniqueness”. [65] In this way, the Sheikh CEO reminds us that action trumps everything, anytime. He always reminded his team that “history is not concerned with visions that are not implemented”.

This delivery focus starts with zooming in on the ‘right’ ideas to start with. Identifying great ideas is not about off-the-cuff dreams and wishes. The Executive Office is like a corporate research and development laboratory combined with a public-policy think tank. It has a very sophisticated system to identify, create, filter and experiment with ideas, which makes use of expert networks, international advisory boards, study visits, retreats and rapid brainstorms. We ran hackathons as early as 2001, although they were not called as such back then, organised focus groups and, most importantly, talked to as many citizens, residents and businesses as possible. Not a week would go by without The Executive Office team talking to a businessperson, hosting an expert talk or conducting a learning journey. It was hectic, a bit messy, energising, and it definitely worked.

When it came to defining Dubai’s full potential and developing a clear and compelling vision, the Sheikh would not accept anything less than the best. Any idea had to have a superlative associated with it, or else he would not bother with it. Successful ideas included the first technology hub in the region, the world’s tallest tower and the world’s largest man-made island.

Once we closed in on an idea that made sense for Dubai and had the potential to deliver good things, we would quickly develop a concept note and pilot the idea. Concept notes always ended up on Sheikh Mohammed’s desk and he would drop by daily or weekly and ask, “What’s new?” That was the trigger for the team to present their ideas and the driver that made sure the ideation system ran 24/7. We knew he would open a meeting with this question, and we had to be ready. New ideas were our currency, and – in many ways for Dubai – were more expensive than oil.

Once an idea is approved, the delivery machines kicks into action. A key piece in this puzzle is discipline. Omar Al Olama, UAE Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence, notes that one key word that describes the Sheikh is 'disciplined'. "I have never once in my life had a meeting set with His Highness that was cancelled, delayed or changed. If he said do this by then, it is done. If he said he is coming to an event or meeting, he will be there. You can bank on it. You have to be ready for it, and you do not negotiate deadlines or delay them once set."

This is not something the Sheikh does only for new ideas and grand strategies. The same 'done' approach applies to fixing issues, large and small. Around the year 2004, Dubai International Airport was growing faster than its infrastructure could efficiently handle. There were delays in a few spots, and the most notable one was the luggage belts in Terminal 1. Some passengers would wait for up to 45 minutes to get their luggage, and that is something that made many people unhappy, especially after a long journey. This would happen specifically around peak hours in the airport, around midnight or 8am. The complaints got louder and the Sheikh heard of this challenge.

"The future does not wait for hesitant people. The more we achieve, the more we realise how much more we can achieve"

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

At that time, I was working in his Executive Office and I remember it was a Wednesday night at 11pm when we got the call saying the Sheikh was going to the airport and we (his technical team) were requested to be there with him. I got dressed and dashed to the airport, and the Sheikh came. He toured the airport, asked the passengers at the luggage belts how long they had been waiting, and then went to visit the airport management office. Naturally as it was the night shift, most senior managers were not there, although some of them were rushing to the airport at that moment having been alerted by their staff that Sheikh Mohammed was visiting.

He left that night and sent clear and detailed instructions and targets to the airport management team to improve the situation. He told them he wanted passengers to spend no more than 20 to 25 minutes from leaving the aircraft to leaving the airport gate. He gave them two months to deliver on this target.

My best guess is that the airport management team, who took the challenge seriously, did not think the two-month target was hard and fast, but more like an indicative one. So they started working on improving the system, but did not focus on the eight-week deadline. True to form, and after eight weeks at 11pm, we received another call to head to the airport, only to see the same scenes as we did the previous time, although some senior managers were on the night shift that evening. They made a presentation to the Sheikh on what they had done so far, the plans ahead, and how it would take them months to redesign some of the processes and, eventually, redesign parts of the airport. The Sheikh approved the plan, but not the timeline. He said that the long-term plan was fine and should go ahead, but they needed to find solutions for the short term. The world does not stop and wait for you while you are making plans.

He left and did two things: he sent a message to the airport saying they had eight more weeks to fix this – at least to put in place short-term fixes – and he asked them to issue ‘all access’ passes to three members of his Executive Office, one of whom was me. Our job for the coming month was to visit the airport three times a day – at 8am, 3pm and midnight – everyday. Each time, two of us would visit and we would observe. My colleague would stand beside a plane that had landed from Rome, Italy, and call my phone to say a gentleman wearing a red jacket left the plane from Rome. I would start the stopwatch and wait around the luggage belt until he arrived. I would then follow him from a distance until he left the airport gate, and then I would stop the stopwatch.

At the end of each day, we would send the average time to our Chairman, who sent it directly to the Sheikh, who reminded the airport management that he had these numbers, and was waiting for the them to reach the 20 minute target.

The airport management innovated and came up with great ideas to release capacity, optimise space, change the handling process, and put in over 12 short-term fixes that helped them hit 25 minutes in eight weeks. They did not lose sight of the longer-term plan and they continued to grow and run one of the best airport operations in the world.

Sheikh Mohammed’s Deliverology

The Executive Office approach was simple, and – in hindsight – resembles how a private equity firm or a venture capital accelerator would approach any opportunity. Once an opportunity is identified, a leader should define the full potential (not accepting an average target) and develop a clear and compelling vision to describe and outline that potential. The next step would be to develop the blueprint (the tactical strategy) that would allow this potential to be realised. This can include strategic competitive actions, resources, partnerships and so on. A critical point after that was to identify and harness the right talent to lead the implementation of this blueprint and then accelerate performance and show quick success.

With time, this formula became a repeatable model and a unique advantage in the Sheikh CEO’s approach. For the system to work, it needed to reside outside of the system’s traditional hierarchy and it could not be managed by any of the people or organisations it was attempting to influence, nor should it directly manage those people or organisations.

This was why The Executive Office was set up to report directly to the Sheikh, with full autonomy to manage its resources and hire the talent it needs. It is ‘his’ office. Indeed, for a long time, the Sheikh’s main office, where he met officials and future partners and convened The Executive Council of Dubai, was located in The Executive Office, on the 44th floor of Emirates Towers.

In later years, the same concept (in numerous variations) has been adopted by many governments in the region and beyond. One international example is the delivery unit that Tony Blair established in his cabinet, which went on to spur a mini movement in setting up delivery units around the world driven by the work and consulting firm of Sir Michael Barber.[66] The Unit, in essence, focused on key targets (election promises) that the Prime Minister wanted to ensure were delivered on time and on budget. The Prime Minister's Delivery Unit (PMDU) was a central government institution aimed at monitoring and strengthening the British government's capacity to deliver on key campaign priorities. Its central principle was to focus on a few targets and overwhelm them with resources. It worked in partnership with HM Treasury, 10 Downing Street, the Cabinet Office and other stakeholders within the Government of the United Kingdom, to assess delivery and provide performance management for the government's top public priorities. Worldwide, such models have seen varying levels of success, but The Executive Office has succeeded in Dubai due to the rigorous application of the simple model and the positive and persistent leadership of Sheikh Mohammed. This was not a fancy framework designed by consultants or a structured methodology developed by academics. It was, and remains, simply the way the Sheikh works. The following is a conceptual attempt to describe how the model typically functioned.

First, a leader must define the 'big opportunity' and outline this very clearly to his team and stakeholders. Harvard professor of leadership, John Kotter, observed how CEOs sometimes struggle to explain their strategy to their teams, let alone align them behind it. His work and case studies, published in the Harvard Business Review in 2014,[67] argued against using long strategy documents and PowerPoint presentations to communicate and align parties on a way forward. Instead, he promoted an approach called the 'big opportunity', which bears resemblance to the style Sheikh Mohammed has been using all his life.

If a strategy shows you what you need to do to achieve a vision, a vision shows you what you will be doing if you are able to capitalise on a big opportunity. A big opportunity is a short, accurate and emotionally compelling description of an opportunity that will move an organisation (or country) forward in a substantial way. A written statement of a big opportunity can be a very useful tool, and there are many examples in how Sheikh Mohammed described some his initiatives like, "Transform Dubai into an airport for the world", "Become the commercial capital of the region between East and West", and "Make Dubai the capital of the Islamic economy".

Once the 'big opportunity' is locked in and clear, Kotter et al advocate that a leader should next set out a 'clear and compelling vision' by describing what success looks like, before moving on to detail the strategic initiatives and activities which, if executed well enough and fast enough, will lead to the realisation of the vision.

This vision might well be what distinguishes a good leader from a great leader. A visionary leader has the ability to see clearly where he chooses to be in the future, and – more importantly – to formulate the necessary steps to get his followers, people or organisation there. This is usually associated with the need for passion, strength of will and possessing the necessary knowledge to achieve long-term goals.[68] Throughout the decades, the Sheikh has been remarkable in his ability to craft and describe a vision that paints a powerful and exciting image of the future. In fact, his ability to draw a compelling vision that energises and mobilises people is the Sheikh's number one characteristic, according to the interviews with people around him.

In The Executive Office, this is usually done by studying best-in-breed experiences from around the world. Sheikh Mohammed always advises his team to start from where others have finished. Build on existing great ideas instead of starting from scratch, and work with those who are already the best. "Do not re-invent the wheel," the Sheikh would say. "Go and learn what others have done, deconstruct it, adapt it to Dubai's context, then innovate and make it better – faster, taller, cheaper, and deliver it fast."

Vision is the ability of a leader to show his followers the 'bigger picture', ensure they understand it and – more importantly – win their buy-in and engage them in pursuing it. It is the spark and driver that appeals to the higher self and motivates action, builds inspiration and offers hope. It offers meaning to our everyday work and actions.

Sheikh Mohammed’s vision is contagious. He inspires, motivates and fires up the people around him. He teaches them to follow their dreams and seek to achieve them. This vision is probably the most crucial element of the Sheikh CEO’s style.

On the 25th of July 2015, Sheikh Mohammed tweeted, “Life reacts positively towards those who know what they want. When a leader has a clear, inspiring and compelling vision, coupled with resilience and determination, life’s circumstances come together to pave the way, and (s)he will have the backing of many followers.”

Once that vision is clear, the Sheikh would move on to develop a strategy. But even in this step, his approach is not typical. While he is an advocate of good planning, he is a champion of action, and hence, he aims to develop a ‘tactical strategy’. The term ‘tactical strategy’ might sound contradictory in the sense that strategy is usually planning for the medium to long term, while tactics are focused on actions in the short term. His tactical strategy is a mix between long-term targets and very focused actions for the short term that have made Sheikh Mohammed what he is today. This ‘tactical strategy’ is an action-oriented approach, but also an innovation-driven piloting approach. It allows for moving fast, but also for changing course if initial outcomes are not favourable.

In one example narrated by Aisha Miran, Assistant Secretary General for the Strategy Management and Governance Sector of The Executive Council, the discussion was heating up about Dubai’s intent to set up the region’s first road toll gates. People were not used to paying a road tax and there were many concerns about the impact of this move. But Dubai was becoming very congested, and the constraints on mobility were starting to affect Dubai’s attractiveness. The Executive Council, under the directions of Sheikh Mohammed, hired a major consulting firm which concluded that Dubai should not implement this road tax. The Sheikh studied the report, listened to the advice and went ahead against it. In his mind, there were not many options that could tackle this issue in a concrete way in the short term, and he did not want a 10 year plan that might or might not work. He ordered the development of Dubai's road-tax system, Salik, but for two gates only as a pilot which he monitored closely. It worked. It improved traffic flows, generated revenues for the government and did not have any negative impact on cost of living in Dubai. By 2019, eight Salik gates were in force, and other cities in the UAE were copying the model. It proved to be a tactical approach that is agile, with a long term goal that is fixed.

In The Executive Office, we also used to call this the 'two-year strategy' tool. Its hallmark is action and delivering quick results, but at its heart there is a long-term goal and a built-in focus on continual learning and adjusting. It is agile strategy at its best.

In the planning phase for any project, the Sheikh listens to advice. In fact, he uses many experts ranging from global management consulting firms to individual experts, global and local CEOs and his own government team. In those early days for defining the big opportunity, the more inputs the better, and from as many diversified sources as possible. The Sheikh likes using many lenses to study any issue before he formulates the opportunity in his mind.

"Most people talk, we do things. They plan, we achieve. They hesitate, we move ahead. We are living proof that human beings have the courage and commitment to transform a dream into reality; there is nothing that can stop them. Dubai is a living example of that"

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

However, once that is over, the opportunity is clear and vision is crafted, action starts on day one – the moment the decision is taken. Then he follows the military's 'OODA' approach – observe, orientate, decide, act – which is a recurring cycle of decision-making that acknowledges and exploits the uncertainty and complexity of the battlefield.

For this approach to work, prioritisation is critical. The Sheikh has the ability to ruthlessly prioritise and has always told his team that if everything is a priority, then nothing is done.

The Sheikh sets a laser focus when he wants to get things done, and he makes sure all his government leaders do the same. The former Chief of Dubai Police, Lt Gen Dhahi Khalfan Tamim, once recalled how he learned this style from his boss. "He taught me early on in my career how to set clear and sharp priorities. In fact, my first tool in managing Dubai Police was to have one sheet of paper where I listed all my priority focus areas. Anything else would have to wait. Focus is key. This is the major difference between having many ambitions and a clear set of goals."[69]

This lesson was learned and implemented by many working under the Sheikh. In 2003, the Dubai Development and Investment Authority developed a whole management approach called 'The One Thing'. This involved a number of tools that made sure each employee, at every level, was clear about the one thing they must focus on achieving that day. Focus on delivery; nothing else matters.

In the early 2000s, the Sheikh's priorities for Dubai were to diversify its economy away from oil by focusing on building a logistics hub, creating a tourist destination and becoming a great place for the emerging knowledge economy sectors of media and technology to do business. These were each elaborated with clear and tangible objectives that were given a primary focus in terms of delivery.

Armed with clear objectives and ready to move forward, the Sheikh likes to show quick results. Rather than plan exhaustively for every contingency before making a move, Sheikh Mohammed has always been prepared to experiment. His approach is to probe, sense patterns and act, even in the absence of complete information.

While he is a visionary leader, he has always been pragmatic with his vision. He knows there is not one set way to achieve things. He is also an adaptive leader. Adaptive leaders face challenges by developing new strategies, learning new ways of operating and challenging embedded beliefs, all while maintaining their focus on the way forward. Continuous and fast learning is a key element of Sheikh Mohammed's deliverology. What's more, he engages others in confronting new challenges, taking new perspectives and learning new habits.

He knows that time is our most important asset so once the goals are set and the priorities and metrics agreed, he puts all his focus on showing early successes. To be able to show these quick results, the Sheikh is adamant about making sure his team has clear metrics and understands how the government will know whether they have succeeded or not and whether they are on the track in terms of time.

Time and time again, the Sheikh would launch a very ambitious and imagination-capturing future vision, only to follow it with a very clear set of targets and measures, along with a very pragmatic two-year plan of action. Rarely does the vision and big opportunity change, but the two-year tactical strategy is like a laboratory that keeps changing the mix until it gets the right results.

Once the results start to show, the Sheikh would scale fast or fail fast.

The Sheikh has excelled in operating in an experimental mode that is not 'fail safe', but 'safe fail'. Pilot programmes, prototypes and beta versions of policies and government initiatives have become the norm in dealing with challenges and opportunities, but they were something that used to be reserved for private sector operations. When these pilots succeed, they are expanded – fast. When they fail, the damage is contained quickly and is usually limited. In the years I spent in The Executive Office, we cancelled (or dramatically changed) more projects than I can recall. History remembers big successes and concrete results. The cancelled pilots along the way are forgotten in public memory, but are unbelievably useful learning tools for the team working on them. This was a whole innovation ecosystem in action.

However, this innovation (and safe-fail) culture does not mean going for pure trial and error because leaders must always bear in mind their responsibility for assets and other stakeholders. It is important to realise quickly if you are going in the wrong direction and adapt accordingly. This is a critical lesson, especially for government leaders who are not used to admitting that things are not going well. Typically in government, even if a project has gone wrong or is not producing results, there is a tendency to 'just keep going'. Instead of stopping a failed project or reversing a bad policy, they end up throwing more money at it to fix it and/or keep it alive. The Sheikh CEO's style is to fail fast when something does not work.

A great example of this approach to deliverology took place in 2013 when Dubai was looking to position itself as a global leader in the Islamic economy. The Sheikh and his team spotted a growing opportunity in a niche part of the global economy. Studies were starting to document the rise of the middle class in the

Muslim world, which is home to about 1.5 billion people. Spending power was increasing and, along with it, the demand for services and commodities compliant with the teachings of Islam. This spanned industries such as financial services offerings, from bank accounts to global bonds; halal food and consumables, including cosmetic products; modest Islamic fashion and religious and cultural content for new media.

In typical Sheikh CEO fashion, Sheikh Mohammed commissioned a study to assess the size of the market, examine the best performing countries in the space and develop a strategy for Dubai. In those days, Malaysia was leading the world and the United Kingdom was jostling for pole position in the financial services sector.

The way the strategy was developed, goals set and initiatives announced is a classic example of the Sheikh's style. From the outset, the Sheikh declared that the ambition was to be number one – the capital for the Islamic economy – nothing less would do. The team worked hard to define the metrics on how to quantify this, from the volume of Islamic bonds, or sukuk, issued and listed, to exports and re-exports of halal goods. Having set the targets and studied in detail the benchmarks of other countries, the direction was to deconstruct their model – their policies, infrastructure and investments – to see which were most aligned with Dubai's position and capabilities.

Once Dubai's areas of focus were identified – in this specific case they had to do with Islamic financial services, global halal certification and family-oriented tourism, called hala – the instruction was to put in place a two-year tactical strategy, which detailed the initiatives the Dubai Government should spearhead and the policies it should draft and launch. Then, of course, the Sheikh would hold his government team accountable to the delivery of that tactical strategy.

Personal Accountability

Throughout this process for deliverology, Sheikh Mohammed employs leadership techniques that make the formula come to life. The most crucial ingredient he adds is personal accountability, a practice he demonstrates himself and demands from his team.

He deployed this tool to great effect in delivering Dubai's goal of being the capital for the Islamic economy. Sheikh Mohammed started off by personally announcing that he would make Dubai number one. He then asked each of his government leaders to commit to the initiatives they would champion to make this happen. Each department had a role to play, whether it was in the policy space, infrastructure or global promotion.

It was not enough for the Sheikh CEO that each government leader had a plan; he wanted them to commit to it in front of him and in front of the citizens of Dubai and the world. The Dubai Islamic Economy Strategy was launched on stage in a hotel in Dubai. Sheikh Mohammed sat among many guests invited from Dubai and elsewhere and listened to each department announce its plans, all with deadlines of under two years.

Within these two years, the number of sukuks listed in Dubai's financial markets had quadrupled, the city had launched the Global Islamic Economy Summit and established a halal industrial park in one of the city's free zones, among many more achievements. With that clear vision to become the number one capital for the Islamic economy came short-term tactical goals for entities like Nasdaq Dubai to deliver a plan for attracting Islamic bond listings. And so the model goes. By 2015, just two years after launching the strategy, Dubai had overtaken other financial centres in listing Islamic bonds on its exchanges, according to the chief executive of Nasdaq Dubai. This worked, and it received a major push to scale fast. Other initiatives within the same strategy did not work as well and were scaled back, equally as fast.

Sheikh Mohammed is on the front line with his people, holding himself to the same high standards – or higher – than he expects from the individual members of his team. As Lt Gen Dhahi Khalfan Tamim, former Chief of Dubai Police, once said of Sheikh Mohammed, “He wakes up before all of us and sleeps long after we all have gone to bed.”[70]

In his first year as Prime Minister of the UAE, Sheikh Mohammed decided to hold a whole-of-government retreat in a hotel venue 45 minutes out of the city of Dubai, called Bab Al Shams. One night before the meetings started, the team was hard at work preparing the venue, checking the equipment, the slides and all related matters. At 1am, the Sheikh walked into the operations room to check on them and thank them for their hard work.

Samir Al Ansari, the former CEO of Dubai International Capital, the investment arm of Dubai Holding, experienced Sheikh Mohammed’s work ethic first hand. “His Highness leads by example and he works 20 hours a day; the whole team around him is like that. There is an expectation to work hard and do well and perform and deliver. It is not easy and can be stressful, but also extremely enjoyable and very satisfying.”[71]

The Sheikh was taught to be a hands-on leader by his father, Sheikh Rashid. A well-known story about Sheikh Rashid’s dealings with a local builder was documented to showcase this style. After completing the morning payers, Sheikh Rashid would tour the city monitoring its projects. One day, he noticed progress had stalled on a particular construction project – construction had halted on the first floor. Later that morning, the owner came to Sheikh Rashid’s majlis where the heads of the merchant families gathered. Sheikh Rashid called him to have a seat beside him. He asked about the man's family and health, then he asked about the project.

"It is going superbly," said the owner. "It is up to the third floor."

Sheikh Rashid replied, "Wow. You must have the best contractor in the universe. When I was there a few hours ago, the building was just on the first floor."[72]

He told Sheikh Mohammed, "Every day, I get reports from the contractor telling me how well the building is progressing. However, I do not just rely on what a contractor or anyone tells me; I go and see for myself." His message for every future leader, including his son, is to monitor progress personally if you want to achieve results.

Sheikh Mohammed took that lesson to heart and has adopted it as a key part of his leadership approach.

The Sheikh describes his leadership style as 'on the ground'. In his book, My Story, he talks about leadership and notes that people sometimes describe a good leader as someone who has a bird's-eye view, observing the full picture from above and having the ability to take it to a few levels of abstraction to make decisions.

"I do not agree," he said. "I think leaders should have their feet firmly on the ground, living with the people, understanding the issues they go through, what makes them happy and what makes them sad. Only then can he actually change their lives for the better."[73] Action and management-by-walking-around is what gets things done.

Sheikh Mohammed is quoted in Pranay Gupte's book, Dubai: The Making of a Megapolis, as saying, "As a leader or chief executive, you have to make tough decisions quickly. The better the information, the better the decision. I find that when I'm on the ground, mingling with residents or the business community, the flow of information is more accurate. Thus, our decisions make more sense. The same goes for our work in government and in the projects that are creating Dubai. I brainstorm with my team and we make collective choices on final concepts and designs. Once the decision is made, I continue to be a part of the team until the project is completed. I stay in touch and informed. I meet the contractors. I visit the sites. I help market the project. And above all, I champion it."[74]

When thinking of Sheikh's grounded manner, parallels come to mind with another great leader – Lee Kuan Yew, who is known as the founding father of modern Singapore. A cab driver once asked a foreign passenger about the differences between Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong, who succeeded him in 1990 as Singaporean Prime Minister. Having received a reluctant response from the passenger, the cab driver offered his own perspective – one shared by most Singaporean citizens: "Goh Chok Tong and his cabinet colleagues were all managers. They were picked up by Lee Kuan Yew from the public and private sectors. They had no experience with people because they did not rise through the ranks of the party. Lee Kuan Yew, on the other hand, is a true leader. He could talk directly to the people, sway their opinion and ultimately convince them to follow him and his cabinet." Being able to relate to the Singaporean people's individual values and goals and align national goals to them helped Lee Kuan Yew persuade his people to adopt new approaches in work and life. For most Singaporeans, Lee Kuan Yew has gained a reputation as being a charismatic leader.[75]

Sheikh Mohammed's hands-on approach was evident from the beginning when he became the youngest Minister of Defence in the world at the age of 21. From that young age, he was responsible for a large and well-equipped defence force. The first thing he decided to do when he took the post was to learn how to fly a helicopter. When asked why, he responded, “So I can understand what my pilots are talking about.”[76]

Many years later, when the UAE was building a road between Dubai and Oman – an important project for trade and tourism – he did not rely on progress reports and updates. He used to get in his helicopter every other day and fly out to see the progress with his own eyes.[77]

In 2016, Sheikh Mohammed formed a new UAE Federal Government cabinet. He briefed his new ministers on the eve of the announcement about what he expects of them: “The government of the future is all about delivering on, and exceeding, citizen expectations. I expect the ministers to be working on the front lines, in the field, dealing with citizens and businesses. I do not expect, nor want, our ministers to be working behind desks in closed rooms.”

“The appropriate place for ministers is in the field where government services are delivered, between the citizens and under the sun,” he said.[78]

He told them that he would assess their performance by visiting people, businesses and project sites to see results. Results, not reports. This was a clear direction and instruction to the ministers to make sure they were directly involved with public services and policies, and not sitting in ivory towers and building walls between them and the citizens.

“Taking a hands-on role leaves no doubt about my priorities in getting things done. This doesn’t mean I micromanage or refrain from delegating responsibility. It just means that I push things along

by staying involved”

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

On stage at the World Government Summit in 2013, the Sheikh was asked how he ensures his ministers are delivering. He described the systems and performance indicators that he set up in The Executive Council in Dubai and the Prime Minister’s Office in the UAE Government. It is an elaborate system with hundreds of measures and performance indicators. These are measured periodically and presented to him in very corporate-like reports.

Then, to show how it really works, beyond reports, he turned to his Minister of Health, who was sitting in the audience, and asked him to offer an answer based on his experience. The minister said, “His Highness can literally call any time and ask for updates on projects and indicators, and he often does! I need to always be ready.”

Then Sheikh Mohammed asked three ministers to update him on key projects there and then, live on stage. This personal accountability and follow-up is how the Sheikh ensures things get done.

Along with personal accountability comes empowerment and credit. At the same event, the Sheikh redirected all technical questions he was asked to his ministers. He gave them full responsibility for their work, full accountability for any challenges and full credit for their success. They all know they are empowered and that he fully supports them. They also know that with great power comes great responsibility.

On the 22nd of March 2015, Abdulrahman Al Rashed, the former General Manager of Al Arabiya news channel, wrote about the secret behind Dubai's success, "Dubai Ruler Sheikh Mohammed knows what he wants, and it is impossible for these projects to happen without his consent and personal supervision. It is obvious that he is giving men and women in Dubai full powers, but at the same time, he holds them accountable for the outcome and the promises they make." He continued to note that this transparency in management is what is missing in other Arab countries where authorities and responsibilities are misused and where there is no accountability. "This is how promises fade away and failures mount. Dubai has much to be appreciated, not because of its skyscrapers, spacious streets or rewarding companies, but for its administrative model that can be reproduced in modern cities that suffer from mismanagement."[79]

When it comes to ensuring the performance of his people, the Sheikh believes in a simple premise: if you want things done, make it personal. I personally lived one of the best, and earliest, examples of this in 2002 when Sheikh Mohammed was Crown Prince of Dubai. That year, he decided to implement a performance measurement system for all Dubai government departments. Up until that day, most government departments worked on their plans and would periodically update the Sheikh on their progress in one-to-one sessions or in his majlis. He would also visit the project sites, talk to people and make his own assessment of their progress. In 2002, the Sheikh wanted to formalise and institutionalise the system given the growth that had taken place in Dubai and the ambitious plans ahead.

At that point, the only system in place relied on the directors of all government departments reporting directly to Sheikh Mohammed, most of the time verbally in one-to-one meetings. The directors valued this interaction and used the time to report on progress and issues and seek quick decisions on their plans. While valuable, the Sheikh knew it was not scalable. He would not be able to continue offering one-to-one meetings at that frequency. He needed to build a management system to measure the outputs and outcomes of his government institutions.

The Executive Office team decided to introduce the ‘balanced scorecard framework’. In those days, it was a fairly new system in the world of performance measurement and management, developed and popularised by Harvard Business School professor Dr Robert Kaplan. Originally developed for the private sector, the framework needed a lot of tweaking to fit the public sector context, and yet more work to tailor it to Dubai’s needs. The Sheikh wanted the system built in typical Executive Office fashion, and within 12 weeks of his directive, it was ready. After the Sheikh reviewed the overall system, and individual department measures, we launched a major campaign to introduce all government departments to the new system, involving training sessions, technical support and meetings with the directors.

The idea was simple: use the framework to map out the key performance indicators for each government department, agree on goals and targets and report quarterly in a specified format using the templates provided. The reports were to be submitted to The Executive Office team, who would then analyse the results, offer insights and benchmarks and submit them for the Sheikh’s review. The reports would be marked up using a traffic light approach, with green meaning a measure was on target, yellow meaning some attention was needed – there was perhaps a resource issue, or delay – and red meant that there were major issues that required some form of intervention.

Once launched, the cooperation of the government departments was underwhelming. Very few would submit the reports on time, and those who did submit them only partially completed them. There were issues with their ability to use and understand the new system and a lack of accurate data. The Sheikh directed The Executive Office’s team to keep moving forward, offering more technical support, feedback and training to the departments. There was no looking back. The system had to work.

After about six months, and after a couple of rounds of submissions, multiple training rounds and considerable technical assistance, things started to improve and some departments were more engaged. Others, especially the larger departments, were still showing signs of non-cooperation. For one reason or another, they did not like the system. Some disliked the exposure of such a results-focused system, while others worried about losing out on their valuable one-to-one meetings with the Sheikh.

However, they did not have the option not to submit their reports – that was something the Sheikh was very strict about – so they submitted reports with no data, claiming they couldn't collect it. We had to invent a fourth colour in the traffic light approach, which was grey to indicate no data had been reported.

In the next round of submissions, some departments had more grey items than any other colour. The Sheikh asked The Executive Office team why the departments were unable to gather the data. Some departments needed time to build the right data collection systems, which were underway, but others simply did not want to submit it. The Sheikh's response surprised us. He asked us to include the personal mobile phone number of the director of each department on the first page of his or her department's report. The next time we collected the reports, we did just that. Sheikh Mohammed read them one by one, and for each report he picked up the phone and called the department director to discuss it. He made sure they knew he was reading them all and that he was not happy with what was being submitted.

That made it personal, and this action was more powerful than anything our whole team had tried over 12 months to gain their commitment. The next round of submissions was a clear and visible improvement, personally signed off by each department director, and the grey colour started to disappear from our charts.

Performance matters. That was the message the Sheikh made sure was loud and clear. Plus, it is personal; the department's performance is directly related to the director. If you are given a position of leadership under Sheikh Mohammed, it is you in the spotlight, and you are personally accountable.

This attention to detail stayed with the Sheikh no matter how much his responsibilities grew. In 2010, Aisha Miran, Assistant Secretary General for the Strategy Management and Governance Sector of The Executive Council, was managing this Dubai Government Performance Measurement System, which had matured and become an executive dashboard with a wide array of key indicators like the number of business licences established and cancelled in Dubai, average ambulance response times, customer satisfaction data with airport services, the number of traffic accidents, and so on. Each indicator would still have a colour coding to show if they were achieving their targets (green), were slow but progressing (yellow), or missing their targets (red). While the grey colour had disappeared, the team had to add a new colour (this time, blue). Aisha noted that the Sheikh was very wary of those who over-achieved their targets and asked the team to introduce the blue colour to the coding system. The blue code meant that the entity had achieved its target and overshot it by a considerable margin. In the view of many people, that was a great outcome. If you plan for 700 licenses and achieve 2,000, surely that is a big success. However, the Sheikh saw it differently. For him, overachieving a target by such a huge margin meant one of two things. Either you had a bad target where you underestimated the situation due to insufficient analysis and planning. In that case, your approach to planning, data gathering and setting targets had to be rectified. The other scenario was that you under-promised so you could over-deliver. Neither situation was acceptable. The Sheikh managed a fine balance between offering his team stretch targets so they could always work the extra 10%, but he was also keen to make sure there was a clear cause and effect relationship between the work done and the results achieved.

The Sheikh knew every detail of this system and read every single report. Aisha knew this the first time she headed this department. She reminisces on her first month of heading the Government Performance Department, when she was asked to present the dashboard to The Executive Council, which was chaired by the Sheikh. She had some executive slides prepared in a PowerPoint format ready for the presentation, and she had about 40 pages of reports for her own background use, with her own hand-scribbled notes printed on recycled paper in black and white, so the colours on the charts and traffic lights were not clearly visible. It was The Executive Council's policy to reuse paper by printing all working papers on both sides and in black and white.

Aisha had her material ready and was then called by The Executive Council Secretary General, who told her that before she presents to the council, the Sheikh had a visiting delegation of outside guests and would like her to walk in, that same minute, to share with them an overview of the performance management system. Anxious, Aisha walked in with her USB containing the professional slides and her pile of draft prints with scribbled notes.

The Sheikh introduced her to the visitors, asked her to sit down and took the draft papers from her. Aisha recalls, "He explained the system to them in full, without even seeing the proper colours as it was all in greyscale. He was fully versed and explained it in detail, with insights on various areas for improvement. That was when I knew that he reads all our reports in minute detail, develops his own insights and is personally engaged. No one needed to brief him. On top of that, he has that personal touch as he never misses a chance to boost his team's morale. When the discussion was finished, he thanked me in front of the visiting delegation and told them, 'Aisha is a young future leader'. That moved me so much and gave me unparalleled motivation."

Sheikh Mohammed's focus on the detail has been experienced time and time again over the years. During the Sheikh's weekly majlis, which takes place in Zabeel Palace every Tuesday, the Sheikh meets all the Directors General of the Dubai Government Departments, and in many cases asks them detailed questions about specific things in their departments – things The Executive Council system measures, like visitor numbers, issues with delays, etc. He asks these questions, point blank, to the person in charge, and expects an answer. The Dubai Government leaders know that such a conversation can happen anytime, anywhere, with the Sheikh. They are always ready and must keep up to date with reports, data and insights.

Another example of how Sheikh Mohammed used personal accountability is when he wanted the federal government ministries to shift their focus from offering electronic services from web-based portals to mobile apps.

It was 2013 and the smartphone revolution had taken over the world. That decade saw smartphones overtake computers and regular phones across countries like the UAE. According to the UAE's Telecommunications Regulatory Authority,[80] smartphone penetration in 2012 reached 168%, meaning everyone in the country had at least one smartphone, if not more.

The world was discussing the concept of m-government, where governments design their services to be offered more seamlessly via smartphones, after spending the previous decade or more focusing on e-government (web-based electronic services). Sheikh Mohammed saw that his government had to move in that direction, and fast. He said, "Everyone should realise that the time is changing and those who can't adapt to this change will not be able to achieve their targets."

Sheikh Mohammed said that the government's ultimate aim was to meet the needs of the people. "Our main target is to make our citizens content. However, we can't do this without taking serious steps forward and developing initiatives to empower them and serve their interests." He was clear that technology was a major part of this equation. "Most of you today have two mobile phones and can't be detached from them for even two days." He also knew that migrating to m-government would not be easy, and if not managed well, could drag on for years and years like many large-scale government IT projects around the world.

True to form, he wanted his government to lead the world in this domain.

According to Sheikh Mohammed, “Nothing matters after number one. Being in first place is not similar to being in second or third place, where you will be following others.”

The Sheikh acknowledges his competitive nature in his book My Story, in which he ponders whether it is something he was born with, or acquired over time. Whatever it is, this competitive edge has pushed him to achieve many initiatives that seemed highly unlikely at the time.

Pointing to the remarkable transformation the UAE Government made into e-services, he said, “Decades ago, there used to be one computer device in each government organisation. Then the number increased to one computer on each floor of every organisation, while today it is available on every desk in government offices. When I discussed the idea of transformation to e-government in front of the government officials and prominent UAE figures at one of the hotels in Jumeirah, some of the Emiratis refused the new concept, saying that they want to manage all their government transactions in person.” That did not stop the Sheikh, and he launched the Dubai e-Government initiative in 2000 and worked hard until all government departments had their services online. A decade later, he was on stage launching the transformation to m-government. “Today [2013], we are launching a new era and we should all cooperate and work hand in hand to achieve this target,” said Sheikh Mohammed. “We are looking for a mobile government that operates around the clock. I want my government to be a one-stop shop where everything can be done easily via this device,” he said, raising his own mobile phone on stage.

He already knew some of the ministers and government leaders were a bit hesitant and reluctant to go with this change, so he made them a promise. “Those who will not adapt to this transformation within the specified time frame of two years will be given a farewell party.”[81]

This was not a threat, it was an actual target, and the Sheikh CEO followed up.

After 22 months exactly, and two months from the deadline he had set, he tweeted that the preparations for the farewell party were underway and all ministries were invited. The event would showcase progress and celebrate those who had achieved their target in m-government transformation and say farewell to those who had not.

Every single ministry delivered the target transformation and many overshot it. In 2018, the Sheikh commented in his Twitter feed about that target he set in 2013 and the results that had been achieved. “Five years ago, we gathered 1,000 officials from the UAE Federal Government and we launched our Smart Government programme. We asked them all to move to m-government and gave them 24 months to deliver. We even promised those who do not deliver a nice farewell party. Today, the United Nations issued their annual report on e-government and the UAE is #6 out of 193 countries. We are leading the GCC and Arab world, and West Asia. I am proud of my team, and we will throw them a celebration party, but only when we are number one globally.” That sums it all up. The Sheikh makes accountability personal, drives performance and then acknowledges and celebrates success. But he does not celebrate just any success. It has to be number one. When working with Sheikh Mohammed, never think your work is complete.

On the other hand, if you fail to perform, the Sheikh CEO will deliver on his promises and take corrective action. Make no mistakes about that. On a Sunday morning in August 2016, he conducted a surprise spot check visiting a few government departments in Dubai. He simply walked around the offices with a camera filming him. It was 8am, after official working hours had started. He went on to post the video online, especially the parts in which he was walking between empty government offices in the Dubai Municipality. It was the loudest message of personal accountability. All employees should have been at their desks, and this was simply not acceptable.[82] In the same week, Sheikh Mohammed ordered a shake-up of the Dubai Municipality leadership team, including the retirement of nine senior officials.

The Sheikh does not only push people working for him to take personal responsibility. He leads by example and walks the talk. He has an amazing eye for attention to detail and personally gets engaged in making projects succeed.

In the 1990s, the now well-known Jumeirah brand was a small and ambitious hotel operator. The then CEO, Gerald Lawless, recalls a story that demonstrates how seriously the Sheikh takes his own personal accountability. Jumeirah Beach Hotel, the first of Jumeirah's properties, had just opened on Jumeirah Beach Road. It was to host a government event the next day, which would be one of the first to take place in the new hotel's ballroom. The night before, Lawless's phone rang. The caller was Sheikh Mohammed. He asked, "How good are the lights in the new ballroom at Jumeirah Beach Hotel?"

Lawless replied to the Sheikh, "We have invested significantly to make sure we have the best possible lights."

Sheikh Mohammed said, "Great, I'll meet you there in 20 minutes."

In the middle of the night, the Sheikh walked around the hotel, inspecting the lights and the overall set-up. "We are going to look great tomorrow when CNN is here. Thank you and have a good night."[83]

Personally ensuring quality is a style that people working with the Sheikh have learned and adopted. When we first started running major events like the Arab Strategy Forum in Dubai, the team hired the most professional support we could get – the best facilities and event management agencies, the best stage designer, lights, audio and so on. Our Executive Office team would also spend the last week before the event on location, leaving no stone unturned. Partly, this was because it was our process to assure quality, and partly, it was because our Chairman, Mohammad Al Gergwai, would pass by every day (sometimes several times in one day), inspecting the lights, checking the entrance and exits, reviewing badges and speaker files. He did this because he had learned from his leader, Sheikh Mohammed, the importance of focusing on the details and personally being accountable for them. In turn, he knew that the Sheikh himself would pass by many times before the event.

Woody Allen once said that 99% of success is showing up. Well, in the Sheikh CEO's book, 99% of success is being there and walking the talk, on the ground, with no bureaucratic layers or second-hand information. From the Sheikh CEO to the most junior audio engineer, everyone was on-site and took personal accountability.

This, to me, is the most tangible element of the Sheikh's leadership style. The world is full of ideas, visions and plans, but very few deliver and achieve results. Being there and being personally accountable is the secret ingredient.

Personal accountability, in the Sheikh's book, is not all about targets and sticks. There are also a lot of carrots and a lot of support and motivation. In early 2015, a new strategy was laid out and numerous policy targets were set for the year 2021, which will mark the UAE's 50th National Day. One morning, as federal government employees all reached their offices and opened their emails, they found a personal email from their Prime Minister. The Sheikh started by telling each employee how proud he was of their work. He outlined the achievements of their government and agencies and highlighted that more hard work lay ahead. In addition to the element of surprise and the personal touch of using his own email, the most touching aspect was a sincere thank you.

This was something he is always keen to do. Reaching out to all levels of his team – he calls all government employees his 'team', not 'staff' – he makes sure to thank them and reminds his leaders that "those who lead from the top of the pyramid end up leading only those on top".

The Sheikh CEO always makes sure he knows who is doing what in his team and across the country. If he sees a particularly pleasing billboard displaying a clever caption while driving through Dubai, he makes it a point of finding out who created it. He will then call them up to compliment them.

Mohamed Alabbar, Chairman of Emaar Properties, recalls a story about a time he was in New York at a conference and his phone rang. On the other end of the line was Sheikh Mohammed, who had called to tell him how proud he was of his work and that his ambition in the construction field was an inspiration to all. The Sheikh said, "Mohamed, I just want you to know I really salute you and your people for what you’ve done. I just want to tell you that we all have dreams, but you are a man who makes dreams come true.”[84]

The Show Must Go On

On the eve of the 31st of December 2015, crowds filled the area in front of the Burj Khalifa to watch one of the most impressive fireworks displays on Earth, as Dubai prepared to see in the New Year. However, a few hours before 2016 was due to start, a major fire erupted on the Dubai skyline just beside the Burj Khalifa. One of the major hotels, the Address Downtown, had caught fire and images of this towering inferno emerged on television screens across the world.

That night, the efficiency of the government that Sheikh Mohammed had built and his personal involvement had critical roles to play. The emergency services managed to evacuate the fully booked 60 storey hotel in 15 minutes. Most importantly, only 14 people received minor injuries and television reporters could only applaud the response. There were no major injuries or fatalities.

The government was well prepared and within a short time the Sheikh was among his team on the scene. Then came the signature hallmark: the show must go on. With less than an hour left until midnight, and after securing the safety of all people involved, the flames were still sky high. Firefighters were battling the blaze, and the Sheikh declared that the firework display at the Burj Khalifa, less than 300 metres from the inferno, would proceed as planned. The world witnessed a fantastic show, with the Address Downtown on fire in the background. The show must, and will, go on.

A few days later, UAE billionaire Khalaf Al Habtoor described the Sheikh as a ruler who has “a lion’s heart, safe hands and endless imagination”.[85]

Much like the fire on New Year's Eve, Dubai's development journey has by no means been an easy or straightforward ride. There have been many bumps along the road, many mistakes made and many projects cancelled. The most memorable of major bumps being the 2008 global financial crisis.

At the time, Dubai was growing at break-neck speed. Everyone felt positive, excited and untouchable. Nothing could go wrong and the sky was the limit. But when the United States housing bubble burst, it sent the global financial system into shock, and the crisis struck Dubai's economy hard. After a great decade where Dubai had grown and amazed its residents, neighbours and external observers, the crisis slammed the brakes on its development and shocked it to the core. Projects, even those in full swing, were delayed, tourism declined and many state-owned and state-backed organisations struggled to service their debts. House prices in Dubai dropped as much as 40% in less than a year and the stock market all but crashed. Many expatriates fled to escape their debt burdens and the population was predicted to have fallen by more than 15%.

The cover of Newsweek in December 2008 asked, 'Is the party over?' showing a photo of the new Atlantis hotel, which had opened in true Dubai style in November that year with a glitzy ceremony rumoured to have cost $20 million. British newspaper the Daily Mail gloated "Bye Dubai", following a reported property slump of 60% in some areas in 2009.

Many of Dubai's state-owned companies had issues. The naysayers were quick to declare the end of Dubai and to speak of the fragility of the Dubai model. That year, Dubai was on the brink of economic meltdown. Analysts waxed ironical about delusions of grandeur and the arrogance that had led the small emirate straight to the wall. In the days of subprimes and the collapse of Lehman Brothers, it was fashionable to criticise Dubai.

At the same time, it became clear that Dubai had a critical advantage that Sheikh Mohammed had uniquely established – almost everyone in the region was invested in Dubai's success. No one wanted to see Dubai collapse or slow down. Not the global banks, like Standard Chartered and HSBC, which were major lenders to the emirate's mega-projects, nor the local banks from Dubai and Abu Dhabi, who were again heavily invested in Dubai's progress. Not the Dubai residents who earned their livelihoods there, nor – by definition – the Dubai nationals. Not only that, there were ample GCC investments in Dubai and many of the tourism assets were owned by major regional family businesses. Globally, Dubai was a key stop on new trading routes (like China to Africa), major aeroplane manufacturers had billions of dollars of pipeline orders to Emirates, and so on. Dubai was important to so many stakeholders who were now part of this hub's fabric.

Globally, the United States considered Dubai a key ally and base, and the United Kingdom had a full embassy in Dubai as well as in the capital, Abu Dhabi (a model that has no other precedent around the world).

The same applies for countries who had major trade and investments in Dubai including India, Pakistan and even Iran. Dubai's success and stability was, and still is, essential to all these stakeholders. The Sheikh CEO had built a true business hub for the region. In one form or another, each of these stakeholders had a role to play in putting Dubai back on its feet, and they needed Dubai. It was the region's economic capital, and everyone needed it to remain as such.

Building on that, and after many quick tactical decisions, strategic negotiations and reaffirming the bold vision, support and confidence in Dubai's capability and future outlook started to gain momentum after 2009, most notably from the private sector. Michael Geoghegan, Group CEO of HSBC, said, "I am confident that Dubai and the UAE will overcome any short-term issues they face." Similarly, David Rubenstein, Co-founder of the Carlyle Group, was very clear in his warning not to count Dubai out. "It has world-class infrastructure, a high-quality talent pool and will continue to be an important financial centre for decades to come," he said.

Bloomberg reported that while its problems may be severe, the viability of the economic model remained sound. Others adopted a wait-and-see position, with Mathew Vogel, Head of Emerging Market Research at Barclays Capital in London, remarking that "Sheikh Mohammed's leadership will be tested; he will be forced to make difficult choices",[86] and he did. The show must go on.

There were a lot of lessons for Dubai to learn during that period, and they were difficult times. There were paradigm shifts and structural changes to be made. However, Sheikh Mohammed managed to stabilise the ship, restructure the nation's debts and leverage alliances in the UAE to contain the economic crisis. Like any great leader, he changed gears, reshuffled some of his management teams to bring in the required skill sets and led a major period of restructuring, restrategising and – most importantly – reflecting and learning.

This resilience was obvious to all who worked with the Sheikh then. Aisha Miran, Assistant Secretary General for the Strategy Management and Governance Sector of The Executive Council, recalls that time. The Sheikh did not shy away and kept reassuring his team that it would pass. His motto was "it is just a phase" and that everyone should be saying 'keep calm and carry on'. He visibly maintained his calm and demonstrated it in all his decisions and actions.

Within four years, and despite the Arab region going through the infamous Arab Spring in 2011, Dubai was getting back on track, stronger than ever. In November 2013, The Economist declared that "Dubai was not just a white elephant after all". With the headline "It's bouncing back: The emirate is recovering boldly from its humiliating crash",[87] the periodical pointed out that Dubai was not only back on track with its numbers of tenants and visitors, but it was exceeding the numbers bargained for in its recovery plan.

The Huffington Post also praised 'Dubai's triumphant come-back'[88] when the *city won the rights to host Expo 2020. "It heralds an economic and political return to centre stage for this emirate that was left moribund after the crisis of 2008, proving that strategic vision and strong leadership are still cardinal values for a country," wrote contributor Richard Attias, former Chairman of PublicisLive and Co-founder of the Clinton Global Initiative. He went on to claim all indicators were by then set to green, "Hotels full, business experiencing growth, the property industry back on track with record prices, and what is undoubtedly even more significant, young college graduates and entrepreneurs arriving into the country every day from around the world to build the country's future."*

The Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world, had opened in 2010, helping to funnel 65 million shoppers into the vast Dubai Mall next door in 2012. Many of them arrived there using the fully automated and air-conditioned Dubai Metro, which had been dismissed on its opening in 2009 as another costly dud. In reality, Dubai Metro is spotless, efficient and popular. It moves some 600,000 passengers a day, an impressive proportion of the city's inhabitants.

Property prices surged by as much as 40% in 2013 alone. To discourage 'flipping' by speculators, a practice which contributed to the crash of 2009, Dubai Government doubled registration fees to 4% of a property's value and put caps on mortgage lending. Investors were pleased. Dubai's stock market index, on which property firms weigh heavily, rose by 81% in 2011.

It was around this point that a friend called me from the United States. Afshin Molavi, Senior Fellow at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies Foreign Policy Institute, had been observing Dubai for many years and he called me to say, "Remember that Newsweek cover declaring the party over for Dubai… Well, this week Newsweek decided to stop its print issue, and Dubai is back in full swing. I guess the party is over for Newsweek!" The paper those days did not fully understand the Dubai model, nor the changing business model in its own industry. That is the fundamental idea about Dubai. You should not see it (nor judge it) with a 20th century development model lens. It is a new economic model for a fast-changing world.

Those trying to explain Dubai’s fast turnaround, while other economies that crashed in 2008 had never fully regained their strength, put it all down to one thing – leadership. Dubai had a leader who acted quickly and decisively, was not shaken by the challenge and had his people backing him and believing in his vision.

The Sheikh had never let himself be swayed by doubts and continued to deliver – building the Burj Khalifa and completing the Dubai Metro even at the depth of the economic crisis.

Following in the footsteps of their leader’s stable and contrarian approach, Emirates airline decided, in 2008, to sign a $15 billion contract to buy new aeroplanes. Commentators noted that it was a very brave step to take in those critical times, considering that some airlines had stopped flying after suffering great losses. American and European airlines were not flying as regularly as normal and even domestic flights had been affected. But Emirates had studied the deal very carefully and had a good reason to sign the contract. Sheikh Mohammed explained that the reason lay in looking to the future: “We had to predict what would happen and why it would happen. Had we delayed this deal for two or more years, it would have cost us a lot more.”[89]

“The positive leader does not see a crisis as the end of the world, but rather the dawn of a new horizon of innovation and achievement”

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al

The Sheikh acted like a true CEO whose company was threatened with bankruptcy and he took draconian measures very quickly in order to control the crisis and re-start the economy. He led a reduction in numbers in the public sector workforce, waged a new war on any signs of corruption or complacency, pushed for drastic reductions in public expenditure and shrewdly renegotiated the debt of the emirate, while realigning its economic policies.

Mohammad Al Gergawi, UAE Minister of Cabinet Affairs and the Future and Chairman of The Executive Office, recalls how the Sheikh demonstrated his true leadership style during those tough times following the financial crisis. “Sheikh Mohammed was quiet, strangely calm. We used to sit down very distressed, feeling that our world was imploding around us. But he was quiet. He saw what we did not see. As people were seeing the decline of the world economy, he saw the line of ascent after the decline. From his previous experiences, and through conviction, he knew that the economy of his country would return strong.

“In the same period, and specifically on the 9th of September 2009, the Dubai Metro was officially opened, the Burj Khalifa welcomed people for the first time and Al Maktoum International Airport also opened. He was celebrating while the foreign media was writing bad news.

“True leadership is leadership that does not stop, does not retreat and does not surrender. Challenges only make it more resilient. This is Mohammed bin Rashid.”[90]

What was remarkable during that period was that despite the force of the shock, the ambition and optimism of the people of Dubai never wavered. They displayed pride in and solidarity with the dream they chose to turn into reality. Every single person in Dubai, no matter where they came from or how long they had been there, fervently followed the voting process for the attribution of Expo 2020. An event that was barely known to the region's residents a few years ago, the Expo became a symbol for Dubai's spirit. In the midst of one of the toughest periods in its recent history, the Sheikh decided to go and bid on hosting a global industrial Expo that has been around for a century, but never hosted outside the West. The Sheikh led a campaign to make Dubai the host of Expo 2020 for the first time in the emerging market. The symbolism did not escape anyone, and on the night when countries around the world took part in the official voting to decide which city would win the rights to host the Expo, you could feel the energy and anticipation in Dubai – on the radio stations, in the newspapers, on social media and in coffee shops. We were not yearning for the Expo as an event, but were wanting to show the world that the show must, and would, go on. When the result was announced, Dubai residents, led by their Sheikh, took to the streets and social networks en masse to express their joy and pride in welcoming this major event that would create more than a quarter of a million jobs. Dubai was back.

Mohamed Hassanein Heikal,[91] one of the Arab world's leading thinkers, said then that other countries in the region should study the Dubai development experience and benefit from it. "The challenge for the Arab world is to find ways and means to adopt and adapt this experience – this Dubai development model is one that is to be admired at a global level," he said. "The real secret behind Dubai's success is Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid. He has been able to capitalise on the core resources of the emirate, build on its current strengths and create a positive and attractive environment, at the same time as other Arab countries have created a negative environment."

The show must go on, always. When asked during the World Government Summit in 2014 about the financial challenges Dubai faced in 2008, the Sheikh reminded everyone that despite all the challenges, Dubai never stopped delivering. It never stopped building its infrastructure, never slowed down and went on a few years afterwards to win the right to host Expo 2020.

In those days, many people asked the Sheikh what would happen should Dubai not win the Expo. The Sheikh’s answer captured the ethos of Dubai. He said, “If we win, great. If we lose, we will create our own.”

Lessons In Leadership

Delivery requires discipline, and discipline comes from understanding that time is our most valuable, and non-renewable, resource. Make your motto ‘five minutes early is on time’. Respect your time and that of others around you. Do not waste that resource by being late for deadlines or meetings. If you do not learn the value of time, you will not be able to deliver on projects, let alone a vision.

Know when to quit. Learn the lessons of the ‘fail fast’ approach and know when it is time to cancel a project or refresh your thinking. In most public sectors around the world, it is far easier to start new projects and propose new ideas than to actually stop current ones, or admit that some have failed to deliver. Having the courage to say, ‘this did not work’, cancel it or change it, is critical in this fast-paced world we are in. Agility means knowing when to quit, and fast, and being adaptive enough to change direction when needed.

Make delivery personal. Show your team the big opportunity and what their future looks like, then make them believe that they are fully responsible for their own actions and consequences. This is a mindset and a system of personal accountability, coupled with enablement and the required authority. Leave no room for excuses. If someone promises or commits to deliver something, make sure they deliver, or move on to give room to someone who can. When it comes to delivery, it is black or white. Do not leave room for grey.

Focus on the details and know what each report says. Do not follow the jargon and be a ‘big picture person’. Success in life is based on understanding details, seeing and appreciating the small things and understanding that success is achieved one step at time, tiny detail by tiny detail. To understand details, read, get briefs and observe. Do not accept second-hand information.

Learn the power of a personal ‘thank you’. There is no stronger motivation. As a leader, thanking your team genuinely goes a very long way in building morale, a positive attitude and respect. It boosts confidence and motivation, when it is personal and heartfelt, much more than extrinsic awards can. ‘Thank you’ genuinely touches people’s emotions and motivates positive behaviour.

Prioritise ruthlessly and overwhelm your priorities with resources. If everything is a priority, then nothing will be achieved and resources will be spread thin. Learn to prioritise and find that one thing that you need to do, and do well. Once you do, do not spare any time, energy or resources at hand. Achieve success and move on to the next.

Never stop moving forward. Keep in mind the story of the lion and the gazelle. No matter what you are, who you are and where you are, you wake up and run. Keep moving forward. Every day is a new start, a chance to build on yesterday’s achievements, address the mistakes and move one step forward towards your vision, goals and dreams. Your life stops when you stop moving forward.

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Chapter 4

Never believe that your work is complete

Innovate Or Perish

Although ‘done’ is such a crucial word in Sheikh Mohammed’s lexicon, it will never apply to his overall vision for Dubai. His sights are always set firmly on the future and he always instructs his teams to keep looking forward and never look back. Dwelling on past mistakes, or indeed successes, is like driving a car forward while staring in the rear-view mirror.

Nabil Al Yousuf, the former Director General of The Executive Office, once noted, “The Sheikh keeps us on edge because he is on edge. He is restless to achieve his vision and does not like to stop or slow down. He wakes up every day wanting to move ahead. He pushed that feeling into all of us.”

A well-known verse captures his thinking, as he records in his first book, My Vision: “With each new day in Africa, a gazelle wakes up knowing he must outrun the fastest lion or perish. At the same time, a lion stirs and stretches, knowing he must outrun the fastest gazelle or starve. It is no different for the human race. Whether you consider yourself a gazelle or a lion, you simply have to run faster than others to survive, every day.”

Talking to his team at Emirates airline after they achieved unparalleled global success, he said, “This vision requires still greater efforts from us. I am optimistic and happy for you have already proved your capabilities through your past achievements. Now we want you to show as much enthusiasm for the future. We must constantly teach and train ourselves so that we can compete internationally. To be a success, you have to have done something which people recognise as successful. Never believe that your work is complete.”

“Never look behind you to see who is following you, always look ahead and keep your eye on the pole position.”[92] The Sheikh is bold in expressing his motto. Delivery is an endless cycle of ideation and implementation.

Every day, he wakes up and tries to move forward and make things better. Even after achieving what many consider to be an economic miracle, he still feels more and more is needed.

To do that, he reminds us to step back and take stock. Make sure we are not stuck in the same development trap going round and round, without clear outcomes, and – more worryingly – not moving forward. In a brainstorming session with his Prime Minister’s Office team, he said, “We must stay ahead of the game. If we talk today about the same things we talked about 10 years ago, we would have wasted 10 years of our lives, and if we deliver government services today like we did 10 years, we would have wasted 10 years of our country’s life. Staying still in today’s world is, in real terms, going backwards.”

In the Sheikh’s mind, never a day goes by without change. He sees that change is the only constant, as he has told his team: “We always need new ways of thinking and continuous improvement and innovation. Change is our way of life and everything is subject to change. We should be open to challenge our own vision and development fundamentals as time passes.”

He continued by noting that we have “to be agile and adapt to the environment around us – local, regional and global. We need to adapt to the new environment, renew our thinking and change our tools”.

The best quote I ever heard in this regard was when the Sheikh was answering a question on stage during the 2013 World Government Summit in Dubai. Someone asked when Dubai would settle and slow down. The Sheikh answered, “There is no finish line for development. We want to be one of the best nations and governments in the world. We will never rest. If we sit and do nothing, we will be exhausted!” He went on to reaffirm that we had heard him right and said my favourite quote in Arabic, “fee al raha ta’ab”, which loosely translates into “sitting down for a rest is exhausting”.

In an op-ed entitled “Innovate or Perish” in Al Bayan newspaper in 2015,[93] the Sheikh wrote that only 11% of the world’s 500 largest companies in 1955 were left today, and while the average age of companies in that 1955 list was 75, the average age of businesses in today’s rapidly changing world is only 15 years. Competition has intensified, technology has transformed our lives and societies have evolved.

The question the Sheikh posed then was would the same thinking and ethos apply to governments? Are governments aging and past their validity as a model? Is the government model, designed in the early 1900s, ageing and becoming obsolete? Sheikh Mohammed asserts, “I do not think anyone can disagree with me on the answer: Yes, governments – in their current model – are ageing, their importance, influence and relevance is diminishing, and they are being slowly pushed out of the circle of history.”

“Innovations in government are not an intellectual luxury, an administrative improvement or propaganda; innovation in governments is the secret of their survival and renewal, the secret of the renaissance of their peoples and the progress of their nations”

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

The Sheikh's position is that if the only constant is change, then the only pragmatic course of action is to be visionary and innovate. Innovation is the key ingredient for survival. The Sheikh referred to Charles Darwin's famous statement that it is not the strongest of the species nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change. "God has created us to build this land and blessed us with the intelligence, mental abilities and psychological motivation, which makes us fit and qualified for this great task. From the first industrial revolution until today, humans have progressed and achieved great development based on one 'secret' – innovation! I am surprised at some of the governments who think they are the exceptions to this rule and try to defend and maintain the status quo."

In the Sheikh's book, a 'government entrepreneur' is not an oxymoron. Why should it be? Entrepreneurship almost always involves pushing against the status quo to capture opportunities and create value, and when a new model is found, an entrepreneur takes advantage of it and moves fast.

Today, this idea of government entrepreneurship is gaining ground and more and more governments are embracing the need to innovate. They are using sensors to detect potholes in public streets, word pedometers and gamification to help students learn, harnessing behavioural economics to encourage healthy eating and crowdsourcing patent reviews. They are encouraging coders to hack governments in coding competitions and civic hackathons and competing in opening their data to the public.[94]

The Sheikh himself is entrepreneurial in his projects, ideas and positioning. Omar Al Olama, UAE Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence, talks about the vision and notes that with hindsight now, many people can see why the Sheikh insisted that Dubai Media City and Dubai Internet City were to be built together, in the same place. Today, with the changing landscape of global media, driven by tech, it is easy to see why, and how they merge seamlessly. Many of his projects pay off a decade later. Today, it is easy to explain the value of Media and Internet City, but in 2000 it was not clear to many.

The only problem that Sheikh Mohammed sees is that there are not enough government entrepreneurs. That is why he created the Mohammed bin Rashid Centre for Government Innovation. He firmly believes that without more public entrepreneurship, it's hard to imagine meeting public challenges or making the most of private sector innovation. He has put innovation firmly at the heart of the UAE's future model to survive, grow and thrive. His message to his government, and all governments around the world, is simple: innovate or perish and become irrelevant.

If we observe how the Sheikh CEO drove innovations in government, we can extract a few lessons for all public leaders. The first lesson is to listen and engage with the front line and your 'customers', be open minded to everyone's thoughts and ideas and be willing to change. The second is creating an ideas culture in which people have the confidence to ideate and innovate. Finally, and most importantly, is the implementation of ideas through the process described earlier as Sheikh Mohammed's deliverology.


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Keep The Door, And Your Mind, Open

The fuel to all the focus on innovation is ideas. Bright, fresh, crazy, new and exciting ideas. Sheikh Mohammed seeks new ideas around the clock and is insistent that good ideas come from all kinds of people, whether they are citizens, officials, employees or even children.[95] When asked about ideation and how to generate more ideas, the Sheikh told us multiple times that in many instances, the ideas he works on are not originated by him. “I just have an open door and people share with me ideas, challenges and complaints. That is why I give my number to all who ask for it. Who does not have my number in Dubai?” To him, it is the best way to get new ideas, think forward, keep your ear to the ground and your finger on the pulse. Just listen to the people (aka customers) you are serving.

Nabil Al Yousuf, the former Director General of The Executive Office, always repeats this story about the Sheikh’s feedback loops, and how he is keen to listen to everyone and everything. In 2005, Nabil was the Chairman of the Dubai Institute for Human Resources Development, and they had a conference on human resources with some distinguished global speakers reflecting on the latest thinking. Nabil attended the opening and the first two sessions, then had to leave for a meeting with the Sheikh in The Executive Office. He went back to the office around 11am, and he briefed the Chairman of The Executive Office, Mohammad Al Gergawi, about the event, who in turn asked Nabil to brief the Sheikh when he came in. When Nabil started briefing the Sheikh about the conference, his reaction was, “Yes, I know! Many of the people attending have sent me messages and updated me on the things they liked.” This is the kind of open, informal feedback system that he has built – 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

When a vision is shared, everyone becomes a part of the development and innovation process. That is what the Sheikh relies on for new idea creation.

Sheikh Mohammed learned this approach from his military days, noting, “We learned to listen to all the troops as military leaders.” After all, who has a better view and understanding of the real issue more than those on the front line?

Sheikh Mohammed has many avenues for listening and collecting ideas, starting with the traditional majlis, which is an open forum that is held weekly. Additionally, he makes a point of running specific ideas sessions, whether arranging brainstorming outings on a yacht on Dubai Creek, or more recently, leveraging technology to gather and crowdsource ideas, widen his listening net and engage more voices from the emirate and the country as a whole.

Aisha Miran, Assistant Secretary General for the Strategy Management and Governance Sector of The Executive Council, worked with the Sheikh for over 15 years, and she believes that the majlis is the Sheikh’s secret weapon for idea generation. According to her, “It is not a social gathering or a political tool, the Sheikh actively uses it to listen to feedback, gain knowledge and seek advice from the public.” It is his way of making sure he is approachable and that his door is open to anyone. He makes sure that he stays open to ideas, and he repeatedly asks, “Who does not know my number in Dubai?” His majlis and his open phone line are his way of getting ideas and first-hand feedback from people in all walks of life in Dubai, the UAE and beyond.

In addition to his traditional majlis, he uses technology (namely social media applications like Twitter) to ask specific questions and gets thousands of responses. In October 2015, he launched the Mohammed bin Rashid Smart Majlis, a smartphone app for anyone to submit comments or ideas about anything to the Sheikh.

“Our goal is to make Dubai the world’s smartest and fastest developed city, with the help of citizens, residents, visitors and Dubai fans”

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

He said, “We want to offer an opportunity for each member of the community to attend our council, provide ideas, debate and work hand in hand in the development process. The ideas are not exclusive to anyone nor do they have a specific time.”

He stressed that the goal for innovation is to improve the quality of people’s lives, adding that he would personally follow up innovative ideas that are put forward to the smart majlis.

The Sheikh said, “My role as a leader is to ‘extract’ the best ideas from our teams in the government and ensure they are delivered to improve the happiness and satisfaction of our people.”[96]

In 2017, more than 60,000 ideas were submitted to the Mohammed bin Rashid Smart Majlis. If this avenue was not enough, people can also simply walk into his office and submit an idea. Some of the great ideas that the Sheikh has delivered came from just that (The Executive Office reception desk). In one example, a woman arrived one day at the reception of The Executive Office to submit an idea. Nothing is too small, and everyone and every idea is relevant. We had a process to manage this flow, even in the pre-technology days back in

2007. As The Executive Office's strategy team, we had a process to study any idea submitted, from anyone, and assess which were worth following up with a meeting with the idea originator. The woman had a great idea about crowdsourcing philanthropic funding from Dubai to donate to the Star Foundation in the United States. The idea was good in principle, and the woman had considerable experience in this regard, but it was not a 100% fit for Dubai's context. That was fine. All ideas are welcome, and the Sheikh's office is open to all.

After an initial meeting with the idea generator and some further development, we refined a philanthropic concept note and discussed it with the Chairman. After adding a few more details, the idea landed on Sheikh Mohammed's desk. This whole process would take less than three weeks. The Sheikh studied it, asked some tough questions about the operating model and beneficiaries, then ordered three main elements be firmed up and detailed. First, he wanted it to be called Dubai Cares and to engage all of Dubai's society. Second, he wanted the beneficiaries to be global and inclusive of anyone who needs the support, irrespective of location, ethnicity or background. Third, he wanted to lead it himself and he wanted his children to take an active part in raising the funds.

Dubai Cares was born on the 19th of September 2007. The Sheikh personally led the fundraising and started the initiative off with millions of dollars in the pot. Since its inception, Dubai Cares, now part of the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives, has been working towards providing access to quality education for children and young people in developing countries through programmes designed to be integrated, impactful, sustainable and scalable. The UAE-based global philanthropic organisation has successfully reached more than 18 million beneficiaries in 53 developing countries through its education programmes. This is one lesson that demonstrates how the Sheikh thinks of new ideas. They can come from anywhere, so keep the door and your mind open and, once you find them, act fast. The lady who walked in the office with this idea was recruited to be part of the leadership team for Dubai Cares and she saw her initial idea progress from a piece of paper to a global impact.

Not only does the Sheikh listen and gather ideas, he is also willing and open to changing his views should he hear something more convincing. The Sheikh always approaches listening with an open mind. He is not a leader who feels he is above the rest.

When I worked in a professional services firm many years after I left my role at The Executive Office, we used to run courses to teach this open-minded, critical-thinking approach to our consultants. We called it the 1% rule: always – no matter how clever you are, how much research you have done and how confident you are in your data – keep in mind that there is a 1% chance that you might be wrong. Always listen with an open mind. This is exactly how the Sheikh CEO's mind works. He is always open to that 1% and willing to listen and be convinced.

In fact, he proactively seeks this kind of input. I remember one of my earliest meetings in The Executive Office with Sheikh Mohammed. I was nervous and was not sure how to act in a meeting where the Sheikh was sitting at the table. It surprised me to experience a relaxed and personal session. Even then, I was not comfortable enough to just jump in with ideas and comments. The presentation was being conducted by our Chairman and I was listening and taking notes. I had a comment that I wanted to add to the discussion, but I was new and did not want to rock the boat, so I decided to keep quiet. I guess my body language betrayed me and it seemed that I shifted in my seat and had something on my mind. Out of nowhere the Sheikh made eye contact with me and asked, "What's on your mind?" I shared my thought. He agreed and asked for us to integrate that idea in the work, and then our Chairman continued the presentation. For me, that set the tone for how ideation runs in Dubai for the coming 10 years.

Nurture An Ideas Culture

“In order to produce genuine, meaningful, beneficial change, creativity must become an established culture with integrated systems. There is a saying that you cannot discover new oceans if you lack the courage to lose sight of the shore,” Sheikh Mohammed wrote in his book My Vision. “To all creative minds, I say: you will always find someone who will fight your ideas. This will be the first indication that you are on the right track.”

Sheikh Mohammed knows that to get the best ideas, he must create the right environment where creativity is part of the culture and failure is accepted. He makes it a point to note that having systems, structures and performance measures is not – and should not – be a counter to creative culture: “We do monitor and we monitor closely. We have performance indicators for each minister, we read internal reports, external reviews and we follow up on all gaps and shortcomings. We also have other forms of inputs like our service-focused mystery shoppers in government. However, that does not mean that we punish mistakes! In fact, we see unintentional mistakes as learning opportunities. I say to each minister, ‘You do your best, plan well and work hard. If you make mistakes, no issues. A lesson (or more) is learned.’ We like that. When you make mistakes, you learn. You grow stronger.”

Dr Antonella Mei-Pochtler, Senior Partner at a global management consulting firm, talks about failure as a key ingredient for innovation leadership. “In the innovation process, you need to have leadership that fosters diversity and unconventional thinking and also puts the team together in a way that you have complementary capabilities. It is a leadership that creates room for failure and has a constructive way of dealing with failure.”[97]

In Sheikh Mohammed's book, failure is not an option and not an acceptable final outcome. When failure occurs, he urges his team to handle it as a natural part of the development process and a great learning opportunity. Journalist Turki Aldahkil wrote, "Mohammed bin Rashid is a leader who is not afraid to fail. He tries to avoid failing, but it does not worry him. What he refuses to accept is repeated failure and insists on learning from mistakes. He gets upset when others do not learn from their mistakes and from his own mistakes."[98] In fact, he always reminds his team that "failure is not falling to the ground; it is remaining there once you have fallen, and the greatest failure is when you decide not to stand up again."

"To take risks and fail is not a failure. Real failure is to fear taking any risk"

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

The Sheikh fully accepts that for a vision to become a reality, his whole team has to be creative and innovative, and hence he sees his role as creating the right space and environment for them to come up with their ideas, test them and – sometimes – fail. He sees himself as the curator of this 'safe-fail space'.

But it is also not good enough to accept failure at face value. In fact, Sheikh Mohammed does not like the word 'failure' and prefers to call it a 'lesson'. To him, it is key for anyone who fails to analyse what happened, what were the symptoms and the root causes, and how it can be avoided in the future. Each failure today is a lesson for better management tomorrow.

While fail fast, learn and adapt might be an oft-preached mantra when talking about innovation culture, putting the learning part into practise is what can differentiate a true leader from a mediocre one. Only by delving into a detailed learning and reflection process can one achieve a positive return on failure. Extracting the learnings from failure can be a complex and emotionally exhausting process for employees and leadership alike.

The Sheikh also knows that his role is not to come up with the ideas himself, but to make sure he curates all the right conditions for the people around him to do so. Indeed, in the Sheikh CEO’s style, innovation leadership does not necessarily mean to be creative and innovative yourself, but to understand how to lead innovative people, how to crowdsource ideas and how to motivate creative people to join your vision.

To lead innovative people, the Sheikh maintains that you must create an environment in which entrepreneurial minds feel empowered to push boundaries, are outspoken and give feedback to the top. He has repeatedly said, “The best ideas come from foot soldiers, not the generals.”

One way of curating that space is by setting a fine balance between direction and a set course. A leader must ensure clarity of purpose and the deliverables so the directional strategy of ‘where we want to go’ is clear. However, he should not prescribe the ‘how to get there’. Instead of defining every single step along the process, leaders should set the focus on the outcome. The power of clear and inspirational vision is that it will motivate creativity.

While he is a man of few words, he manages to give clear and quick feedback to set the course and direction. His style in this respect is very different – almost contrarian – to everyone around him. When he is listening to a new project that you are pitching to him, you can never read his face. He is a deep reflective thinker and does not give you gestures or facial or body language to give you feedback while you are presenting. At the end, he gives a few words, either to propel you forward quickly, or change the direction and give you a clear position and orientation. Omar Al Olama, UAE Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence, tells a story that sheds light on his feedback style. He recalls that one day he and his team were pitching a new initiative. When they finished, Sheikh Mohammed shared his thoughts in a few sentences, saying, “Each one of us is responsible for the seat we sit on; and initiatives must not only target impact, but we need sustainable, long-term impact. Please keep this in mind for the future.” Then he added, “My goal is for the UAE to become a laboratory and an incubator of minds and the reference for future thinking. What you are doing is good, but does it fulfil these goals?” Later on that day, the team sat together and debated how to manage this feedback. Some took it as an indicative approval of the project, with a need for some improvements. Others considered it a rejection of the idea. What the Sheikh was doing was neither. According to Omar, he “pushed us to become our own devil’s advocates. We went away, re-thought our work and got out of the box, the new design for the project was, in my view, a hundred times better. He never said go work day and night, but we did. He did not order us, he inspired us, and gave us a clearer direction and very clear criteria with which to assess our work. We did work day and night, and our goal was to impress him and deliver his vision. He has a powerful way of motivating us and making each one of us feel we want to be part of his vision, his projects and his legacy.”

Change Or Be Changed

In his book My Vision, Sheikh Mohammed addressed the whole Middle East region and urged them to take chances, build on the energy of their youth and open their markets for the private sector to flourish. He called for boldness, courage and self-reliance, away from dependence on natural resources and development aid.

In 2004, he gave a talk at the Arabian Gulf University in Bahrain with a message to all Arab leaders about the future of the Arab world: “People are clever. You can deceive some of the people some of the time, but today, the world of media and communication has changed. You can’t control it or control the messages and information. Digital media has given a new voice and power to society and mainly the youth. The world is changing. People want a decent life. I am not a judge of governments, but their own people will judge them. Change or be changed.”

Those days, while growth was racing ahead in most countries in the Middle East, challenges were appearing and the youth bulge was higher than in other parts of the world. Reports from international organisations like the World Bank and others noted that the MENA region needed to create 100 million jobs by 2020, or unemployment across the region’s youth would be in double digits. Few heeded the warning. Most governments did not embark on any active or bold reforms to open up their economies, create jobs and modernise their systems. They simply continued to manage in the same way they managed their societies 10, 20, even 30 years ago. They did not change. It was inconvenient and upsets the status quo with its entrenched stakeholders. Unemployment did rise, and quickly. In 2011, the region’s youth shocked the whole world in what became known as the ‘Arab Spring’, but could more aptly be described as a ‘youth-quake’.

Almost a decade later, many of the leaders Sheikh Mohammed addressed in his talk back in 2004 were in fact changed as an outcome of the Arab Spring. They were changed based on the popular demand of their own people, whom they failed. Whatever the political outcomes of the historic events of 2011 will be, it must not be forgotten that these did not start as ideological revolutions, despite some emerging governments being ideologically inclined. These were also not revolutions orchestrated by charismatic leaders with a set agenda or a unified vision. These were uprisings against stolen futures – a loss of hope for a better tomorrow.

Young and old people alike reached a tipping point – one that was built on broken government promises and on institutionalised and widespread corruption at various levels across all sectors. The Sheikh foresaw this result and warned the region's leaders: change or be changed.

This thinking is central to his decision-making process and something he never fails to remind himself and his team. In August 2018, he posted several tweets with the hashtag #Life_taught_me and reinforced the same message he carried forward over two decades.[99]

“Life has taught me that political discourse in our Arab world is a waste of time, a corruption of morals, a waste of resources. Whoever wants to accomplish something for his people should work in his backyard. History is the witness. Either great achievements speak for themselves or [you get] hollow speeches with meaningless words.

“We have a surplus of politicians in the Arab world and a shortage of managers. Our crisis is a managerial one, not one of resources. Look at what China and Japan accomplished without having natural resources, [while] countries rich with oil, gas, water and human labour lack development. Some of them can't even provide basic services such as road infrastructure and electricity for their people.

“A politician’s job is to make the lives of people easier, to solve crises instead of creating them and to build achievements instead of destroying them.”

The Sheikh’s approach to development is analogous to that accredited to the American political scientist Henry Kissinger, often referred to by commentators as ‘Realpolitik’ – an approach to politics or diplomacy based primarily on considering the given circumstances, rather than explicit ideological notions. Often simply referred to as ‘pragmatism’ in politics, the term ‘Realpolitik’ was coined by Ludwig von Rochau, a German writer and politician in the 19th century, but had its origins in the works of great thinkers like Sun Tzu and Ibn Khaldun.

Sheikh Mohammed is convinced that pragmatic and visionary leadership, followed up by delivering results, is the answer to regional development. Almost 14 years after the publication of My Vision, he repeated his call for change, with the same message. On the 4th of August 2018, he tweeted, “Life has taught me that there is only one measure for true achievement and authentic leadership: the results that people see in their daily lives, not speeches and plans. Our region is home to more than 200 million young people. We have the opportunity to inspire them with hope and to direct their energies towards improving their lives and the lives of those around them. If we fail, we will abandon them to emptiness, unemployment and the malicious ideologies of terrorism.”

This change the Sheikh talks about is not only a change of mentality, it is also structural. When circumstances change, a great leader is able to learn, adapt and change how he thinks, how his teams operate and the structures that are around him.

Since 2015, our world entered into a digital future that is undeniable to anyone. One that the founder of the World Economic Forum, Professor Klaus Schwab, called the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Governments needed to change and think about how to leverage technology to build government 4.0. In parallel, the youth bulge in Arab societies has reached its peak, with over 60% of the Arab population under the age of 30. These are mega trends that will shape the coming decade (and more) in our lives.

The Sheikh CEO knew it was time to change. In February 2016, Sheikh Mohammed announced a major change in the UAE Federal Government structures. He set up new ministries for tolerance, happiness and wellbeing, artificial intelligence and the future, and appointed a 22 year-old woman as Minister of State for Youth Affairs. Some commentators admired the changes, others found them strange, while a third group dismissed them as a PR stunt. The Sheikh responded that change is essential for survival and it should come from within.

“Change or you will be changed: leaders who neglect the good of their people will be forsaken. Leadership is a service, not a gateway to privilege”

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His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

His message was clear: “ because they are fashionable; we are doing them because they are critical to surviving and thriving in the coming era. We are being pragmatic and responding to the changing nature of our world, our society and our competitive position."

The Sheikh explained that we change when change is needed, but we change forward, rather than reacting under pressure. "We made these changes because we learned a lot of lessons in the past five years. We learned lessons from events in the Middle East – mostly led by youth. We learned from lessons in our history and we learned from the various efforts of our teams in trying to look forward.

"We learned that by being rigid and not responding to the changing needs and aspirations of our youth, we would be swimming against the tide. Our region is 60% youth and they are a different generation. They have rising aspirations and if we turn our back to them and enforce upon them our old models, we will be dismantling our development model and robbing them of the most important asset: hope for a better future."

The Customer Is King

Sheikh Mohammed's pragmatic leadership style places the citizen (customer) firmly at the centre. The customer is king. Nabil Al Yousuf, the former Director General of The Executive Office, found that this impact and customer focus touched him personally when he first heard it. He recalls that in 2004, the team was sitting in the Sheikh's majlis in The Executive Office and Sheikh Mohammed started talking to the whole team and outlining how he saw their role. Nabil said, "We expected a talk about delivering projects, strategy and our plans. Instead, he simply talked about impact and kept repeating in many different ways that our role is to make a real, positive impact on people's lives. His real driver and motivation were all about serving the people and improving their wellbeing. That is actually what he gets excited about the most."

In the early days of government modernisation in Dubai, this concept became central to the Sheikh. He wanted to make it clear to all government leaders and staff that there is only one measure of success: customer satisfaction.

When he launched the mobile government strategy in 2013, he said he wanted his customers to have access to government services 24/7. Customer-centricity is key and little else matters to Sheikh Mohammed when it comes to measuring government performance.

Between 1997 and 2000, the term itself was not even accepted in the government sector. The culture was that of any bureaucratic government, which worked with a focus on their policies and procedures. The citizens they dealt with were beneficiaries of the services they provided. Beneficiaries are not the same as customers; they are recipients of services that governments can deliver on their own terms. Beneficiaries should be grateful, not satisfied. Beneficiaries follow the rules and procedures, they do not demand better services and give feedback.

The Sheikh took it upon himself to change this culture, and he launched the Dubai Government Customer Satisfaction Survey. This was essentially a basic customer satisfaction survey, based on the four points of access, quality, time and general satisfaction.

Something out of a private sector business handbook, it should have been fairly easy to administer. He wanted to ask the people living and working in Dubai what they thought about the services the government offers, and he wanted the people to give feedback on service accessibility, quality, timeliness and the overall feel and attitude of service delivery.

However, many government departments resisted the idea, claiming that they did not have ‘customers’. They were doing government work which couldn’t be measured simply by how good their services were. In fact, some departments, like the police, spoke out publicly to question how a police station could be measured by the satisfaction of criminals and speeding drivers. Surely their services would never get a good rating. Fast forward to 2013, over a decade later, and resistance had changed to pride, buy-in and a constant search of improvement. The then Chief of Dubai Police, Lt Gen Dhahi Khalfan Tamim, proudly publicised on Twitter that Dubai Police had achieved 90.2% customer satisfaction.

This transformation was not only in the police, it was across Dubai Government. Every single department thought theirs was a special case and the private sector concept of customer satisfaction did not apply to them. They all stated their case in meetings with the Sheikh in his majlis. But a decade later, they have moved from being naysayers to being believers and supporters of this customer-centric view of government services.

The Sheikh used many tools and techniques to change their mindset. For a start, he consistently reinforced his message that customers matter. He repeated that "the only real measure of success in government is customer satisfaction". He asked his team to take the customer surveys and put them on a scale so that each government department could be ranked by a score out of 100. Then he told the departments that there would be an annual awards ceremony to recognise the best performer, with a big celebration on stage and a cash prize to the teams involved.

That was the first step, and the Sheikh's use of such awards to motivate, recognise and mobilise has become well known over the years. He has always known that competition and recognition are major motivators and key management levers to change behaviour.

But there was also a twist in this measurement and award programme – it was not optional.

This is another great tool deployed by the Sheikh to say that having satisfied customers is not an option or a luxury; it is at the heart of what the government does. So the competition was mandatory for all government departments to join, and may the best department win.

A few years into the programme, a number of departments complained that they had no chance of winning against much larger departments with greater resources. So the Sheikh introduced a new award category for 'most improved' service, challenging departments to compete with their past performance as well as against each other. The department that made the most visible improvement in its ranking is a winner, just like the one that sits at the top of the league table – and yes, there was a league table, with the winners announced and celebrated every year.

But alongside the incentive was accountability.

Mohammad Al Gergawi, UAE Minister of Cabinet Affairs and the Future and Chairman of The Executive Office, recalls how in 1998, Sheikh Mohammed had launched the initiative, now known as the Dubai Government Excellence Program, and assigned him to coordinate it, stipulating that the annual achievement event that year be held at his grandfather's house, the Sheikh Saeed Al Maktoum House, in Al Shindagha. During the event, those who achieved top ranks were honoured, but at the end of the ceremony, the Sheikh decided to be fully transparent and announce every department's ranking, starting from the bottom of the list.

"Government is not an authority over the people, it is an authority for the people, and its main measure of success is the satisfaction and wellbeing of the people"

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"I think it was a historic moment in government administration," Al Gergawi said. "Sheikh Mohammed continued for four years to announce the results in that fashion. The outcome was a total change in the process and mentality in managing government performance and much more focus on customer care and satisfaction. Departments who were at the bottom, like the Dubai Land Department, improved so much that they are today among the best departments in terms of performance. The Civil Defence, which also featured at the bottom of the list, is today one of the world's finest." He continued, "The Sheikh's decision was an unexpected shock, and over 20 years it has transformed the concept of quality and excellence in government. He then transferred this experience to the UAE Federal Government, and today we are helping other governments, such as Egypt and Jordan, to follow in these footsteps. The Arab Organization for Administrative Development has also expressed its desire to implement this system at a regional level in the Arab world."[102] In 2019, a pan-Arab government excellence award was launched in the Arab League, in Cairo, by Sheikh Mohammed. From the UAE to the Arab world. Change or be changed.

I have vivid memories of those event ceremonies. We used to prepare for them and sit in anticipation to see what the Sheikh CEO would do next. At that notable event Al Gergawi referred to, Sheikh Mohammed said, "We celebrate winners every year, but what is equally important for us is that those at the bottom move up." Reading the list from the bottom up was an unbelievably interesting tool. While the list was being read aloud from bottom to top in an auditorium of more than 500 people; you could hear a pin drop. The full line-up of government department leaders would be sitting in the front row, live on television. They would feel the heat when the Sheikh started to read the list, one by one. With each department name, the television cameras would zoom in on the leader's face. If there was ever a message about how important the customer is to the Sheikh, that was it. Performance matters, accountability is personal, the customer is king, and… change or be changed.

The main thrust of these actions was to motivate these leaders to move ahead and improve their department's performance or move out of the way. That indeed was the outcome. Over three years from starting this tactic, some leaders from the bottom of the list moved away, while others made a great leap, with one department rising to the top four positions in less than three years. The culture was akin to how some of the leading management consulting firms in the world manage their own resources: up or out, with the measure being customer satisfaction. Results, not reports.

In 2016, this thinking was institutionalised by leveraging the latest technologies. The UAE launched the Happiness Meter across all government departments and services. The Happiness Meter measures the public's happiness and satisfaction in government services on a daily basis. Using electronic devices connected to a central network, the Happiness Meter asks customers to express their happiness and satisfaction through a simple choice of three sentiments – happy, neutral or unhappy. The smart application sends daily reports to decision-makers that enable them to monitor performance by department and geographical area. Sheikh Mohammed explained, "Preparing annual or quarterly reports to measure the happiness and satisfaction of the public does not meet our ambitions because today the world is transforming very fast and people's expectations too are changing rapidly. Therefore, government services must be monitored on a daily basis."

He was clear that this is not simply a new system, but a way of life for his institutions. "The ultimate goal of all our initiatives is to make people happy and make their lives simpler by reducing the time and effort it takes to complete government services. Through the new initiative, we seek to measure everything related to government services and follow them on a daily basis. While at this stage the initiative is starting with government departments, eventually the private sector should also be included in the programme to improve the life of citizens and residents in Dubai to the highest standards. It will also enable visitors instantly to assess the experience of their visit to Dubai."[103]

This customer-centric doctrine fostered, over many years, a culture of high performance that has driven Dubai Government to new heights. Their leader continually reminds departments that, "What is more important than the government services themselves is the way they are delivered. What is more important than the number of services and transactions delivered is customer satisfaction."

Sheikh Mohammed is clear about the critical nature of this customer focus. "Experience has taught us that the difference between a successful government and a failed one is the number of obstacles and the amount of red tape it develops and deploys when creating and delivering public value."[104]

As Prime Minister of the UAE, Sheikh Mohammed has always had a sophisticated system for measuring government performance – a system that is informed by globally accepted best practice and well-designed key performance indicators, including the important economic indicator, GDP.

However, and on many occasions, the Sheikh has said that GDP is a good indicator of a society's economic development, but it only gives a rough indication. It doesn't really reflect the standard of living. It is necessary, but insufficient, to measure GDP. GDP measures what is produced and offered to the market, but it does not measure levels of health and education, leisure time, environmental quality or activities conducted outside of trade, such as being a carer. It includes how much we spend on things like medicine, but it does not capture a walk in the desert or an hour of meditation. To him, this felt like a strange way to assess people's health, let alone improve it. In certain cases, it was not clear that a rise in GDP is even a good thing. If a city is wrecked by a hurricane and then experiences a surge of construction activity as it rebuilds, GDP goes up. If people lead an unhealthy life and need excessive medical care, GDP goes up.

The age-old saying goes that money cannot buy happiness. In this context, the Sheikh is adamant that GDP does not fully measure wellbeing. He has pondered publicly and openly the core objective of his role as Prime Minister and decided he wants more focus on wellbeing. Instead of introducing another policy framework, he put the matter in the spotlight, front and centre of his government. In 2017, he appointed Ohood Al Roumi as the world's first Minister of State for Happiness and Wellbeing, giving her the chance to bring these questions to the forefront of the policy agenda. Government, in his mind, should not work to deliver abstract growth measures like GDP, but should really focus its efforts on the wellbeing of its citizens (customers). The citizen is the ultimate customer of the government, and hence his/her satisfaction, happiness and wellbeing are the ultimate measures.

This focus on the needs of the customer has been central to how the Sheikh designed government policies, free zones, infrastructure and more. It is also central to how Dubai emerged as a tourism destination in the region.

Talking to his government team in Dubai in 2003, Sheikh Mohammed spoke of the opportunity that Dubai had in terms of growing its tourism sector. With sun, sea and great desert safaris, the government was mandated to focus on tourism to reach new levels. At the time, Dubai was attracting fewer than 6 million tourists per year. The Sheikh said this number should at least be doubled. He held a meeting with government officials to discuss the policies required to achieve it.

His first few words captured his approach. Instead of citing macro goals, announcing mega developments and making big statements, his words were very specific. We must focus on three categories of jobs in Dubai to make tourism a success. These jobs are the ones that will shape a large part of the customer (tourist) experience. “First impressions last, and you do not get a second chance to make a first impression. We need to make sure three people in Dubai are always ready to start the tourist’s journey in the right way: the immigration and customs officers at the port of entry, the taxi driver and the hotel receptionist.”

He had mapped the customer journey, identified touch points and focused on the customer. He knew that this is what shapes a customer experience, and he was starting his tourism plans with these moments in mind. This approach has been documented in the private sector, and perfected by companies like Procter & Gamble and others, as described in Scandinavian Airline’s CEO, Jan Carlzon’s book Moments of Truth.

The Sheikh’s customer focus is not only based on systems and strategies; it is personal and intuitive. In September 2014, Chinese company Nu Skin[105] announced that it was flying in 16,000 of its employees from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau to Dubai for a corporate trip. More than 200 flights were booked for the outing, including two chartered Emirates planes, while more than 40 hotels and 409 buses were required. The visitors arrived in overlapping groups of about 2,000 people at a time, and the visit aimed to reward their top sales leaders in the Greater China region. Dubai bid for the jaunt in October 2012, competing against other cities, including Seoul, Macau and Singapore, to play host.[106]

While you might expect another host to hold a formal welcome with a speech by the mayor, Dubai simply welcomed the visitors by letting them enjoy what the city had to offer. Instead of a formal welcome, Sheikh Mohammed jumped in his car and joined them as they browsed the souk, personally welcoming them and taking part in selfies.

This is the Sheikh's personal approach to customer focus. Customer experience drives business and studies show that a happy customer informs five others. The Sheikh knows that, and he genuinely believes in this doctrine, always noting that, "What's good for business is good for Dubai."

Lessons In Leadership

Innovate or perish. Opportunities are made, they do not come to you. However, to innovate, you need to get of your comfort zone and ‘out of the box’. This can’t happen if you are trying to innovate by sitting in the same office, talking to the same people, attending the same workshops and trying to improve the status quo. Be bold; talk to people you never talked to before. You can’t solve new problems with the same minds and tools that created them. Dedicate part of your week to look at, and think of, non-traditional things.

Customer-centricity is key. Listen to customers or citizens and design your offerings based on their needs. Listen to anyone you are serving. At one point, Jaguar (a United Kingdom-based auto manufacturer) added a line to the pay slip of every employee so (s)he could read it when getting their pay cheque at the end of the month: “A satisfied customer made this possible”. Never forget that the only true measure of success is customer satisfaction.

Invest in ideas that will make your work obsolete or redundant. Never forget that organisations (and leaders) who fail to innovate do not get weaker or live a stagnant life – they perish. Create new models that will make your current models obsolete.

Learn something new every day. Learning was always a leader’s main focus, but the pace has increased in today’s digital age. Lifelong learning should become a daily habit, like going to the gym. A leader must challenge himself every day and must never stop learning. At the end of each day, ask yourself, what new skill have I learned today? What new knowledge did I add?

Keep an open mind and never stop listening. Listen to people who criticise you and show you the shortcomings before the people who praise you. Never believe you are 100% right. There is always, in any situation in life, a 1% chance that you are wrong. Keep that in mind and never stop listening to feedback and searching for ways to improve your thinking and mindset.

Never say never. In the age of constant and rapid change, the only pragmatic course of action is to innovate and be agile. Be an idealist and reach for the stars, but always stay open. In a fast-changing world, agility and pragmatism will be a core strength. Keep in mind that it was never the strongest species that survived throughout history. It was the most agile and the fastest to adapt to change.

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Chapter 5

Surround yourself with strong leaders

A Talent Obsession

The Sheikh CEO takes a personal, and very keen, interest in developing human capital overall, and future leaders in particular. Those marked for potential future leadership do not get an easy ride. While he opens doors for them and gives them great power, with that comes great responsibility. He pushes them to compete and achieve their full potential. He also makes sure he gains their respect, as he knows that there is no true leadership without genuine followership.

The American journalist Walter Lippmann once said that the ultimate test of a leader is that he leaves behind him in other men and women the conviction and will to carry on. This is a key element of Sheikh Mohammed's legacy and a key lesson he learned from his father. It is something that those in the top 1% of truly successful leaders have in common. They know that acquiring talent and developing people to become leaders is one of their most important tasks. At the end of the day, systems become outdated, buildings deteriorate and machinery wears, but people are an asset that truly appreciates.[107] In fact, the success of some of the world's most competitive nations like Singapore, South Korea, Germany and the United States can be attributed – in large part – to planning for and investing in human capital. They dealt with human capital development as a national strategy. Professor Klaus Schwab, Founder and Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum, noted in 2017 that "managing the transition towards deeper investment in human potential within the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution is one of the most important political, societal, economic and moral challenges we are facing today".

As much as the world talks about leadership development, the top political, government and corporate leaders have been found, in practise, to pay insufficient attention to identifying, recruiting and selecting future talent. As a result, they usually end up promoting candidates already working in the organisation to take over its leadership.[108] Not the Sheikh CEO, however, who walks the talk in this regard and makes doubly sure that all his team do the same.

The Sheikh has a unique and enviable eye for talent spotting. He is constantly seeking young prodigies at all levels and is keen to maintain a second and third in line in any organisation. He sees it as a critical competitive advantage, a key part of business continuity and an essential part of agility in decision-making. In a hierarchy, the leader at the top receives all the information and makes the decisions. However, when there is a crisis or an unexpected event and the system is under stress, hierarchies can be unresponsive – even dangerously dysfunctional – should decision-making bottlenecks form at the top. Entities risk paralysis when faced with strategic shock, and the world today is too complex and changing too quickly for those at the top to have all the answers. Acknowledging this, the Sheikh always surrounds himself with capable leaders (a second line) and is always on the look out for the next generation of young leaders (a third line).

“A true leader is one who creates a favourable environment to bring out the energy and ability of his team. A great leader creates more great leaders and does not reduce the institution to a single person”

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

Omar Al Olama, the world’s first Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence, recalls that when he joined the Ministry of Cabinet Affairs and the Future, he wanted to make a real impact and had high ambitions. However, “I never assumed going in as a junior employee that I would ever interact with His Highness. I used to work on projects that would be submitted to my manager, who in turn presented them to the Chairman, who would take them to the Sheikh. There was no way for me to think he knew that I was doing part of that work. However, one day, after I became Minister of State, I was giving a presentation to the Council of Ministers on the UAE Artificial Intelligence Strategy, and when I was done, the Sheikh followed up with a question and some positive comments. Then he took my hand and said to all the Ministers, ‘We took Omar in, we taught him, we looked after him, we nurtured him and I personally watched him work, from his early days at Rashid School to the scholarship he won and the projects he worked on in the Ministry of Cabinet Affairs. Once I saw his results and outcomes, we empowered him’.” Omar said he got goosebumps at that moment. The Sheikh not only knew about his work today, but he had known what he was doing for some time. “I was amazed how much he knew about me. I am confident now that he has system for spotting talent and investing in it in a very inspiring and structured way.”

Not only does Sheikh Mohammed choose his team carefully, but he encourages them to develop their own team and nurture young leaders under them as well. The Sheikh is very clear on this direction and insists it is at the heart of the challenges we see in the Arab world. In his book My Vision, he notes that “today’s Arab crisis is not one of money, men, morale, land or resources... The real crisis is rather one of leadership and management”.

Forward-looking situational leadership

In addition to hiring top talent, the Sheikh CEO has effective ways to get the best from his people. He gives ownership, holds people personally accountable and leads by example. He rewards and celebrates success and encourages learning. He also pushes his team, altering his behaviour depending on the situation.

The most suitable way to describe the Sheikh's approach is by using situational leadership theory, which distinguishes successful leaders by their skills in altering their behaviour according to 'follower readiness'.

The theory focuses on two independent behaviour dimensions: directive, or task, behaviour and supportive, or relationship, behaviour.

Directive behaviour is used to describe a situation in which the leader spells out the duties and responsibilities of a group. It includes telling people what to do, how to do it, when to do it, where to do it and who is to do it.

Supportive behaviour, on the other hand, is where the leader uses two-way or multi-way communication. It revolves around listening and facilitating other practices that support people in their efforts.

Sheikh Mohammed adapts his style and behaviour to the situation by assessing the readiness of his team, which he measures as a combination of the ability and willingness of the person to accomplish a task.

When his team members are not ready to manage a certain situation, he simply directs them and tells them what to do. This also applies when they are unable, don’t know how or are unwilling to manage the situation. In such cases, he would give them specific instructions and closely monitor their performance.

In 2018, when the cost of doing business was diminishing Dubai’s competitiveness and many government departments were unwilling to reduce their fees, the Sheikh simply issued a decree which banned all of them from any fee increases for three years. Many departments protested and presented plans they had put in place that depended on increasing fees. But he was the only one who had the full picture. He simply told them what to do and he froze the fees.

“I want my team members and Dubai’s future leaders to be brave and ambitious and keep their mindset positive. I want the same thing for my children and theirs, the future leaders of Dubai”

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

At the other extreme from this directive style is the supportive style, which he demonstrated in 2001, when working towards the Dubai 2010 Vision. He outlined an overall vision with a list of opportunities for Dubai and challenges to be overcome. He generated positive energy among Dubai’s nationals and residents and got everyone working at an elevated pace. He told the teams what could be achieved and continually encouraged them to pursue that vision, although he never told them how to achieve it or gave specific directions. From building the tallest tower in the world to creating the world's most recognisable man-made island, the Sheikh coached his teams into high performance.

The final style used by the Sheikh is delegating, whereby he assigns work and full responsibility to one of his trusted advisors or executives. He is able to do this given the quality of people around him and the investment he makes in his people. In fact, probably one of the key secrets for the Sheikh's success is surrounding himself with a 'cabinet of talent'.

The Sheikh once explained why it is so crucial to delegate responsibility and ownership of a project to those charged with managing it. "That way, the onus is on them to make it a success, and they rarely fail to live up to it," he said. He also pushes them to stretch boundaries. If one of his team presents a plan unworthy of Dubai's ambition, he responds, "Would you wait until history writes about us? Let's make history ourselves!"[109]

His motto is, "Enable your team members and they will deliver, respect them and they will respect you, show them love and they will in return, strengthen them and they will be your strength, appreciate them and they will appreciate you; lead them under these conditions and they will follow you to the ends of the Earth."[110] Is there a simpler formula for leadership?

Nurturing Talent Locally And Internationally

The Sheikh is single-minded about attracting global talent to Dubai. He has said, "The United States leads the rest of the world in so many areas because of its openness and its ability to attract the best minds from around the globe."[111] He works tirelessly to attract the right talent to Dubai and halt the region's brain drain.

In 2014, he wrote an op-ed published on the professional networking platform LinkedIn.[112] He recalled that when he was studying at the Mons Officer Cadet School in the United Kingdom in 1968, he visited a hospital where he met a doctor who spoke fluent Arabic. The doctor was new to the United Kingdom and the Sheikh asked him if he intended to stay long or return home. The doctor replied with an Arabic saying that translates as, "My home is where I can make a living." To the Sheikh, this was a classic example of the loss of talent that has afflicted developing countries for decades.

He wrote, "These countries spend scarce resources educating doctors, engineers and scientists in the hope that they will become engines of prosperity. Then we watch with dismay as they migrate to the West, taking with them the promise of their talent." It has always been clear that without opportunity, talent gravitates to the bright lights of the West. Indeed, in 2014, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) noted that migration for work to the OECD countries has risen by one-third since 2000.[113] However, in the same year, a study by LinkedIn measured the net international movement of talent among its members. Topping the list as a destination attracting talent was the UAE, with a net talent gain of 1.3% of the workforce in 2013.

The Sheikh concluded his article with a few sentences that summarised how he truly feels: “To make this work, we must believe in people. Human beings – their ideas, innovations, dreams and connections – are the capital of the future. In this sense, the ‘brain regain’ is not so much an achievement in itself as it is a leading indicator of development because where great minds go today, great things will happen tomorrow.”

Hand in hand with welcoming international talent, the Sheikh puts a major focus on nurturing local leaders. In 2015, Abdulrahman Al Rashed, the former General Manager of Al Arabiya news channel, wrote a piece which tried to decrypt Dubai’s secret. He noted that in one of his various interviews, he recorded one contributor’s confident claim: “The secret behind Dubai’s success is in its foreign management and the willingness of the government to commission non-citizens to lead the huge projects in the emirate.” Abdulrahman investigated further and found out that this was not true.

In Dubai, there is an intense fervour to employ UAE nationals, but at the same time, it keeps the door open to creative and capable candidates from all nationalities. Most of Dubai’s big business figures are Emiratis. Those who deal directly with Dubai’s government institutions know this truth.[114] In fact, spotting and nurturing Emirati talent is one of the Sheikh’s best skills and the area he seems to enjoy the most in his work.

One of my favourite examples is how the Sheikh spotted Mohammad Al Gergawi, who rose from a junior government official in Dubai to become the Chairman of The Executive Office and Minister of Cabinet Affairs and the Future for the UAE Federal Government. In the 1990s, Sheikh Mohammed used a mystery-shopper system to gain feedback on the quality of government services. These mystery shoppers would report on service issues, challenges and good performance, and they would also spot hard-working civil servants. The Sheikh wanted to know about good experiences as much as he wanted to know the bad and mediocre.

The mystery shoppers began to bring in reports of a certain civil servant, a young man in his late 20s, who worked in the Department of Economic Development as Director of Business Registration. The young man's name was Mohammad Al Gergawi. He would go the extra mile in his work, interacting with people trying to set up a business in Dubai, not from behind a window, but sitting with them on the waiting room benches, asking for their feedback, helping them find the right forms and simply being there for support. He would fill out forms to help elderly people who did not know how to read or write and escort them to the proper counter. He did the same for anyone who arrived looking confused, sometimes offering cups of tea.

"The greatest accomplishment of leadership is not measured in monetary targets, but rather in the positive impact the leader has on his or her people"

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

One of the clients he helped was a man named Moaded. Unbeknownst to Al Gergawi, Moaded was a member of Sheikh Mohammed's team of mystery shoppers. A few years later, Al Gergawi was offered a job in the private sector, which paid nearly triple his salary, and he submitted his resignation. When the Sheikh heard about it, he made him an offer he could not refuse. He promoted him to Deputy Director of the Dubai Department of Economic Development, the number two job in the department. Not only that, the Sheikh CEO signed the offer letter himself. Soon after, Al Gergawi moved on to set up and chair The Executive Office, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Just like he spotted and nurtured Al Gergawi, he spotted others like Mohamed Alabbar, Chairman of Emaar Properties, Founder of noon.com and former Director General of the Dubai Economic Development Department, and Sultan bin Sulayem, Group Chairman and CEO of DP World, among others. In addition to being enterprising, these Sheikh’s men are astute about the world at large and are unafraid to venture into the unknown.

He is always on the lookout for new leaders, and he has his own ways, both formal and systematic, and informal and personal. When we were establishing the Dubai School of Government (now the Mohammed bin Rashid School of Government) back in 2006, we ran a couple of programmes for the young future leaders in Dubai Government. In one of the programmes about leadership, we had more than 40 young Emirati students. Interestingly, more than half the class was young women. On that day, the Sheikh came to visit the school and check how the programme was going. He always made sure to drop by whenever we had a group of young Emiratis being prepared for future leadership. On that specific day, he walked in during the lunch break and joined nine female leaders sitting around the dining table. He spent around 30 minutes with them, chatting about their daily lives, their work, their children and families, and then told them he was proud to have them on his team. Then he left, and none of them ever looked back.

Ohood Al Roumi, UAE Minister of State for Happiness and Wellbeing and Director General of the Prime Minister’s Office, has seen this talent-spotting in action. Back in 2003, she was working in Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and she recalls that she was nominated to join the Mohammed bin Rashid Leadership Program. During that period, there was some research being done on consumer confidence and the Chamber was supposed to present that to Sheikh Mohammed, who was Crown Prince of Dubai at the time. Ohood prepared well for it, though was extremely stressed and anxious given this was her first time to meet the Sheikh, let alone present to him. It took three days of sleepless preparation and the presentation itself was three minutes. She even booked a day off after it to recover. She did a great presentation and delivered all the messages. More importantly, she was ‘spotted’. Within three months of that, Ohood was working in The Executive Office of Sheikh Mohammed. She says, “My colleagues and previous boss at the Chamber are all convinced that it is because of that presentation that I was called to move to his Executive Office.”

In fact, he used to frequently visit the school when a course was running, and in many cases he insisted on attending part of the course as a student, while on other occasions he would deliver part of it and engage in some Q&A himself. You could tell from his eyes that he was not just doing this to support the learners. He enjoys learning. He also enjoys teaching, passing on his experience and seeing other leaders grow and flourish around him. He was also listening and observing, scouting for future talent. This is what we would call his obsession with talent and leadership development. The energy and momentum he dedicates to this is second to none in my experience. It also gives him first-hand access to a pipeline of future talent.

Seeking New Leaders

Given that Sheikh Mohammed spends a lot of his time seeking local talent, he decided to institutionalise it, as he does with most of his great traits. In 2002, while working in The Executive Office, we faced a major issue with identifying local leadership talent. Simply put, our pace of development and project pipeline was outpacing the leadership talent pipeline. We had many upcoming projects on the heels of successful schemes like Dubai Internet City and Dubai Media City, and the Sheikh asked us to develop a structured system for talent identification.

He wanted his team in The Executive Office to keep a list of 30 to 50 young locals ready to take leadership opportunities in various sectors. These roles could be in newly launched projects or succession positions in government departments or state-owned enterprises. He wanted us to build a 'future talent and succession planning' system for Dubai. His instructions were to look far and wide for best practice and to study the best systems in both government and the private sector.

We embarked on a four-month mission to study leadership development systems and programmes around the world. We analysed public sector experiences like the 'administrative officers' system in Singapore, as well as leading private sector examples like GE's Crotonville and global thought leaders like Harvard's Center for Public Leadership. At the conclusion of that tour, the Mohammed bin Rashid Leadership Development Program was born. Launched in 2003, many of today's UAE ministers and Dubai's department leaders are graduates of that programme. In 2016, it was expanded into a leadership centre and has been adopted by various governments around the region.[115]

Sheikh Mohammed was clear about the core competencies he wanted the leaders to have and which would be required to achieve the future he envisions for Dubai. He wanted people who had great vision, ambition and courage. He was also keen to find those who could nurture other leaders and were driven by a passion for continuous improvement. He does not distinguish between private and public sector leaders. He wants these traits in all the leaders who work with him, irrespective of the sector. He is not hung up on academic degrees and Ivy League credentials. While valued, he believes that the technical skills can always be taught to someone with the right characteristics and attitude, while the opposite is not always true.

Our team at The Executive Office set out to establish the programme which would create Dubai's new generation of leaders, armed with a clear top-level competency framework outlined by the Sheikh himself, which hinged on three main principles.

The first principle was merit. The Sheikh wanted only the best of the best to get into this programme and demanded that we have a 'blind' and fair recruitment process. This meant that we opened the programme to applications from anyone who believed they had what it takes. We implemented a clear, structured and transparent way to assess the candidates, including detailed written applications, psychometric tests, team games and assessment centres. Back in 2002, when most hiring decisions were based on connections and traditional human resource management systems, this was not only good practice, but a game changer.

It is also notable how he decided to announce the programme in Dubai. I still recall that moment in 2003 and the specific words he chose. It was during the Dubai Government Excellence Program Awards ceremony. The hall was full of over 500 government officials, with the Government Department leaders all sitting in the front row. The Sheikh took to the stage to say a few words, and noted that we, in Dubai, are looking to the future with excitement; that today we celebrate our government's achievements, and that we want all our government departments to improve, today and always. Then he said, "And to my fellow leaders of the government departments, I have two pieces of good news. I am with you and behind you. You have my support to continually improve your work and departments. I also have more good news. We are preparing your successors. The second and third lines of leadership are being nurtured." The message was clear. You have my support. You are empowered. But with great power, comes great responsibility. Change or be changed. That is how the Sheikh CEO announced his Leadership Development Program in the Government of Dubai.

Overnight, he transitioned the government from a system where people competed for jobs by networking and seeking to meet the 'right people', to a landscape where young men and women in Dubai were undergoing strict ability and attitude tests to assess their leadership potential. This was quite a cultural shift and one that the Sheikh CEO effected almost overnight.

The second principle in selecting this future leadership pool was gender balance, which is something the Sheikh feels very strongly about. In his search for future leaders, Sheikh Mohammed has placed a special focus on women, and – in most cases – he has tipped the scales in favour of them. In the mid 2000s, he would proudly tell every visitor to Dubai that his Executive Office is made up of more than 70% women. In his book Flashes of Thought, he notes, "Our job is to provide an environment that unlocks women's potential – one that protects their dignity and femininity, helps them create the necessary balance in their lives and values their talents and potential. Given this environment, I am confident that women will perform nothing short of miracles."

In 2004, when we launched the second cohort of the Mohammed bin Rashid Leadership Development Program, the Sheikh came to the launch, and before we started, he asked us about the percentage of women in the cohort. The programme director proudly informed him that we had 35% female participants. The Sheikh immediately said, "Next year, I want it to be 50%." This message was consistent throughout his life. Many years later, in 2018, he passed a decree allocating 50% of the seats in the Federal National Council to women and tweeted, “Women are half of our society; they should be represented as such.”

Sheikh Mohammed has demonstrated his ability to relate to women, understanding their experiences and individual situations, and supporting them. Aisha Miran, Assistant Secretary General for the Strategy Management and Governance Sector of The Executive Council, shares a story from when she was a young employee in The Executive Office. She attended various events where the Sheikh was present, but being a junior employee she never interacted with him directly. After a few years, as she rose through the ranks, she remembers a day when the Sheikh was greeting the whole team. He saw her, stood beside her, called her by name and commended her on her work. It gave Aisha an endless boost. In his own way, he told her he is watching her, is proud of her work, knows her personally and is supporting her.

The Sheikh continues to support women in his country across all walks to life. In 2018, they outnumbered their male counterparts in higher education in the UAE, and far outranked them in maths and English tests in school, according to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). In fact, Sheikh Mohammed has issued a warning to the men around him: “I have said it loud and clear: Beware, men, lest women deprive you of all the leadership positions in the country.” To those who question his focus on gender balance, he has a simple question: “Can a society take any step forward without its better half?”

His last principle is diversity. People have different skills and capabilities, even if they all show leadership potential, and the programme would always ensure that the candidate pools were broad enough to contain a variety of skills and potential that could be nurtured through different approaches.

This is a technique the Sheikh has often used to gain a competitive edge. During the 2008 financial crisis, the Sheikh assembled an ad-hoc team for this situation that required a novel approach. To be sure to air as many points of views as possible, he included people other than those who shared similar opinions to him, which involved gathering members from across various departments.

When it came to us designing the leadership development programme, it was clear from day one that the Sheikh did not want us to go out, buy a few training courses from reputable universities and then enrol our future leaders in those classes. Such standard international leadership executive education was only a minor component of the overall leadership development programme. He wanted these future leaders to experience different situations, shape a can-do attitude and learn many more things, a lot of them practical and many unique to Dubai. He also wanted them to learn first hand from other Dubai-based leaders.

“The making of leaders is a secret granted only to those who have overcome their own ego and who understand that their greatest achievement is to build people, not edifices”

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

We selected reputable education partners who understood our specific needs to provide the academic part of the programme. In Sheikh CEO style, we were to start where the best in the field had already reached and improve upon it from there. When it came to tailoring the content relevant to Dubai’s future, we did this ourselves. We started by focusing on the practical element and designed a management challenge that participants had to tackle as a team throughout the eight-month duration of the programme. The challenge was based on a real-life situation, and we asked the participants to come up with real solutions, complete blueprints and, in some cases, to raise the funding needed for implementation.

The challenges were rooted in real life and these future leaders had to come up with real solutions – ones that could be adopted at a national level by the highest authority. This programme was real and nothing in their training was academic.

Other elements of the programme included closed-door sessions, enabling the participants to engage in open and intimate conversations with current leaders in Dubai, starting with Sheikh Mohammed himself.

We also planned various study trips for the participants to visit counterparts from around the world. In the early days, our benchmarks were the United Kingdom, Singapore and Australia. Over the years, we expanded them to include South Korea and Estonia. Each participant was clear on the objective of these trips. As well as gaining experience from around the world, they would build networks that could advance our international relations in the future and build and nurture Dubai's brand and soft power.

We managed to complete the full design for the first-ever Leadership Development Program for Dubai and were ready to present the final plan, activities, assessment methods and academic partners. Sheikh Mohammed gave us all his attention and listened to the details in full. He then asked specific questions about the assessment mechanisms and experiential learning. He was also keen to learn who the recommended academic partners were, and we explained how and why we had selected London Business School, among others. When the presentation was done, the Sheikh said, “Go ahead and launch this programme,” and then added, “I want to be the first lecturer to speak to the future leaders.” With that personal attention and energy boost, we renamed the programme the Mohammed bin Rashid Leadership Development Program.

Since the launch of the leadership programme back in 2003, it has been continually updated and refined, as should all leadership thinking. Any review starts with updating the definition of leadership, placing specific focus on the context of today and tomorrow. Leaders should be equipped with relevant competencies that are specific to the organisation’s context and skills that make a significant difference to performance. Equally important is preparing them for what tomorrow has in store. The Sheikh was adamant that we should stay five to 10 years ahead of everyone else in our thinking. He was also keen to make sure these future leaders were assessed, supported and properly nurtured.

The programme team continually monitored and assessed its performance, as well as that of the programme’s partners and network. To do this, we evaluated the effectiveness of the young leaders who went through leadership development courses using performance data and feedback from executives and tracking their career progress, all of which could inform solid improvements for the programme.

These future leaders are not only a human resource management issue for the Sheikh. They are a source of pride for him. In 2008, when the then United States

President, George W Bush came to visit Dubai, that message was loud and clear. President Bush had only one day in Dubai and he began it with a stop at the historic home of the former ruler, now a museum full of photos and artefacts of the emirate's history. The next stop was lunch with students of the Dubai School of Government. Sheikh Mohammed instructed us to have the leadership programme participants ready to host the President, and they were sitting on cushions, set in a circle, with food in bowls on the carpeted floor before them. The conversation was all about the future, human capital and Dubai. After the meeting, President Bush said, "I'm most impressed with what I've seen here. The entrepreneurial spirit is strong and, equally importantly, so is the desire to make sure all aspects of society have hope and encouragement."

Three Horses In The Race

One thing I noticed early on at The Executive Office was that the Sheikh would always have many people competing to deliver the same project or studying the same policy, and even various state-owned companies working on similar mandates. This was most obvious in the real estate sector when the Sheikh created three companies that led the rise of Dubai: Emaar Properties, Dubai Holding and Nakheel. In its formative years, Emaar quickly became the fourth-largest 'Arab Titan' on the Dow Jones Arabia Titans Index and was ranked number 462 in the global rankings by the London-based Financial Times Stock Exchange (FTSE), with an estimated value of more than $20 billion. In fact, Emaar was so successful, so quickly, that Sheikh Mohammed decided it needed some competition, so he launched the developers Nakheel and Dubai Properties (part of Dubai Holding) to hedge against the possibility of Emaar growing into a monopoly[116] or – even worse – becoming complacent.

I initially wondered about the wisdom of that approach. We also wondered at some point why another team was working on the same policy area we were investigating. It put more pressure on us to perform, we worked harder and ran faster and it sharpened our creativity toolbox. Then it was clear – that was exactly what he wanted us to do! To increase the chances of success and make sure everyone was working to their full potential, the Sheikh CEO has three horses in any important race.

Having three horses in the race is a distinct decision-making pattern applicable to all investment, experimentation, innovation and learning decisions in today's complex, uncertain world. It also explains the dynamics of external and internal competition, whereby multiple firms would sometimes be asked to conduct the same work or internal teams would work on the same project. This impactful operating model demonstrated benefits over two decades for a number of reasons.

In most new initiatives launched by Sheikh Mohammed, we were venturing into new territory or complex policies. In such cases, the use of multiple inputs to help define goals and plans was very useful and indeed critical. The Sheikh's trust was distributed across multiple parties so that he rarely had all his eggs in one basket. This form of risk management is essential when one decides to move at double, or even triple, the normal speed of all others around him. This pattern divided the knowledge of sensitive issues in such a way that no one could exert disproportionate influence on any outcome. Finally, the approach recognised the volatility and uncertainty in the world and placed emphasis on the constant generation of multiple options as both an exploratory and a hedging strategy.

Sheikh Mohammed's adoption of this approach shows how he is constantly experimenting, his passion for new ideas and inspiration and his desire to solicit many ideas and opinions before selecting the best. It piques in others an appetite for creativity and experimentation, a willingness to try new ideas and products and novel approaches to entering new markets and building new industries without traditional restrictions and red tape.

It can also be an expensive way of policy-making and managing innovation. However, the Sheikh is very aware of the potential negative outcomes of his approach. Like a great umpire, he knows exactly when to stop the race or slow it down. He strikes a fine balance between competition and co-opetition (competing and collaborating at the same time). He would not use the 'three horses in the race' approach to pit his teams against each other, but he would use it to give them stretch goals and to understand that they can't get too comfortable on the job. In most cases, no one would know which horse was winning, which project had been approved or which policy had been adopted. In fact, there was never one winner. The outcome would usually be a combination of the best ideas and Sheikh Mohammed would never make people feel like winners or losers. He would just let the teams know that they should always do their best because there are others who are running equally as fast.

“True excellence does not come from being superior to others, but means surpassing oneself time and again”

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

In parallel to this positive pressure and creative competition he creates, he is supportive and enabling. Ohood Al Roumi, UAE Minister of State for Happiness and Wellbeing and Director General of the Prime Minister’s Office, talks about his attention to detail and how he nurtures and supports young talent and future leaders. She tells a story that happened to her: “When I first started in the Prime Minister’s Office, I was invited to the Council of Ministers to give my first presentation. I was a young director in the Prime Minister’s Office and naturally very nervous. I was standing up in the room, waiting for the ministers to take their seats. The Sheikh walked in but did not go to his seat. He came to my side of the room, patted me on the back and said, ‘Do not be nervous. I am behind you.’ He knew how I felt and knew the perfect time to deliver a personal message, and he made sure everyone saw his support. It was a message to all, in front of all ministers, that he gave me his trust. For me, this was priceless motivation and something that still spurs me forward today.”

While he has built a competitive system, how he manages his team day to day is based on simplicity and genuine leadership. I found this out in my first few weeks in The Executive Office in 2001, when we had a big meeting with 12 people from the office preparing for it. We had slides and flip charts and had spent the previous few days working non-stop. It was related to a major new project that we wanted to present to the Sheikh for yet another milestone for Dubai. It was 12.30pm and Sheikh Mohammed walked into the perfectly organised conference room on the 44th floor of Emirates Towers. He looked around and said, “You all look like you have been working hard and deserve some downtime. Let’s go for lunch!” He took the whole team down with him to the Noodle House in Emirates Towers. They arranged a table for 12 people and we had a lovely lunch with the Sheikh. Well fed, with a major morale boost and anxiety lowered, we walked back with him to the meeting room after about 45 minutes and had a great conversation about the project. It was clear from that day that to the Sheikh, the team’s wellbeing and morale came first.

Lessons In Leadership

Pay it forward and nurture future leaders. Looking after young leaders, allowing them to grow and supporting them is key to delivering your vision and legacy, and it is simply the right thing to do. Nothing can be more rewarding than seeing young leaders grow around you and supporting you.

Make sure you grow leaders based on merit, diversity and gender balance. Diversity is at the heart of innovation, and gender balance is simply how nature designed life. Merit and diversity are also key to avoiding ‘groupthink’ and the very common leadership mistake of surrounding yourself with ‘yes people’ who tell you only what you want (and like) to hear.

Delegate, delegate, delegate. To grow, you need to have great people around you, and you need to delegate work to them. Gary Hendricks calls this the ‘zone of genius’, where you can have a great team around you that shares your vision, manages the work delivery and allows you to spend your time on moving your vision forward.

Take your team to lunch. Great leaders connect with their team, facilitate open communication, know them personally and can connect with them on a personal, human level. This is not about a team lunch with presentations full of jargon and motivational quotes. This is simply about taking the team to eat and enjoy a meal together every now and then. Teams who play and eat together, work well together.

Great leaders must have the ability to make the most out of every situation. They are courageous and not afraid to challenge the status quo and push the boundaries to make things better, and they do not believe that they have all the answers. The best leaders know how to get the most out of people and how to enable the full potential in others. At the heart of this is being able to spot, nurture and empower future leaders. This is probably the most important task of a leader.

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McKinsey & Company and Partnership for Public Service, Building the Leadership Bench: Developing a Talent Pipeline for the Senior Executive Service (Washington, DC: 2013

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Chapter 6

Win hearts and minds

While many leaders in the region have political followers, Sheikh Mohammed has fans! These fans come from Dubai, the UAE, the GCC, the Middle East, Africa, South-East Asia and beyond. In fact, it was his fan base all over the region that encouraged the writing of this book. In any public lecture, executive course or similar event where Dubai's story is mentioned, people would ask about Sheikh Mohammed. How does he do it? What is his secret recipe? Stories about him spread far and wide, with many examples of how he managed a certain situation or how he directed a certain project. Some are exaggerated, just like we all exaggerate the powers of our heroes. I have heard many stories about how he dealt with certain situations or quotes that have been attributed to him, which are positive and great, but not all true. These are the stories fans make up when they admire someone so much. He acquired a status in people's minds that is positive, respected for action and associated with great vision and great achievements.

These are people who admire his work look up to Dubai and aspire to achieve similar outcomes in their own city or country. They respect his leadership style and his apolitical stance when sharing his views on the region, and they are fans of his poetry and horse riding. Sheikh Mohammed has established himself in the Arab world and beyond as a celebrity leader. Not only does he enjoy huge followership from within Dubai and the UAE, but he is a global celebrity. He has millions of followers on his social media accounts, making him – by far – the most-followed Middle Eastern leader.

I was in a meeting with some senior officials in the region, who were planning some exciting developments in their countries. Much of the talk was about delivering the vision and making the plans a reality. One of the officials said that his country needs to build an executive office like Sheikh Mohammed's. That would make things move faster, à la Dubai. However, another senior official said that this might not work. After a short argument, he concluded, "You might develop a nice vision and you might build a great executive office, but that does not mean you will achieve the great results… Your leader is not Mohammed bin Rashid!" In the region, many believe this to be true. His leadership style is the magic recipe for Dubai's development formula.

This fan base is not only made of policy wonks and aspiring public sector leaders. It comprises a huge number of young people as well. Year after year, the Arab Youth Survey that is conducted among more than 3,000 participants from the 22 Arab countries in the Middle East, puts the UAE at number one for being the country that Arab youth look up to, aspire to live in and wish their countries would emulate. The UAE has been in the number one spot for that survey for eight consecutive years, having edged out the United States, France, Germany and Canada. In 2019, two in every five young Arabs surveyed said they would like to live in the UAE as their first choice.[117]

In 2006, The Washington Times published an article entitled "The Towering Dream of Dubai", which included a quote from Dr Nasser Al Saidi, a former Minister of Finance of Lebanon: "We [in the Arab world] missed an opportunity in the 1970s when the oil wealth was there or emerging. People have learned their lessons, and I think we're getting it right this time." Dr Al Saidi continued, "You never had a champion. Today you have one." The article goes on to quote me: "Forget the American Dream, the goal of the previous generation of young Arabs. This is the Dubai dream."

Among the many development achievements that the Sheikh has under his belt, his most prominent one is the regional fan base. Those are people from the region, young and old, who admire his work, the youth whose hearts and minds he has won, the people whom he gave hope and made look at their own region and country and think, "yes, we can".

Communicate From The Heart

There are many books offering advice to leaders about how to communicate more effectively. They cover basics, such as know your audience, tailor your messages, listen well, be direct and specific, and many other useful tips. These are great sources to learn from, and definitely a set of skills worth sharpening for any leader. But at best, they might make a person a better speaker. What is important for a leader is to be a great communicator, not just a great speaker. In this space, the Sheikh CEO offers his own valuable and practical lessons.

For a start, the Sheikh is a great motivator and knows how to inject positive energy. Aisha Miran, Assistant Secretary General for the Strategy Management and Governance Sector of The Executive Council, recalls that in the early days of The Executive Office, their Chairman took the whole team to the Godolphin ballroom in Emirates Towers for a team town hall meeting. That morning, the Sheikh came in and talked to the whole team, saying, “You are our spine, I am proud of you, and I depend on you.” He spent over 30 minutes discussing raising the bar, thanking the team for their efforts and affirming his pride in them. Aisha said, “We were so motivated, uplifted and full of energy… I felt high energy and praise for both UAE nationals and expats in the office. We were all his team, and we were all one team.” That theme of motivational energy is one thing Ohood Al Roumi, UAE Minister of State for Happiness and Wellbeing and Director General of the Prime Minister’s Office, also experienced. The Sheikh would frequently visit them in the Prime Minster’s Office and he would be full of simple and powerful words of praise and appreciation, reminding the team that “you are the reason for our success”.

If anything, the Sheikh is not a speaker as such. He shies away from long speeches and lecturing. He is a man of few words. However, when he does talk, he captures hearts and minds. He has mastered the art of communication, which is probably the most important leadership capability. Sheikh Mohammed does not give fiery speeches or use overt body language, but when you meet him and discuss business, you get a calm sense of energy and confidence, which inspires people to give their best and go the extra mile or 10.

If we look at past leaders who have managed to change the world, create history, grow global businesses, conquer nations and even start regional or global movements, they were all excellent communicators. They all knew that leaders need to reach their followers and touch their hearts and minds. Despite all their differences, this was the one capability all these leaders shared.

“Always communicate, never hide. Treat the media as your friends, not your foes – they are friends to the dynamic, honest achiever and enemies of the corrupt, shifty and lazy”

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

Great leaders communicate well to deliver messages to their teams, create shared visions, give feedback and motivate people. They communicate well to reach out to their followers, share their vision, build connections and explain their policies, promote their products, services and countries, bargain with suppliers, strike deals with partners and negotiate with competitors – even terrorists (something the Sheikh has had to do in the past).

Being a great communicator should not be confused with being a great orator, although some leaders have been both. The ability to communicate is the ability to use various tools and skills to deliver a message to your followers and win their hearts and minds. It can be oratory, via a great speech. It can also be delivered through the right timing of the intervention, specific body language and gestures, the use of symbols, digital communication or any other means of effectively delivering a message.

Sharpening this ability to communicate comes with practise. Much like developing a muscle, the more you exercise it, the stronger it becomes and the tougher the exercise, in a measured way, the better the outcome. In observing the Sheikh communicate and deliver his messages over the years, I managed to distil a few practical tips for all current and aspiring leaders.

At the heart of these tips is the core principle of authenticity. Communicate from the heart. People can sense that. When you communicate what you believe in, what you truly feel and what you dream of, people can sense the positive energy. The Sheikh simply communicates from the heart. He channels his true north.

The following are more practical tips that the Sheikh CEO teaches us.

1. Listen, listen, listen

Sheikh Mohammed has always been good at ‘traditional’ communication, which he learned from his father, sitting with his people in his majlis, visiting businesswomen and men in their shops and offices and motivating his government team.

His upbringing has made the Sheikh a very hands-on leader. He has an open majlis and maintains constant contact with the many around him, from all walks of life and all parts of the society. He personally talks to people to keep his finger on the pulse. That guides his true north.

A critical part of Sheikh Mohammed's communication model is listening. He has established key feedback loops that he personally maintains, with no buffers and filters. In fact, he is very weary of filters. "It is a common mistake among some Arab leaders to listen to their own voice,"he says.[118]

It is not unusual to see the Sheikh driving his white Mercedes, recognisable for its license plate 'Dubai 1'. Unlike most leaders, he drives the car himself and is open to his people, not surrounded by security, which is a far cry from a region used to streets being blocked for hours on end waiting for the president to pass. These drives give the Sheikh all the information he needs about many issues in Dubai. He does not only rely on performance indicators from the Roads and Transport Authority to tell him about congestion and road traffic, or macro-economic numbers to tell him what economic activity there is in the city's shops and malls. Like his father, he witnesses the progress of projects instead of relying on reports from contractors.

He also sometimes calls people up to ask questions about the conditions in their neighbourhood, about his policy choices, about their feelings about Dubai's growth and progress and about their family's financial health and whether or not it has improved. He particularly enjoys talking with long-established Emirati families that have done well in business.

These direct connections can be quite telling. As Dubai's CEO, Sheikh Mohammed considers these chats a form of market feedback that helps him refine policy. This information is unfiltered by the media or his staff. He does not want to be insulated or isolated from his people. He also meets regularly with private sector executives from multinationals and major investors, inviting them to Zabeel Palace during occasions like an annual business leaders iftar every Ramadan. When they break their fast, he takes the chance to talk informally to as many people as possible.[119]

In terms of managing his government, he had very frequent one-to-one meetings with department leaders and they all also attended his majlis where they discussed things as a group. Sheikh Mohammed recalled that one of the first decisions his father, the late Sheikh Rashid, took when he became Ruler of Dubai was to set up councils for the municipality, trade leaders, merchants and engineers, among others. When Sheikh Mohammed asked his father why he would need such councils, and why spend so much time meeting with them, Sheikh Rashid said: “Because we must never stop learning. They have a lot to teach us, and we need to hear from them how they want us to build the Dubai they want to live in. They will train you how to be a better leader, and your training starts now [by engaging with them].”[120]

This approach is so important to the Sheikh that he later developed the traditional majlis concept into an official government institution to ensure its sustainability.

In the early days of Dubai Government, each department was headed by a Director General who reported directly to Sheikh Mohammed as the Ruler of Dubai. They all submitted their plans to him, debated them with him and delivered their promises. They also held majlis sessions where all the department heads, alongside other attendees of the majlis, would discuss the issues, challenges and opportunities of the day. This was a system that worked over the generations, but as Dubai started its exponential growth in the late 1990s, it was clear that some cracks started to show. The one-to-one model was reaching its limits, and the Sheikh was thinking of institutionalising all his ‘listening’ mechanisms.

In those rapid-growth days, many government departments had trouble keeping up with the developments. Dubai Municipality was struggling to keep on top of road management, with so many real estate developments being driven by state-owned enterprises like Nakheel and Emaar. There were also issues in relation to the newly established free zones and how they interacted with the mainland government.

All these issues came to the Sheikh's table, and he had to deal with them day-in, day-out, and all on a one-to-one basis. He knew it was not sustainable, especially given the growth he had planned for Dubai. He started gathering the department heads in their own little majlis in his office on the 44th floor of Emirates Towers.

This was the first step in institutionalising the age-old majlis concept. Instead of meeting on an informal basis in his palace, he invited them to meet formally, in a periodic manner, in his office. After the first year of meetings, it became known as the Executive Majlis. Majlis in Arabic translates into council in English, hence it became The Executive Council. This institution was formalised by the late Sheikh Maktoum bin Rashid Al Maktoum who issued Law No (3) of 2003, establishing The Executive Council to assist the Ruler in discharging his tasks and exercising his powers.

The Council was to be chaired by Sheikh Mohammed, who was then the Crown Prince of Dubai, and consisted of a number of heads of government entities. The Council's published aims are to develop and update a comprehensive strategic plan for Dubai, work out the annual budget of the Government of Dubai, maintain the city's security and order, provide public utilities and achieve economic and social progress in the city. With that law, the Sheikh institutionalised and professionalised his majlis and his way of running the government. Within a few years, all the emirates of the UAE followed suit.

Sheikh Mohammed perfected his ability to communicate, but sharpened and institutionalised his ability to listen. He embodied the old adage that you have two ears and one mouth. That design is specifically to ensure you listen twice as much as you speak. A great leader does exactly that.

2. Communicate across platforms

In addition to traditional communication, Sheikh Mohammed has mastered new media tools, an indispensable capability for a leader in the 21st century. He uses social media to address his people directly through the channels they use. He has a presence on all social media platforms of the day, like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn. He is ranked as one of the most influential world leaders on social media with a combined total of more than 15 million followers across various platforms (2017).[121]

In 2016, when the Sheikh announced the appointment of ministers for happiness, tolerance, youth and the future, he presented the rationale behind his decision in an article on LinkedIn, which explained the UAE Government's initiative to build channels of engagement and strong support among the youth. In the first 48 hours of publishing, Sheikh Mohammed's post generated more than 300,000 interactions.[122] This was a social media record and the post became one of the top three most engaging posts from a political figure on LinkedIn's Influencer platform, an exclusive programme available to selected achievers from various disciplines, who can share their experiences and advice with the network's 414 million members. In addition to Sheikh Mohammed, other top influencers include Barack Obama, Richard Branson, Hillary Clinton, David Cameron, Bill Gates, Narendra Modi and Oprah Winfrey. Sheikh Mohammed's post attracted considerable interest from across the world, with the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada featuring among the top five countries to have viewed and engaged with it.

In October 2015, the Sheikh launched the Mohammed bin Rashid Smart Majlis, a smartphone app to receive suggestions, observations and ideas around the clock, as well as conduct virtual brainstorming sessions with direct follow-ups by himself.

At the launch, he said, “Our doors were, and will remain, open as we added today a new channel for communication and new council that includes all government agencies to receive opinions, suggestions and listen to the observations.”

3. Simplify your messages

The Sheikh has mastered the ability to simplify messages, which has proved a critical skill for the age of social media and digital communication. A simple message can be sent in 140 characters on Twitter; a long political speech can’t.

The Sheikh himself refers to Leonardo da Vinci’s quote: “Simplicity is the highest form of wisdom.”

He firmly believes in this concept and notes that you can’t simplify a complex plan unless you understand it very well, in every detail. You cannot have wisdom in life unless you have been through many experiences and consumed vast amounts of knowledge, and you can’t explain a complex theory to a child unless you have mastered it.

The art of simplicity is a hard one. Everyone can talk for a long time and write long memos and papers, but being able to capture your message in one page or in one verse of poetry, and get the message to your people, is not easy.[123]

In management consulting, we have a long-standing joke about being able to say things in a simple, succinct manner: “Excuse me for writing you a long memo, I did not have time to write a short one.” Developing and delivering simple messages is part art, part science and critical for leaders to master.

4. Paint vivid images

The Sheikh has the great ability to conjure images that stick in the mind. When talking to his teams about customer satisfaction, which to him is the only measure for government success, he would explain that as a government employee they should get their satisfaction from doing a great job and offering a great service. But instead of using technical language about performance, he would simply say, “Satisfaction and happiness come not from hanging a plaque on your wall or publishing congratulatory messages in the local newspaper; the real happiness comes when we make a mother smile, when we make an orphan feel at home and when the simplest government employee feels appreciated by all members of society because of his or her work.”[124] He attached the image of a mother smiling to the concept of providing good service. That is an effective visual key performance indicator that employees can remember and draw motivation from.

In December 2018, when Dubai International Airport received its one billionth customer and the Sheikh congratulated the airport team on his Twitter account, he said, “I am proud and humbled by this achievement and thank the DXB team, led by Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al Maktoum. We are committed to remaining the first choice in transporting people across borders, helping them fulfil dreams, meet loved ones and discover the world’s wonders.” Again, he portrayed an image of the happiness they delivered, rather than celebrating the volume of transactions they undertook.

Related to this approach of painting vivid images is his use of symbols. Humans react to symbols and remember them. They may take the form of words, sounds, gestures, ideas or visual images and are used to convey other ideas and beliefs. A simple and powerful example is how the Sheikh coined his own ‘V for victory’ gesture. While the world is accustomed to the ‘V’ sign, he added his thumb to create a three-finger salute. On stage during the World Government Summit in 2013, he explained what the gesture meant. He told the audience that it stood for two synonymous three-letter words in Arabic – foz and nsr – both of which mean ‘victory’. It also stands for three words: I love you. The audience laughed, clapped and enjoyed the story. But the symbol was then etched in everyone’s mind. Since then, many pictures of the Sheikh show the teams around him making that symbol.

Another example of Sheikh Mohammed making good use of symbols is his focus on the number one, which is also a critical part of his symbology. He is consistent and on message, day in and day out. He is clear, there is only one number one. No one remembers number two. He makes sure those symbols are part of every story.

This simple and sharp focus on being number one has impacted the DNA of Dubai and its government. The leaders and everyone working with them know clearly what to aim for. From the Global Competitiveness Index, published by the World Economic Forum, to a police force phone operator picking up the phone within four rings, there is only number one. We must be number one in the Global Competitiveness Index ranking, as well as in consistently answering customer phone calls on time. This clarity of the message ensures that there are no two ways for anyone to think about their target.

5. Build on your credibility and show confidence

A critical piece of the puzzle is credibility. Credibility comes with walking the talk and delivering on promises. That is an area where Sheikh Mohammed stands out. His credibility, combined with his confidence, is the rocket fuel for his communication approach.

He is always engaged in the topic he is talking about and anyone listening to him knows this. You can feel his passion, you can hear that he has the knowledge and data to support his plans and you can see his determination. He does his homework and does it well. The Sheikh does not like reading speeches written by other people. He likes to talk about what he knows, what he believes in and what he prepared for. When a leader has that content credibility and confidence, there is no need for speech writing.

On the eve of his 10th anniversary of becoming the Ruler of Dubai, the Sheikh sent an open letter to the citizens of the UAE, a letter which many people said proves what a great leader he is. One commentator described it as “hands down the most inspiring thing you will read all year”.

The best way to show why they reacted in this way is to share excerpts of this letter:

Dear brothers and sisters,

Over 10 years have passed since I assumed the position of Prime Minister and Vice President of the United Arab Emirates. In those 10 years, we have launched a number of plans and strategies, led a number of reforms of our government, developed systems to track performance and improve services, encouraged innovation and the application of technology across all sectors,

established awards, formed thousands of working teams, held numerous retreats and meetings and established many new government agencies.

We can perhaps now, 10 years later, ask ourselves: what is the outcome of all this work and activity? It is important to pause occasionally and review our past work, measure our accomplishments and chart our road ahead…

Despite the global financial crisis and the resulting economic slowdown, despite the upheaval and disorder our region has endured, the United Arab Emirates has shown marked progress in all sectors. Our economy has doubled in the past 10 years, from a GDP of AED 663 billion to AED 1,360 billion, an improvement which has provided jobs and underpinned considerable economic and commercial opportunities for the citizens and residents of our country… Our non-petroleum exports have increased from AED 113 billion when I assumed office to AED 603 billion (including free zone trade) in the past year. The economic contribution of the non-petroleum sector has increased from 66% to some 77% today. This has provided our economy with considerable protection throughout the recent decline in oil prices and meant we have been one of few countries worldwide cushioned against the resultant economic slowdown…

We have seen a major growth in our competitiveness, from being the world's 32nd most competitive economy to the 16th. This has placed the young nation of the UAE on a par with countries who have hundreds of years of development behind them…

Detailing the accomplishments of our government teams over the past 10 years requires much more room than this short address. My message today is not only about celebrating our achievements, but also evaluating the challenges ahead.

A few years ago, we announced the indicators for our National Agenda. There are 52 national key performance indicators in education, health, housing, society, infrastructure, economy, environment, security, justice and safety, among others, which we aim at achieving by 2021, to be among the best countries globally by that date, which marks the 50th anniversary of our Union.

A week ago, I received a detailed report about the current progress in achieving these indicators – it stands at 62%, which means 38% of the indicators have not been effectively achieved. We have only five years remaining, a very short period in the life of a nation. It is not our custom to appease or ingratiate anyone, because courtesy at the expense of the country is not a sign of nationalism.

Today, we issued a directive to form government teams called 'The National Agenda Execution Teams'. The teams comprise 550 members of our government across all sectors and departments, responsible for fulfilling the indicators. The teams will be under my direct supervision to intensify our efforts, mobilise our assets and redouble our work in the coming period, in order to reach 100% of the goals of our National Agenda by the year 2021.

There is no room for procrastination, no time for delay. History is a witness to all of us. We have promised our people to accomplish what is best and we shall fulfil our promise. Government work is an honourable duty, and our government will ceaselessly and tirelessly implement its plans and fulfil its objectives.

I will lead this effort and the teams behind it personally. We ask God to guide us to what is best for our country and nation.

Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

The Sheikh begins with calling his people ‘brothers and sisters’, much like how he always makes a point of referring to his ‘team’ instead of ‘staff’. He reaches out to people at their level, not looking – or talking – down to them from above.

He has credibility because he has delivered. This is an essential part of this approach. He can cite the facts and figures and back up his statements with evidence of action.

At the same time, he is transparent about what remains to be done and where he is not satisfied with performance. Instead of congratulating himself for the successes, the Sheikh CEO is full of positive energy and is always looking forward. He also takes personal accountability, pledging to his people that he will lead the effort.

6. Master the art of storytelling

Over and above all tools Sheikh Mohammed employs to communicate, his unique differentiator is storytelling.

Central to his approach is the semi-structured and down-to-earth nature of it. He is not a fan of pre-written speeches or complex jargon. In fact, when I worked at The Executive Office, we used to spend many hours writing speeches and talking points for certain occasions, only for the Sheikh to stand up and ‘tell it like he feels it’. This often involved telling stories and not reading the prepared speech. The best part is that this approach delivered the messages we hoped to deliver in a much better way, with greater impact on the audience.

Stories run the world – from corporate stories and social narratives that create our cultural norms, to religions. Humans think in stories rather than in facts, numbers or equations. And the simpler the story the better. This is true even in the most profound texts in our human history.

In the Holy Qur'an, Surat Yusuf, Aya 3, God Almighty addresses the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and reads, "We relate to you, [O Muhammad], the best of stories in what We have revealed to you of this Qur'an although you were, before it, among the unaware." The same applies to the Holy Bible with the stories of the Tower of Babel and David and Goliath, among many others. That is the power of storytelling. It changes history, it moves people and it delivers messages.

To pick people up when they are down, he tells them stories from the past that are analogous to their position. When something seems far-fetched and people doubt that it might happen, the Sheikh will tell stories from the past that would have been equally hard to believe in those days. When he wants to remind his economic management team of the importance of competition and an open economy, he tells the story of Dubai International Airport and the creation of Emirates. If anyone doubts the possibility of reaching an ambitious target, Dubai's rise to a world-class tourism destination is one of many go-to stories explaining why he will not accept the word 'impossible'.

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. Well, Sheikh Mohammed's stories, many of which are recounted in this book, are worth a hundred lectures in open markets and liberal economics. If you are part of the Sheikh's team, these stories deliver the nation's economic principles, and they will not be forgotten.

This ability to tell stories is not simply a good thing to have. It is an essential skill for great leaders. By observing the Sheikh for many years and studying his storytelling approach, there are a few tips that anyone can learn.

The first is to focus on the 'why' and start with the value drivers; prioritise what matters and focus on why you are doing what you are doing. It is never about 'how' or 'what'. Only the 'why' can drive the masses and win hearts and minds. More importantly, the why has to be genuine. Authentic vision is contagious.

Typically, to rally people around a cause or organise a community for a project or any action, an effective approach to communication requires three types of inputs – the head, hands and heart. The head focuses on 'how' the message is structured and considers strategy, technique, planning, vision and process. The hands relate to doing – taking action, doing the work, putting the strategy into action. Good leaders tend to be good at communicating 'how' they want to change and 'what' people need to do to help. They talk to the head and the hand. Where many fall short is in the heart. This revolves around 'why' an action is important. It helps people realise the value and moral reason for the change we want to create.

The heart is at the centre of Sheikh Mohammed's communication style. He is able to use personal stories effectively as a way of inspiring other people to take action. He relies on this technique and usually offers his personal story of why he is involved, what motivates him, what inspired him to be involved and the circumstances, choices and decisions that made him do what he is doing or planning. He is simply a good storyteller. In his recent book My Story, he summarised the history of his 50 years of public service in 50 stories. These stories are central to how he sees the world and how he conveys his thoughts. For the Sheikh, storytelling is a cornerstone of the human experience. It is not just about understanding the world, but about changing it.

The second lesson is to make it personal, both for the listener and for you as a leader. Reflect on your own stories and know your audience well. Speak their language and understand their culture, norms and gestures. The Sheikh does both of these things very well. He tells stories that are unfolding dramas. He engages listeners emotionally and rationally. Most importantly, he builds a clear case for change and describes what success looks like. He casts those listening to the story as the protagonists who will make change happen and guides them to identify their own roles.

For a leader, the ability to tell a story can’t be overstated. Vision alone is not enough to create a winning strategy. Winning leaders must also provide motivation and plans of action by constantly creating stories about the future. Leaders who can create and tell engaging human stories are simply better leaders.

A Positive Discourse

In his role as Prime Minister of the UAE, the Sheikh holds an annual brainstorming session with his team. In 2017, the team was sitting and waiting for the Sheikh. He walked in and looked around at the team’s faces, which were business-like and focused, some tired, and he said, “I do not like this meeting. We should all be positive and smiling.” We smiled, but he said, “Too late now. I am happy to see you, but you should be the same.” The following year, the same session was taking place and Omar Al Olama, UAE Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence, recalls that they were genuinely happy and smiling waiting for him, all remembering his positive advice. The Sheikh walked in and the first thing he opened the meeting with was, “That is much better. I am happy to see you smiling.” That, in a way, sums up his positive disposition and outlook on life.

Ohood Al Roumi, UAE Minister of State for Happiness and Wellbeing and Director General of the Prime Minister’s Office, recounts a story that the Sheikh told her, and which reflects his personal attitude. It was about the global financial crisis in 2008. The Sheikh told Ohood how people around him were depressed and feeling down. In the meantime, “I was enjoying making my morning coffee, thinking about poetry and keeping my nerves intact. I was not going to let myself feel down. I focused on my hobbies and was thinking and looking ahead because I knew and saw the positive things that could (and would) come.” This is not simply about a positive attitude. It is about resilience. No matter how hard things get, he roasts his own coffee every day, and he stays focused on improving and making things better and moving forward. Ohood noted, “In 15 years of working for the Sheikh, the number one word I have heard repeated is positivity. In work, life and overall attitude. This is his signature word. It is how he is and what he believes in.”

In 2016, the UAE launched a hashtag campaign to say thank you to Sheikh Mohammed, marking his 10 year anniversary as Vice President and Prime Minister of the nation. After 10 years as Prime Minister, the progress across the nation was clear to all to see. He had transformed the whole government and advanced the nation in one decade. A thank you was well earned – and due!

The hashtag #Thank_You_Mohammed_Bin_Rashid[125] was used more than 268 million times all over the Arab world. His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the UAE, also thanked him for his service to the nation and wrote the following letter, which was published in Al Bayan newspaper on the 3rd of January 2016:

Today, my brother His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum is currently completing his 10th year as our UAE Prime Minister, and he now leads an advanced, agile and modernised government. In 10 years, he raised effectiveness and efficiency, and achieved advanced ranking in indices from international organisations and praise from many near and far. In 10 years, he established transparent systems in public management, performance measurement, quality assurance, advanced smart services, and programmes to develop our human capital for the future. In 10 years, he raised the global competitiveness of our nation to advanced economies status, and built institutions and teams focused on the wellbeing and happiness of our citizens. He strengthened the coordination between the federal and local governments, formed [issues-based] national task forces, formulated strategic plans to deliver our joint vision, alongside his brothers the members of the Supreme Council [Rulers of the Emirates]. My brother, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, has completed 10 years in leading a successful, balanced and sustainable national economy and an efficient government fiscal policy with his team of ministers and officials. In 10 years, Mohammed bin Rashid had engrained his unique management approach and philosophy. He inspired thousands of young people and strengthened national unity in our country. Every year, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid dedicates the anniversary day of his ascension to Prime Minister to thanking others. He thanked the mothers, he thanked the nation's protectors and soldiers, among many other different groups. Today, we say

to him, thank you, Mohammed. Thank you for everything you have done for the UAE, for your Arab and Islamic nation and for the world. Thank you for your administrative, humanitarian, economic, developmental and intellectual experience.

This was indeed a special year to mark the 10 year anniversary, but is not a typical way to celebrate that day. For decades, people of the region have celebrated such an inauguration day of their leaders with much fanfare, pages after pages of congratulations in the newspapers and so on. They mark the day the leader took his position and compete to celebrate it.

Sheikh Mohammed has a different view for that day. In a break with regional traditions, the Sheikh asks not to be celebrated on this day and for the energy and any resources to be redirected to celebrating other causes and thanking other leaders from society. Annually, since he took over as Prime Minister on the 4th of January, he asks people and his social media followers to thank someone else who has made a difference to our lives and societies. In the first instance, he started by thanking mothers, followed by teachers in the next year, the security forces in the one after that, and so on. Each year carries a message of gratitude to people who touch our daily lives. This simple symbolic gesture has a great impact that carries positive energy across the whole nation.

When it comes to generating positive energy, Sheikh Mohammed really is a unique figure in politics in the Middle East. For many decades, the region has lived in challenging times of regional disputes, international warfare, economic boom and bust, rising youth unemployment, the Arab Spring – the list goes on. It is not a coincidence then that the general mood in the region is not always positive. It is easy to get depressed in such turmoil and instability. However, this contrasts with the Sheikh’s positive outlook on life, and he has set out to spread a message of hope and positive energy. He wants to bring positivity into politics and public policy and wants to focus on people’s wellbeing and pursuit of happiness.

Throughout the years, this message has become louder and louder, culminating in his book Reflections on Happiness & Positivity, published in 2017. In that book, he presents two concepts in which he has a great personal interest. He explores the relationship between happiness and positivity and examines how they impact achievement, productivity and creativity. The book includes both personal stories and an international perspective to emphasise the pivotal role that happiness and positivity play in forming leadership strategies and fostering relationships among team members.

“I believe that positive energy and optimism help us to take up any challenge in life and to succeed in even the most difficult tasks. I also believe that positive energy is contagious: we can transmit it to others”

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

The book in itself is a great read, but there are many more examples of this positive thinking in the Sheikh’s life.

Positive energy is an essential part of the Sheikh’s view on life. Over the years, people have picked up on many of his memorable quotes, some poetically delivered. He describes positive energy using vivid imagery, reminding us and himself that “it is such a beautiful life, but many people spend it worrying, burdened and frowning. You can easily see the beauty of life in the laughter of a child, the tenderness of a mother, the smile of a friend or the love of a compassionate wife."[126]

When appointed the world's first Minister of State for Happiness and Wellbeing, Ohood Al Roumi asked the Sheikh how he defines happiness. He said, "Happiness comes from the inside. It is about being always positive. I see only opportunities."

He talks about positive energy in every contact with his team and the wider UAE society. In his own words, positivity means having the optimism for a new day every morning. "If you wake up from sleep optimistic and smiling, your day will remain smiling and optimistic. The positive energy of a person makes that person strong, ready to face challenges in a spirit of determination. Negative energy frustrates one's power, will and optimism."

This is a core theme in the Sheikh's leadership philosophy and how he conducts his own life. He talked about this in his early book, My Vision, in a chapter entitled "Positive Energy and Negative Energy". He said that positive energy "is the force that drives action and develops the initiative, builds loyalty and generates creativity, it is the foundation of success and the secret of achieving goals. Therefore, the most successful leader is the best able to motivate his subordinates and encourage them to give. Creativity, performance and ambition are linked to the level of a person's moral motivation, and the relationship is proportional".

This focus on positive energy has its roots in aiming for a better quality of life and actually has scientific backing. The Sheikh is adamant that just like cars need fuel to move, humans need positive energy to move forward in life and work. Negative energy has negative consequences on our lives and bodies. Anger, fatigue, feeling a loss of control and a general lack of happiness are all driven and amplified by negative energy.

The most interesting thing about meeting the Sheikh is how natural it feels. He walks into meetings and simply blends in. Whether he is walking into a work meeting, attending a course at the School of Government, or welcoming an outside visitor. Aisha Miran, Assistant Secretary General for the Strategy Management and Governance Sector of The Executive Council, describes this presence and says it is almost unexpected when you meet him for the first time. He has an aura around him so that you clearly feel his presence when he walks into a room, but when he starts talking to you, you relax and any anxiety disappears. His style, demeanour and interactions with you immediately break the ice. Whether deliberately or just naturally, he puts you at ease within a few words.

For the Sheikh, a positive outlook is not just a state of mind, it is a management approach of which he is a proponent, bringing positivity into the field of government and politics. He tells his ministers in the UAE, “Positivity is a way of thinking and happiness is a lifestyle. With a positive outlook, you will see challenges as opportunities, the future full of success and people packed with potential, abilities, talent and goodness. When we apply positivity in administration, leadership and decision-making, creativity is born, abilities are unleashed and miracles happen.”

Significance, Not Just Success

On the 6th of January 2019, two days after announcing the Eight Governing Principles of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed unveiled the 50 Year Charter, so-called as its timing marks the Sheikh's 50 years of service to the country.

Demonstrating how the government will continue to win hearts and minds, the charter contained nine points, which constituted Dubai's plans to improve the quality of life for its citizens and residents over the next 50 years.

Again, the Sheikh shared this document across his social media platforms and called it a "pledge and promise, on behalf of myself and the ruling family of Dubai".

It outlines how, over the next 50 years, Dubai will be maintained as a "city governed by law and bound by the spirit of compassion, love, harmony and tolerance. A prosperous city where future generations achieve their dreams and aspirations".

The nine articles of the 50 Year Charter reflect Sheikh Mohammed's positive energy and visionary style when it comes to maintaining Dubai's economic and social development.

The principles covered Dubai's position in the world and coined the idea of a Dubai Silk Road, reinforcing its destiny to be a crossroads between East and

West, North and South. They also called for a rethink of the economic model and Dubai’s geo-economic map, launched a virtual free zone, and aimed at making Dubai’s universities into hubs for creativity and start-ups. The principles also focused on UAE citizens, promising a future of personalised education, personalised healthcare and sufficient housing. All are great principles to continue building on Dubai’s economic model, the welfare and wellbeing of the UAE citizens, and the success that has been achieved to date.

But the Sheikh CEO is not just about success; he aims for significance and a legacy for Dubai. His last principle is the most profound (in my view). It took me back to the year I joined his Executive Office, when I was asked in my interview, “What is your dream for the region?” The last principle promised an annual growth in philanthropy.

The ninth principle reads, “Our daily businesses and projects should not let us forget about giving to those who need help. We pledge to increase philanthropic initiatives every year and grow them by at least an equal percentage of our annual economic growth. Charity is indeed a major factor in the happiness of societies and the continuity of progress and prosperity.”

The Sheikh CEO is a leader who seeks success every hour of the day, but he strives for significance and impact.

This was not a new strategic direction or something that was yet to start. It came after decades of philanthropic work and strategic initiatives aimed at giving, with a major focus on the Arab region and emerging markets. When the Sheikh discussed the region with a Newsweek reporter, who asked which issues were on his agenda for the future, he said, “This region is my region. Its people are my brothers and sisters and its history is the basis of my identity… Therefore, it is not on my agenda, it is my agenda. It defines all of my work and most of my initiatives.”[127]

A committed philanthropist and a welfare advocate, Sheikh Mohammed stressed that the UAE has always worked hard for the stability of this region and upheld its historic responsibility to all the people in the Arab world.

The Newsweek reporter noted that the Sheikh's eyes danced with warmth when he spoke of new initiatives that were set to yet again enhance the standard of living in the region, but that it was also possible to detect a sense of sadness and concern.[128]

"I don't use humanitarian initiatives for any political or economic purpose," Sheikh Mohammed said. "We do it because we believe that those who turn their backs on the suffering of others also turn their backs on their own humanity." He added that religion, sect and ethnicity have no bearing whatsoever on the emirate's work.[129]

The Sheikh's many philanthropic efforts are included under the umbrella of the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives (MBRGI). This foundation pays special attention to the challenges that face the Arab region. In a few decades, the various initiatives have benefitted more than 54 million people, from treating the visually impaired to helping school children, from promoting reading and acts of kindness to inspiring hope in their society. The Sheikh has always said that we do not want our youth to dream about their future, we want them to live those dreams.

These initiatives are not designed to be a form of charity. In Sheikh Mohammed's words, they aim to institutionalise the business of hope to ensure sustainable giving by making the best use of resources and focusing on clear, well-defined development goals. Under one of the programmes, some 50,000 young entrepreneurs were trained with the hope of creating half a million new job opportunities. Another programme aimed to train a million Arab coders, while another provided innovation incubators to support 5,000 Arab researchers and innovators.

When we set up the Dubai School of Government (now known as the Mohammed bin Rashid School of Government) in 2005, the Sheikh was keen for us to launch a Masters in Public Administration programme (MPA) because he knew that an effective government was at the heart of the development of any nation. We worked hard with the Kennedy School of Government (Harvard University) to develop the programme, and we were about to launch it in 2008. My first proposal to the Sheikh was that we should have the first few cohorts dedicated to Dubai Government employees and he agreed with that idea. Then he asked about the region and how we could use the school to better prepare future leaders in regional government. We suggested that we offer financial assistance and partial scholarships to some aspiring young Arab government officials. The Sheikh nodded and decreed a full scholarship programme for a whole class of Arab government officials. Just like that, he started training future leaders in the region.

“We may not live for hundreds of years, but the products of our creativity can leave a legacy long after we are gone”

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

His engagement in philanthropic activities across the world has grown the Sheikh’s impact and fan base. He is admired by many, especially in the Arab world. Mohammed Sabil, from Sudan, wrote about Sheikh Mohammed, praising his Arab Reading Challenge initiative, which was launched in 2015 to encourage young Arabs to read more. It was designed in a way that allowed each participant to assess how much reading they have done over a year, and via a process of measuring and judging, selects a finalist that will win $1 million. Yes, that's more than a Nobel Prize[130] – an annual prize of $1 million to encourage young Arabs to read.

Sabil said, "In Sudan, we have a traditional saying that describes a person who is always doing good, without being asked to or promoted. Loosely translated, the saying is, 'Light does not need to be told to brighten up a place', it simply does that on its own. Light falls on anything dark and brightens it, and people like that are lighthouses in our lives. They do good, and they are driven by their own thoughts because they know it is the right thing to do, not because they have been asked or someone is looking. They give us all hope and are a great role model to follow."[131]

These initiatives have not only benefitted millions, but they were lighthouse projects. They put a spotlight on key issues, challenges and opportunities. They were also copied elsewhere, causing a ripple effect. The 1 Million Arab Coders Initiative, launched by the Sheikh to train a million Arab youth in coding, was adopted shortly after by the Government of Oman, which worked with the same partners to launch a similar programme targetting 1,000 Omani youth. One year after that, and led by the Sheikh himself, a similar programme was launched in Jordan with the Crown Prince Foundation. Directly and indirectly, the philanthropic initiatives have had, and continue to have, a major impact on the region.

Reflecting on The Executive Office and the system the Sheikh has built around him, the large group across the nation that he calls 'my team' mostly agree that the whole ecosystem is unique. To describe it in one line, it is 'high energy, high impact'. Once you work around the Sheikh in his office and ecosystem, you can't leave. Omar Al Olama, UAE Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence, who worked in The Executive Office before becoming a minister, talks about this ecosystem.

“The drive, passion, energy and impact… you can’t get that anywhere else. People who leave try to come back. They are hooked. Hooked on adrenaline, like management consultants or investment bankers, but there is more. You get hooked on impact and doing well by doing good. We feel our work is making an impact in our country, and we achieve impact in the region.”

Sheikh Mohammed has said to us many times, “You can’t be successful in a bad neighbourhood, and you can’t achieve your best if you say no to any request for help that you can actually fulfil. You can only lead and develop and progress if you are a role model and you act what you preach.” There is a huge sense of doing the right thing because it will lead to more success and progress, so you do more of the right thing and it becomes a positive cycle.

Significance, not just success. My personal favourite initiative – and it is very difficult to choose a favourite one as they all help millions of people – is the Arab Hope Makers. That is exactly what Sheikh Mohammed is to me, a hope maker. He is a great leader, a nation builder, an astute businessman, a government leader and a great horseman, but above all, he is a hope maker.

Launched in 2017, the Arab Hope Makers initiative honours and celebrate individuals who dedicate their lives to helping others. The initiative calls for submissions and nominations from around the Arab region – a region that is in desperate need for hope. In 2018, over 87,000 submissions came through. The initiative rewards one winner with AED 1 million in recognition of their efforts and to support their mission so they can help as many people as possible.

This is a great way to round the circle on the Sheikh CEO’s leadership model. A great leader does not only enable his people to achieve, he helps them find meaning in their achievement. He believes that “there is a sense of goodness in every person and a merciful and generous soul inside each of us”.

Lessons In Leadership

Timing is everything; many great ideas in this world do not see the light of day because of bad communication and timing. Even if you think you have the best idea in the world, do not underestimate the value of proper communication, and at the heart of branding is the timing for the pitch and/or launch. A leader is like a great orchestra conductor, (s)he knows exactly when to call the right time, with the right move.

Manage the ‘new’ media age. There is no escape from the digital age. The future is here, and just like leaders of the past had to learn to manage tough interviews, dealing with media and writing speeches, today each leader must develop a high level of competency in managing the new media world, especially social media. Not only does this help deliver your messages to a wider audience much more directly and much faster than in the past, it also makes you as a leader more approachable. People can reach you, and this makes a real difference.

At the heart of being an excellent communicator is your ability to listen. Listening allows you to understand and connect. When you do that, communication comes naturally. You have two ears and one mouth. That is nature’s way of saying you should listen twice as much as you speak.

Make your own coffee. In many instances in life, we need a clear mind to make the right decisions. Never make a decision in a stressed or tired state. A leader needs to be able to manage the mental stress and physical pressure, especially in times of crisis. While there are many pieces of advice about complex systems and remedies to manage stress, the most effective approach is going back to basics – sleep well, take long walks and make your own coffee.

Learn to tell stories. Tell stories that capture people’s hearts and explain your unique contribution and impact. Make sure your stories start with ‘why’. Simon Sinek studied the communication patters of great leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr, Steve Jobs and the Wright Brothers, and concluded that they all started with why. It was their natural ability to start with why that enabled them to inspire those around them and to achieve remarkable things.

Work for something greater than yourself. Focus on people, doing good and making an impact. Great things happen to those who work towards a bigger purpose. There is more joy, satisfaction and fulfilment in that type of work.

Look after number one. This is not about being selfish or exclusively looking after yourself. This is about keeping in mind that you are a person who needs to rest, get good nutrition and enjoy life. If you forget to look after yourself, then you will not be your best, and you – in return – can’t look after the people, projects and goals you care about. Have a hobby that you enjoy, go for walks, meditate and stay physically active.

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Epilogue

We shall go to Mars

There is no looking back, and anything less than number one is not acceptable. That is the driving force behind the Sheikh CEO and that is why, and how, he keeps going. His vision inspires a nation, if not a whole region.

In 2016, he continued the journey by setting a new milestone for his nation: Mars. Unveiling the plans for the mission, which will see Emirati scientists and engineers build a probe called Hope that will enter Mars' orbit and contribute new data to the international science community, Sheikh Mohammed said, "This probe represents hope for millions of young Arabs looking for a better future. There is no future, no achievement, no life without hope."

He added that the Emirates Mars Mission would send three important messages: "The first message is for the world: that Arab civilisation once played a great role in contributing to human knowledge and will play that role again.

"The second message is to our Arab brethren: that nothing is impossible and that we can compete with the greatest of nations in the race for knowledge.

"The third message is for those who strive to reach the highest of peaks: set no limits to your ambitions and you can reach even to space."[132]

Undeterred by commentators concerned about the cost and economy, Sheikh Mohammed said the project was a necessary investment: "We need such projects to prove to the world that Arabs are capable of resuming their role as a world civilisation, that we are capable of contributing to the development of human knowledge, that we are able to compete globally to reach Mars and that all of this can be done by Emirati engineers. That is an important milestone in restoring confidence in our civilisation."[133]

He added, "The duty of governments is to anticipate the future and prepare ahead. What matters is figuring out which sectors will lead the world's economy in the years to come and ensuring that [they] are part of these sectors". That has been Sheikh Mohammed's outlook on the global economy for decades and remains his plan to maintain a sustainable nation in that future.

"Who would have thought that 10 years ago, a company such as Apple would be much larger than 100 year-old oil companies?" he argued. "A company like Uber is a world leader in transport, yet has no fleet and no drivers. It is valued at more than $70 billion, yet is only a few years old. The world economy is going through economic transformations that need to be understood and built upon."

Just like business models and global companies decline and disappear when new models emerge, so do nations. To him, governments who are not alert to the challenges they face will lag behind.

On the 4th of February 2015, he wrote, "Companies, like people, grow old. They start life small, fuelled by youthful energy and fresh ideas. They compete, expand, mature and eventually, with few exceptions, fade into obscurity. The same is true of governments. They can lose the hunger and ambition of youth and allow themselves to become complacent. Countries whose governments grow old face the same fate as outdated companies. Their choice is simple: innovate or become irrelevant. To avoid this fate, governments must focus on what really matters."[134]

As always, the Sheikh’s vision extends to the Arab world – his region. Following the launch of the Emirates Mars Mission, in 2019 he worked with other Arab space agencies to form the first Arab body for space cooperation. The body’s first project will be a satellite that Arab scientists will build together in the UAE. Again, he gave the project a name which inspired hope across the region.

Launching the project at the Global Space Congress, taking place in Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohammed said, “This satellite will be called 813, which is the year in which the House of Wisdom in Baghdad reached the height of its reputation during the reign of Al-Ma’mun. The House of Wisdom brought together scientists, translated books of knowledge and became a place where the region’s scientific community flourished.”[135]

“Whoever convinces himself that he is not worthy of first position has doomed himself to failure from the very beginning”

[136]

His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

It was a major symbolic cry to the region. The satellite was to be built in the UAE by engineers from 11 Arab nations working side by side, and the name was invoking Arab history.[137]

Both missions are as much about science as they are about nation building and inspiring a whole generation. The Sheikh has been clear that going to Mars is an investment in people more than technology. Through this project, he aims to train hundreds of engineers, scientists and researchers specialising in space sciences and advanced technology. More importantly, he aims to inspire tens of thousands to engage in science, engineering and technology. These are missions to train and inspire a whole generation.

For Sheikh Mohammed, investing in the future, in non-tangible assets such as minds and in innovative sectors “is what will give future generations the chance to dream big”.

About The Author

Yasar Jarrar, PhD, has worked at The Executive Office of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE, Ruler of Dubai, in a career spanning various roles within the UAE and Dubai governments. An expert in strategy, public policy and innovation, Dr Jarrar served as Director of Strategy in Sheikh Mohammed's Executive Office for more than five years, was the founding Executive Dean of the Dubai School of Government (now known as the Mohammed bin Rashid School of Government) and was a Research Fellow at the John F Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. He previously held positions as Senior Advisor on Public Sector Development at the Prime Minister's Office within the UAE Federal Government and Head of Policy & Strategy in Dubai's Executive Council.

Having played a leading role in launching key initiatives such as the Dubai Strategic Plan, Dubai Government Performance Measurement System, Dubai Institute for Human Resources Development and Mohammed bin Rashid Leadership Development Program, Dr Jarrar has gone on to provide advisory services around the globe as a partner for PricewaterhouseCoopers and Bain & Company. He was recognised in 2009 as a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum.

Before working in Dubai, Dr Jarrar was a Research Fellow in the Cranfield School of Management at Cranfield University, United Kingdom. Today, he lives in Dubai and continues to share the lessons he has learned from the Sheikh CEO.

THE SHEIKH CEO
LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP
From Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum

The rise of Dubai is a remarkable story, one which has created a brand synonymous with superlatives and dynamism and put it among the world's leading cities. As a result of its connectivity, bold futuristic projects, ease of doing business, hub status and robust trading networks, Dubai has emerged as the Hong Kong of South Asia, the Miami of Africa and the Singapore of the Middle East.

This book is not about Dubai. It is about the Sheikh who built Dubai into a global hub, his leadership style and the way he operates. His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE, Ruler of Dubai, is – by any measure – one of the most known and admired leaders in the region. He has created an extraordinary legacy through his bold vision and ability to deliver, often against all odds.

Dr Yasar Jarrar worked at Sheikh Mohammed's Executive Office for several years in a career spanning various roles within the UAE and Dubai governments. In this enlightening book, he distils the lessons to be learned from observing Sheikh Mohammed first hand and gives readers an insider's view of the Sheikh CEO who runs Dubai, his personal leadership model and how he delivers. Whether or not you aspire to be a political or public leader, any leader or manager can improve his or her capabilities by studying Sheikh Mohammed's lessons in leadership.

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