

From The Book – Psychology of Arab Management Thinking!

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November 8, 2008.

B.8. - The ‘Foreign’ Arab Manager.

Introduction.

Be careful when you fight with that rather what you think insignificant Staff that is in your Office. You do not know the private connections he has with the top brass. Be weary especially of Clerks and Secretaries, especially if you value that job of yours. This has happened to me, and that is how I lost my last job in UAE!

Do you have this Arab Boss (or anyone else for that matter!) who is always narrow minded, naïve, proud, conceited and thinks that he is the ‘smartest and most intelligent being’ to inhabit the face of the earth – and the rest of you all are invariably and unbelievably so ‘shallow, unintelligent and stupid bumbling fools? He is always cynical and skeptical – always good at finding faults and causing friction, harm and damages? If you work like a donkey he does not care, but with the first error or mistake, he will come with guns blazing?

A person that you simply cannot even dare to try to express your own opinion or view - especially if that one is completely different from that one of your Boss? Or even if it is within your job auspices and authority, but you just cannot say anything about it? You never dare to stand up to someone who is more ‘powerful and stronger’ to you, because you just do not have the courage and guts to do so?

Or you are scared stiff that you will lose favor, and maybe the first one to go whenever the ‘big Boss’ feels like it? If you are especially an Expatriate, and however good and dynamic you are in your job, this threat and danger is more vulnerable for you? It can happen to locals too, especially when you are new and on probation – even to long serving Staff when the ‘sales graphs’ start to show a downward trend.

That is the time ‘for showing and punishing time’ for these type of bosses. Only they are so confident that the Board of Directors and Owners will not touch even a hair on their head, because

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they are that ‘important and indispensable’ – they are the Companies and the Companies are them. 25 to 30 years later they are still on the ‘seats of power’, so they have to be right! Who dares rock the boat, or bring in new blood with more pragmatic innovative latest technology and ideas? No one – especially as the times are difficult, and not expansion but survival becomes the key factor and with all those KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) just to SURVIVE – not to grow and expand.

Thus no risk taking of any kind, even minor for that matter is shunned and not allowed. Conform and go with the tide – or the tide will drown you! Or go with the flow of the river! Or if you are a bird – then either do not fly – but if you want to, then go with the direction of the air and wind! What if we have thunder and lightening, like we had recently – what do we do? I leave that to your imagination!

Seriously though, my first experiences with this Arab Levant Group work-wise was when I was working in this Oil Company in Abu Dhabi as a Training Planner. My boss was a local, but he was bewitched and influenced greatly by this group. The Levant Arabs I met there were mainly Palestinians, Lebanese, Jordanians, Syrians and Egyptians – though there were also some Libyans, Moroccans and Algerians too. His Secretary was Syrian (the above Secretary thing applies to her!). His Second in Command was Syrian too. Though I was supposed to report formally to this local boss, the Syrian guy was able to marginalise and wedge me out – and whatever what I produced to the Boss, I found it on the desk of this Syrian guy waiting for his comments and approval. Though the Internal communications were all in English, they both wrote to each other in Arabic over my proposals given.

I think they did it on purpose and willfully too. The reasons were stark and crystal clear. Though I was born in Zanzibar in East Africa, our Omani Arab parents and relatives spoke to each other in Arabic, and also to us the children – though many times we spoke back in Swahili, which was an African dialect – but had over 70% of words coming from Arabic words – for example Magharib meaning dawn in Arabic, had an I added to it – which meant the same. The Swahilis (found mainly in the Coastal areas of East Africa, and majority being Muslims) liked to use the vowels at the end of many of the Arabic words that they used – a; e; i; o; and u. For example my name Majid (Glory in Arabic) the Swahili used to call me MajidI and my grandfather’s name Nasser to Nassoro!

What this all meant was that my understanding of the Arabic language was very high, and speaking it was not an issue either. I read the Holy Quran well and was well versed it. I could read typed versions well, and get the gist of meaning to even 80% plus of the contents. Arabic is a difficult and complex language, with its masculine and feminine emphasis (like French has). But Arabic was worse – because just a change of hyphen or mark could mean something else and completely different! Thus could change the whole meaning of the sentence. Instead of things spelled like P – like Pepsi – they used B instead – and thus Bebsi, or bh instead of bh sounds.

My Boss and his Assistant knew my weaknesses in not being able to read clearly handwritten notes, especially if it was scribbled badly. What I used to do is make a Photostat copy of these writings, and ask one Lebanese girl very friendly with me (she is Lebanese Passport holder) to read it for me. If it was not for the fact that those of us from Oman were not allowed legally to marry from outside the AGCC states (Gulf Cooperation Countries – Oman, UAE, Saudi Arabia

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(KSA), Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar) in true honesty I would have dearly loved to get to know better this girl. She was pretty and very smart and intelligent. I liked her a lot, and was afraid I was getting drawn to her closer day by day.

It all stems that I was working alone in Abu Dhabi, though I had a big flat with 5 bedrooms and servant quarters too. My wife and family were coming only once a month to Abu Dhabi, and that made me lonely and vulnerable. However, I started paying attention to one local girl more – though she was a young widower at age of 29 after her husband had died in a tragic road accident, after storming from the house after a fight with her on a flimsy excuse. She had two children aged 12 and 10 – who were both very jealous and envy of me – though her Mother a Saudi was more in favour of me.

Anyway back to the Office and my bosses, and excuse me for my style of getting diverted from the main topic and getting carried away in expressing myself. However, this I am very sure – had I stayed longer there in Abu Dhabi, I might even have married one of these girls as my second wife! You might well as say both of them – as you know we Muslims are Religiously allowed up to 4 wives – so long as you love and treat them equally. And that is a billion dollar question. That is why Religiously we are advised to remain monogamous otherwise!

The good girl used to tell me – one day you will put me in trouble with this lot. I used to promise her I will not. The notes went like this – there he goes writing long stories instead of coming to the point – and the Assistant used to reply – I agree. Will shorten it. Or other kind of crude remarks. If you are a Professional (Human Resources like me), you will come to realize how unethical, uncharacteristic, unprincipled and unprofessional the whole dramas were – not forgetting the pain, hurt, insult and injury too. This was a very difficult time for me, also trying to keep myself clean and principled as a faithful and loyal Husband and Father – with all the attractions around me with the girls seeing I was alone and detached – and with a good job and position too.

I have worked for more than 25 years in a bigger Company and with more girls, but I had never experienced such things before. Perhaps because the girls knew my wife working in the same Company. My first shock was one of the girls asking me for a 'loan of 6000 UAE Dirhams (about US Dollars 2000) and she will repay me after 2 months. After 2 months she told me subtly and calmly she was not in a position to do so, and if we could explore other ways for payback.

Two months later I lost my job abruptly, perhaps in God's mysterious ways, because I was just thinking on what ways that could be. It surely does not spell much intelligence and smartness that it took me that long to find out! Just like the donkey that in the middle of the night started braying loudly! When the other animals asked it why, the donkey replied now he got the joke that was cracked by the rabbit early morning, and at that time the donkey was the only animal confused and puzzled – and not laughing either!

That is how I got into problems with this Syrian Secretary. Her intentions were very clear, and after teasing her that her name was the same like my sister (actually niece!). In the first few days she was very welcoming kind and generous to me, helping me to settle down and feel at comfortable and at ease. But even a drunk fool could not miss the flirting and attraction signs to me.

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However, my local UAE colleagues warned and cautioned me not to get carried away as the two were liaison linked, my boss and this Secretary. And usage of sex was a great weapon and tool I found in my experiences away from my country, though they could have been there too but I did not notice them because I was considered not a good catch or as one of the girls one day angrily retorted to me after teasing her that I was not ‘her cup of tea! – And I retorted unnecessarily as a man that the feelings were mutual!

One month before my job ended abruptly with my local UAE boss, I fell very sick in my big flat there in Abu Dhabi. My son had come from Abu Dhabi to stay with me, and he was working there with one Insurance Company, and his boss was a Sudanese (that is another story, and as the book is not about him we will leave out that story for now!) I had to painfully pick myself to go to the Company approved clinic by taxi.

Each step down was very painful. I realized then I had been eating a lot of Red Meat, and it might have been gout. Both my two feet were swollen and painful. I managed to reach the clinic finally. One strange thing and coincidence, all the doctors and nurses were Levant Arabs. They could not hide their feelings as to how an Omani (neighbor to UAE) had such a high position. I could not understand the Arabic dialect of especially the Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian ones – though with the UAE Nationals I had no problems as such.

I had first phoned the Secretary to say I was very sick and I could not come to the Office. She was running the Office literally with the assumed powers that she got, and everybody was giving her a wide margin – except me of course brought up under British Training, Education and Exposures – and being in Management cohort with The Shell International Company of my last job in that Oil Company (25 years).

If I was in the Cabinet of a Dictatorial regime, and with a clash with his concubine / mistress, I would surely have had my head chopped off in middle of the night, or framed car accident after being shot at point blank. I was very naïve, not discreet – and on hindsight not that smart and intelligent either by picking a fight with this ‘powerful’ Secretary – and treating her formally as a higher official to a Secretary, with respect and esteem of course, but she knowing her place and position – and knowing that I was a more Senior person, if not second but definitely third person highest position in the Human Resources function of that Company per se!

I received 3 days sick leave and informed the good Secretary. She told me to bring the letter to the Office. I do not know where she got this power and authority from, this was the job of my Emirati local boss and not her. However, it is the boss who had delegated and empowered her to do so (as my British boss at one time had told me the difference of delegating and abdicating – like in this case too!).

I was not used to such approaches, but I needed the job badly to feed my stomach and my family’s too – and after the collapse of my Consultancy Firm in Oman with the repercussions of being followed and being hunted for unpaid salaries, invoices and bills – and especially from the Banks. I would not wish bankruptcy and the fall and demise of a business even to my worst adversary.

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This I am sure of – if my Religion did not profess that suicide one goes to eternal damnation and hell, I would have gone on that track – and look for heroism in the process. For once I came close to what a suicide bomber thought – though some of them who destroyed themselves this way were educated peoples, and some even heavily pregnated mothers – and which Mother goes to destroy her own unborn sibling if not in giving up and in surrender – and losing all hopes and that life is not worth anymore living!

Though I was very sick and in pain, I decided to report to work on that day after the 3 days of sick leave had ended. I gave the Medical Chit to Madame Big Secretary. Though I was more Senior to her by many Salary and Job Groups, she threw back the chit to me (Be wary of a woman scorned syndrome!). She told me it was the wrong one. I told her I was new to Abu Dhabi, and this was the first time I was going to a clinic there. My Emirati colleagues advised me not to go against her and the dominating system. One of them called the clinic, and they promised to fax the original document to great Madam Secretary, which was done. I told her the good news.

She crudely replied back – No way! If you do not bring you the original, we will deduct all 5 days of absence, 3 days sick leave and the two days before that as Company Policy (The irony was that though I was a Senior person I never got to see these Policies, only the Secretary and my peer – both Syrian, and one Palestinian (though she was Junior to me) had copies – but not me. When I asked my Emirati boss, he told me that if I had any query I could ask any one of the three (he himself did not have a copy, or if he did he did not know where it was!)

I got really angry and pissed off. It started bad that morning, used to reverse parking in my old Company, and whilst I was doing that, I got a rebuke and warning by a Police car – though my protestations bore no fruit (ironically the Police here were Yemenis, and not UAE citizens). UAE National forms a minority, the majority being foreigners and the Levant a large sized majority – unalike my country where we were the majority – but I could not get a job there in Human Resources (see E series – Sorry Sir, You Are Over 50 – and Fifties Is Not Old).

I told her deduct five days or even one month. I do not care or bother, but I am still sick and will not bother to get the original document (or even go again to that clinic after the crude and rude treatment – there was only one Indian Doctor that I would go to see again, but not the Levant ones for sure. I know this for sure to this day – I was angry and was talking in a loud voice – but I was not rude. She Madame Secretary started crying loudly and ugly – and everybody came to ask her what was the matter. The Lebanese girl came to me and asked me to go quickly and apologise to her, before the boss came back. Would you believe before this stupid me too had asked her why she was crying – and that made her increase the volume and deciphels only!

The Big Boss called me. He started to reprimand and talk to me like a Principal of a School to a student caught smoking hashish (marijuana). He told me – see what you have done to L? I give you two choices. Either you resign yourself, or we find an excuse to terminate you (he found one eventually that my job was going to be Emiratised – though by the AGCC Charter Cooperation between Member States, I was supposed to be treated the same like one – though I was from Oman).

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I told him I will not resign, and he can terminate me instead – but I will complain to The Oman Embassy in Abu Dhabi (later on sadly I found it was no use thing!) and The Ministry of Petroleum and The GCC Bureau in Abu Dhabi (both two of no use either – poor helpless peoples have no rights, freedom or say in this part of the world – and thus coming out of my book now!). A UAE friend and the GM (also UAE National) wanted to avoid an International Incident (and between two AGCC countries) and asked me to accept a letter saying that the Company has accepted my Resignation with ‘deep sorrow and regret’ and the other letter will be of showing the job was going to be Emiratised – to protect both interests. I ruefully and sadly realized my time had come (every dog has his day!) and I had rather reluctantly and dismally to accept the inevitable.

They allowed me to keep the flat for another 4 months, but I had to pay my own Electricity, Water and Telephone – and came to realize that with these three elements only that life was very expensive. It is a great pain and shock for me to face termination in the work force for the first time in my life, this had never happened to me ever before. There is always a First Time, and that is the whole crunch and gist of the matter. As I was saying goodbyes, I saw the Secretary now very happy and giving a high five to the boss. Nothing surprising to me, I had caught him many times massaging her neck, and pecking kiss on her neck after finishing. I thought it was the Secretary who was massaging the boss, and not the other way around!

I was distressed and was wondering about the street like a lost hare or a fish caught on a net. I was talking to Madam on the phone in Oman, but she had the audacity and the further insult and injury to cut me off and not let me finish – because she had to arrange a meeting (Coincidence of coincidence she was a Secretary too, though her boss was a woman – but so what my angry mind was telling me – it could be her or another young man in the Office too.

For a very long time to come I never came to trust no more any Secretary for that matter – or any lady working for that matter. My suspicions further increased to see Madam wife was not to keen to see me return to Oman after losing my job badly this way , but that is another story for now – including that part of family members saying that I always ‘quarreled and fought with bosses, especially my sister in Abu Dhabi. That too is another story – with my wife’s way of treating me in giving the bad news. I knew the why some men left their families, and why they never ever returned! Disappear completely with a new life (and wife)!

Actually the incidents in Abu Dhabi were a great eye opener and awakening for me. I used to cry and weep when I saw Palestinians (and Lebanese) being treated badly by the Israelis in the TVs, but I went cold and unattached after this ugly and hurtful experiences in Abu Dhabi. Every basket has bad fish (fruits), but I can say this in generalizations – my treatment with the Levant (of course not to exclude The Emirati boss, whom in the beginning was a good friend to me – I must admit, even confirming me after one month (instead of three months) and giving me the big flat (after one month too – the rest even locals 3 months, and Levants 6 months!). I have never to this day ever trusted or acknowledged Levants as friends.

I recall the Syrian colleague saying very nasty and bad things about the Emiratis, even to the extent of saying their women stinked and were ugly, and that was why the Emirati men and boys went after Levant women. The Levant control much of the Private and Public Sector too, especially in Abu Dhabi and in Al Ain, though I hear now with the younger Ruler things have started to change,

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with Emiratis taking over and more in control of their own fate and destiny – which is very good and welcome news, and I congratulate them from deep in my heart. I have to feel for UAE, with direct family members and relatives as UAE Nationals (I advise you to read also E Series – The Garbage Truck on Saudi Arabia fiasco too).

From day one the Levants especially were jealous and envious of me, and how I got treated better than them, and near them too. I had an Emirati girl who too did not like the Levants (even her uncle who was from a famous tribe in Abu Dhabi. This in short how much they were hated and being despised, and I could understand their feelings per se. When I had made a presentation on Performance Appraisal System to the Management Team (slides in English) unfortunately the Indian Finance Director was late, and they asked me – why are you talking to us in English (I am more fluent in!)

The GM knew the politics at bay, and said to me kindly – just wait till he comes, and the rowdy crowd reminding them that English was the Official Language, both inside and outside the Company – and to leave me alone as I was doing a good job. This was three weeks after joining the place, they even said to each other – the man near you (me) – who gave him an Arabic country passport, and his Arabic is not good? I was brown complexion – so he said maybe he is Indian or Pakistani? They talked to each other in Arabic, as if dumb and stupid me could not understand what they were saying.

See my First Arab Manager, nothing new. Besides the point of cutting you off and interrupting you, this other nasty trait is talking bad and ill of use by catch phrases, innuendos and metaphors. That is how we Arabs are, and how the cookie crumbles.

Not to bore you with more sordid details, but I had an Egyptian Estate Agent who came to insult us in the Offices and making my Omani girls in the Office cry together, and the Lebanese and Consultant (HR) who were insulting our intelligence of our knowledge and expertise of HR (me my Omani Lady General Manager, and my Assistant) by condescending and patronising approach – till I pulled rank to say I will not authorize payments for such a low grade and lousy work produced as a HR Project (submitted before I had joined the place, and they thought they were dealing with the kind of Omanis they met before who rose as Clerks and Public Affairs Clerks to Human Resources Managers and Directors.

They learnt the hard way that they were dealing with, and this group are more easier to use all the dirty books to get business or on their side – even in offering money and services – but I was no such taker. I had at one time direct control of 16 million US Dollars budget in one of my jobs as Training in charge, but did not take even one penny which did not belong to me. What peoples forget is the true Islam, and how to behave and interface and interact with each other – even in job aspects and responsibilities.

In conclusion, this was the longest article written by me, both as was the last one and kept to the last as the most difficult, hard and painful chapter in my life – with the Levants featuring prominently.

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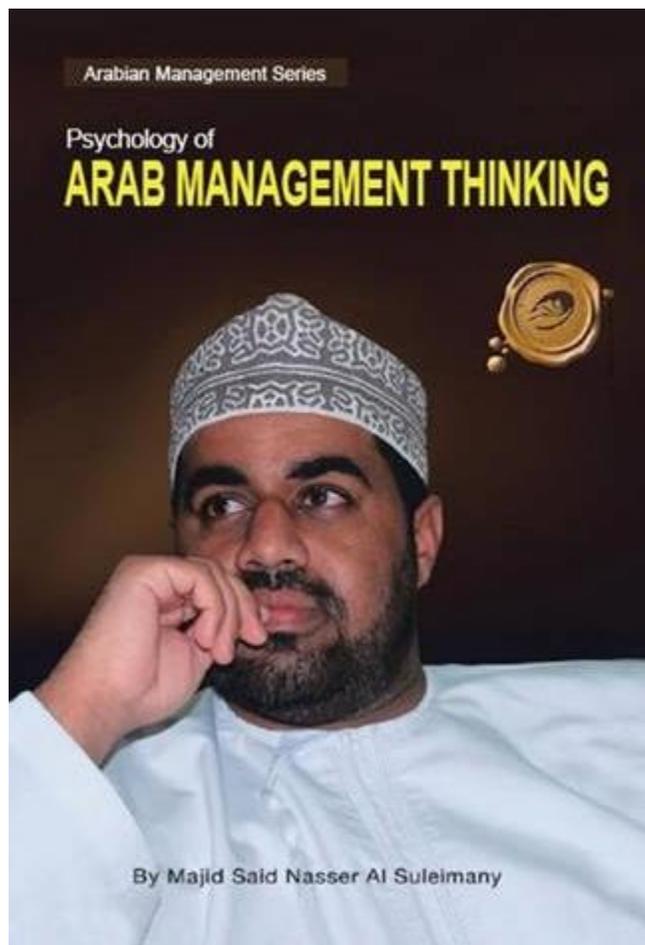
It took me a long time to change and adjust, but here in Oman I had the greatest fan, admirer and supporter in an Egyptian Engineer – and that makes me feel more guilty and feeling of conscience pricking, self-analysis and soul search. Bottom line we are all human beings, milk of humane kindness and different ways to tick!

End

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