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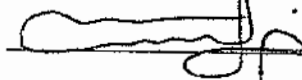
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# **THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL**

## **The Influence of National Culture on Leadership Styles in Saudi Arabia**

Being a Thesis Submitted for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in the University of Hull

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## **Abstract**

Globalisation, nowadays, has increased the need to comprehend how cultural differences affect leadership styles, especially given the potential impact on organisational performance.

In the Middle East and Saudi Arabia in particular, organisational performance has been claimed to be held back by national cultural values, but it is currently unclear how leaders in Saudi organisations are negotiating the balance between national cultural values and modern influences, and how the values they uphold may influence their leadership roles and practices. In order to develop leadership in the Saudi context, there is a real need to understand better the relationship between culture and leadership. Therefore, this study investigates to what extent and how the national culture influences the leadership process.

The study was conducted in the utilities sector, the organisations that provide the three main public services; telecommunications, water and electricity. Qualitative data were collected by means of a multiple holistic case study strategy, involving interviews with nine managers and eighteen subordinates, and subjected to interpretive thematic analysis. Seven influencing factors were identified, with tension between the traditional factors of social norms, tribalism, regional affiliation, and *wasta*, perceived as having negative impacts, and the modernising influences of education and technology, perceived as positive. Islamic values reflected an ambiguous position, theoretically positive but purportedly misunderstood or incorrectly applied. The outcomes challenge universal views of leadership and suggest a distinctive Arab leadership style, albeit one facing contestation. The outcomes are expected to contribute to theories of culture and leadership, and to leadership practice in Saudi organisations.

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to:

The greatest woman I have ever known, my mother.

The lady to whom I am most grateful, my lovely wife.

My very sweet children, Abdullah, Joud, Alanood, and Maha.

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## **Abbreviations**

A	Autonomous
CEOs	Chief Executive Officers
CVB	Charismatic Value-Based
CVS	Chinese Value Survey
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GLOBE	Global Leadership and Organisational Behaviour Effectiveness
HO	Humane-Oriented
HRM	Human Resource Management
IBM	International Business Machines
IDV	Individualism
IVR	Indulgence versus Restraint
LTO	Long-Term versus short-term Orientation
MAS	Masculinity
MIP	Management from an Islamic Perspective
NWC	National Water Company
P	Participative
PD	Power Distance
SABIC	Saudi Arabia Basic Industries Corporation
SEC	Saudi Electricity Company
SP	Self-Preserving
STC	Saudi Telecommunications Company
TO	Team-Oriented
TSE	Treated Sewage Effluent
VFW	Values for Work
UA	Uncertainty Avoidance
WTO	World Trade Organisation

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background and Research Problem

This research explores how aspects of national culture influence perceptions and practices of leadership in Saudi utility organisations. As leadership is a highly sought-after and highly valued commodity, it has gained the attention of researchers and professionals worldwide. The public, as well, has become increasingly captivated by the idea of leadership. In addition, people continue to ask themselves and others what makes good leaders. Individuals, also, seek more information on how to become effective leaders (Northouse, 2010). In this study the understanding of leadership is based on the following definition:

“a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2010:3).

This definition has been selected because it encompasses a number of elements common to many definitions of leadership (see the literature review, Chapter 2, section 2.2), and does not assume a specific leadership style, model, or position in the organisation. As an initial working definition, therefore, it provides a broad framework of elements against which to examine conceptualizations of leadership in the distinctive Saudi context.

Globalisation, nowadays, has increased the need to comprehend how cultural differences affect leadership styles. The impact of national culture and leadership styles on organisational performance is huge. Although there are still debates among anthropologists and sociologists regarding the meaning of the word culture, it can be defined as “the learned beliefs, values, rules, norms, symbols, and traditions that are common to a group of people” (Northouse, 2010:336). Hofstede et al. (2010:6) defined

culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another”.

Previous writers have suggested that in the Middle East and Saudi Arabia in particular, organisational performance is held back by national cultural values (Idris, 2007). For example, Hutchings and Weir (2006a) have referred to authoritarian leadership and to “wasta” (strictly, intermediation, but often interpreted as favouritism, cronyism or nepotism). Such behaviours are sometimes expressed in terms of cultural dimensions of Power Distance and Individualism versus Collectivism (Hofstede et al., 2010). Hofstede uses the term Power Distance to mean the extent to which a society accepts the existence of inequalities, while Individualism versus Collectivism reflects the extent to which individuals’ identity and interests are bound to those of a larger group: family, tribe, or community. Hofstede’s original data collection methods and his claim to have identified national cultural characteristics have been criticized (McSweeney, 2002a, 2002b). However, some researchers have found these terms useful in describing cultural traits, even if they have preferred to view them as individually held values rather than commonly held national traits (Brewer & Venaik, 2011). There have also been suggestions that such traits may have an influence on leadership style. For example, Saudi Arabia has been characterized as high in Power Distance (Bjerke & Al-Meer, 1993), which would seem to imply that transformational leadership may be difficult or disfavoured.

Hofstede took a functionalist approach, researching “national culture as a given regularity” (Williamson, 2002:1375) and adopting statistical techniques that avoid or suppress subjective interpretations. Similar approaches have been adopted by a number of other researchers, who offered their own dimensional typologies. Key examples (which will be discussed further in Chapter Two) are Trompenaars (1993); Schwartz (1994; 2004) and the GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organisational Behaviour Effectiveness) study

(House et al. 2004). In contrast, others describe culture in more qualitative terms. For example, Atiyyah (1993) discussed the traditional social system in Saudi Arabia, AlRasheed (2002) included some observations on cultural characteristics in her *History of Saudi Arabia*, while Khan et al. (2010) discussed Islamic values and their implications for human resource management (HRM).

Interestingly, studies in the former category, that is, based on large scale surveys and statistical analysis of cultural variables, have not explicitly discussed Saudi Arabia; they have either discussed other selected Gulf countries, or have reported on the Arab world as a whole. Studies of a more qualitative nature have discussed aspects of Arab and Saudi culture, but have not considered in depth the relevance of culture for leadership in Saudi organisations. This is an unfortunate omission, as Saudi Arabia offers an interesting context. On the one hand, it is a country which for many years attempted to remain “closed” from foreign influences, and one which, to the present day takes seriously its position as the birthplace of Islam and upholder of Islamic values (AlRasheed, 2010). On the other hand, it has been exposed to Western influences in business through heavy reliance on expatriate workers, a new breed of Western educated managers, and accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) bringing closer integration into the global economy. In this situation, it is currently unclear how leaders in Saudi organisations are negotiating the balance between national cultural values and modern influences, and how the values they uphold may influence their leadership style.

Although dozens of leadership theories and models exist, yet the question raised two decades ago by Schriesheim and Neider (1993:17), in a review and critique of several such models, “Have we developed general approaches to leadership which, when applied to the training and development of leaders, clearly increase their organisational performance?” still remains. In the current state of Saudi Arabia, the answer to this

question, unfortunately, is most likely to be "perhaps not". It is reported that Saudi leaders and managers are often restrained by concern or rather fear of failure; they generally are unwilling to take risk into innovation (Drummond & Al-Anazi, 1997). This, of course, does not mean that all Saudi leaders are equally cautious. However, such reluctance and caution can be seen in respects of high reliance on authority and low delegation compared to their counterparts in European and North American organisations (Ali & Swiercz, 1993), although Islam advocates self-reliance as a source of success (Ali, 1988). Thus, there are suggestions that the leadership situation in Saudi organisations desperately needs to be improved, due to some cultural values that have been inherited through the ages (Idris, 2007). In order to develop leadership in the Saudi context, there is a real need to understand better the relationship between culture and leadership. Therefore, this study investigates to what extent and how the national culture influences the leadership process, focusing on the utility sector in Saudi Arabia. The utility sector is of particular interest in the Saudi context, because the utility companies were set up to distribute the benefits accruing from the country's abundant natural resources, and in theory should benefit everyone, but there are suggestions that this is not the case. These companies play a major role in the Saudi economy, so it is a matter of national concern if they are not run well. At the same time, technical constraints specific to the sector, and cultural constraints common to Saudi industry as a whole, potentially challenge the process of leadership in this sector. The Saudi economy and the role of the utilities sector within it, are discussed in more detail in section 1.6, while background about the selected companies is provided in section 1.7.

## **1.2 Research Objectives**

This research aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To explore how leadership is conceptualized by leaders and subordinates in Saudi utilities organisations.
2. To investigate how cultural factors influence the way leadership is conceived and practised in the Saudi context.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

This study undertakes primarily to investigate how national culture influences leadership in Saudi organisations, particularly in the utilities sector. Specifically, it attempts to answer the following questions:

- How do leaders and subordinates in Saudi utilities organisations understand the leader's role?
- How do leaders and subordinates perceive the qualities and behaviours that characterize an effective leader?
- To what extent, and in what ways, are leadership roles and practices in utilities organisations influenced by cultural factors, e.g. religious (Islamic) values, social norms, tribal customs and traditions, regional affiliation, the education system, and technology changes?
- For each of the cultural factors identified, to what extent is the factor perceived as having a positive or negative impact on leadership effectiveness?

### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

Most of the preceding studies in the area of culture and leadership have focused mainly on cross-cultural impacts of leadership within diverse societies, which means that these studies were conducted in different societies involving comparisons, interchanges, convergences and divergences, and so on (At-Twajjri et al. 1994; Hunt & At-Twajjri, 1996a,b). However, overarching cultural factors, in Saudi Arabia in particular, have not



been investigated in terms of their influence on the leadership process. Leadership style in turn is likely to affect organisational performance, despite the remarkable growth and the huge investments in both governmental and private sectors. Therefore, the significance of this research is derived from the importance of cultural values as influential factors in society as well as the importance of the leadership style as a strategic and critical organisational tool. Therefore, it is imperative to look at these cultural factors, and to explore how each one of these factors affects the leadership process in the context of Saudi Arabia. Towards this end, this study looks in depth at the impact of diverse aspects of national culture on conceptualization and practice of the leadership process within Saudi Arabia, where the literature review and personal experience have revealed that there is a scarcity of information, especially given the closed nature of Saudi society (AlRasheed, 2002).

It is of particular significance that this study focuses on the utilities sector, which has attracted little attention in the Saudi research context. The utilities sector comprises large, production-based, bureaucratic organisations which are distinct from both the small family businesses that dominate Saudi business, and the large American organisations which import Western business practices. They thus present an opportunity to contribute to cross-cultural business literature by providing insight into Arab and specifically Saudi approaches to leadership. Since these companies have been subject to a programme of Saudization, requiring a preferential employment of Saudi nationals rather than expatriates, leadership in these companies is expected to reflect local cultural influences more strongly than in companies more reliant on an expatriate workforce.

It is predicted that this research will enable leaders and subordinates alike to be more aware of the intertwined cultural factors and their impact on the leadership process. Thus,

this study can be of theoretical and practical benefit to Saudi society, and to the wider academic and business communities, in a number of ways:

From a theoretical perspective, the study provides new, deep insight into the set of cultural factors that most affect the conceptualization and exercise of leadership in the Saudi context, and how these impacts are manifested. It identifies seven major interacting factors (Islamic values, social norms, tribalism, regional affiliation, *wasta*, education and technology) found to influence leadership in the organisations studied, which may encourage appreciation and further study of the salience of these and other such factors when discussing leadership in cross-cultural contexts. In particular, it provides insight into the extent (and limitations) of applicability of Western derived concepts and theories of leadership in non-Western contexts, illustrating how context – specific cultural factors may modify their interpretation and shape or constrain their application. Challenging universal conceptualizations of leadership, it contributes to development of the notion of a specifically Arab style of leadership, which has been suggested in other Arab states but not demonstrated in Saudi Arabia, containing charismatic, transformational, autocratic and transactional components. It contributes also to understanding of the complex interplay between traditional and modernising cultural influences and the contested relationship between espoused and enacted values in Saudi leadership.

At a practical level, the research will potentially be of value to leaders in Saudi organisations, particularly the new generation of educated leaders keen to apply modern management theories, by offering new insight into the challenges they encounter. Rather than offering simplistic prescriptions, the research sheds light on the dynamics of leadership with its associated contestations in the selected Saudi organisations. In this way it contributes to alerting organisations and their leaders to issues that need to be considered in their planning and practice, such as the implications for workplace morale,

organisation efficiency and public relations. This in turn may help them to tailor, explain and implement their leadership in culturally appropriate ways so as to enhance organisation effectiveness. Such insights will also benefit the Saudi government as owner or major shareholder of these organisations, in the context of its modernizing agenda and ambitions for the Kingdom. By identifying how cultural and related factors impinge on organisational leadership, whether as supportive factors or as impediments, the study may provide insight into areas where government intervention (for example through training initiatives and investment in technology) can contribute to promoting desired outcomes. Moreover, particularly in the context of Saudi Arabia's accession to the WTO, the insights into Saudi culture and organisation leadership afforded by this study could be useful to individuals and organisations in other countries doing or considering business in Saudi Arabia.

Finally, from a methodological perspective, the research contributes to the development of the research culture in Saudi Arabia by adding to the small but growing body of qualitative research in Saudi organisational contexts and drawing attention to the challenges and benefits for researchers of conducting qualitative studies in such a context.

### **1.5 Research Approach and Methods**

This study followed an exploratory, inductive approach, on the rationale that culture is a subjective phenomenon, created through the perceptions and experiences of social actors and so best understood by close interaction with participants in order to gain access to their thoughts and feelings. A multiple, holistic case study design (Yin, 2009) was adopted, whereby three organisations were investigated, each being viewed as a whole. The selected cases were three large public-sector utility companies: Saudi Telecommunications Company (STC), Saudi Electricity Company (SEC) and National Water Company (NWC). Data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews

with purposively selected managers and employees in each company (nine managers and eighteen employees in total). Data were subjected to within-case and cross-case analysis (Creswell, 2012) using a template of initial themes suggested by the literature, and modified in the light of emergent findings (King, 1998) resulting in a model of six major culture-related factors found to influence leadership style in the organisations studied. A full account of the methods employed, with the rationale for their adoption and details of implementation procedures will be found in Chapter Three.

## **1.6 Context of Study**

The study was conducted in the utilities sector, in particular, the organisations that provide the three main public services, which are telecommunications, water and electricity, in Saudi Arabia. The utilities sector is of interest for a number of reasons. As providers of important components of the national infrastructure, these are production companies, which one might assume are task-driven. This raises the question why leadership might be an issue in these companies. In the West, for example, leadership in such organisations might be regarded as secondary to delivery of the task, which is more a technical issue. This in itself imposes certain constraints on leadership, since many decisions of staffing, resource allocation, strategic priorities and so forth, will be strongly influenced by technical imperatives. The tasks of Saudi utilities companies, for example, especially NWC and SEC, are constrained by the technical difficulties of providing basic resources over a vast area, with very varied and difficult topography, including mountains and desert.

In the Saudi context, however, there are suggestions that, for cultural reasons, it is difficult for organisations to be task-oriented, due to the interference of competing values with roots in tradition and historical factors, such as tribalism and the rentier mentality (Beblawi, 1987; Hertog, 2009; Tlaiss and Kaiser, 2011a), as discussed in the next section.

Such constraints are not necessarily unique to the utilities sector, and have not been discussed in that specific context, but writers have identified a number of constraints on leadership in Saudi and other Arab contexts, which may be expected to influence the case study organisations. For example, Arab cultures are said to be socially conservative and tradition-bound (Ali & Swiercz, 1993), reflected in a preference towards uncertainty avoidance (Bjerke & Al-Meer, 1993) which could impede creativity and innovation. Conservative values are also reflected in Saudi Arabia in the limited opportunities for women, because of places of gender-segregation. This means that, not only are women in leadership positions rare, but also leaders cannot exploit the potential of highly educated and talented women in their workforces.

Another constraint is the tendency towards strong status hierarchy and unequal power relations (Ali & Swiercz, 1993; Bjerke & Al-Meer, 1993), reflected in autocratic decision-making. Whilst this situation may seem favourable to leaders, who are in a powerful position, it also imposes pressure, since they are expected to carry the burden of decision-making, and it means they may not be able to benefit from the information and variety of perspectives that a more participative culture might bring to the fore.

Constraints on leadership may also be derived from the cultural characteristic of a strong emphasis on affiliation related to Saudi Arabia's collectivist culture and derived from the Kingdom's tribal history (Bjerke & Al-Meer, 1993). In organisations, this may be reflected in strong in-group influence (House et al. 2004), difficulty in refusing a request or conveying negative information (Hutchings & Weir, 2006a), decisions swayed by ascriptive social criteria rather than efficiency (Ali et al., 2013), and even the exercise of corruption in securing privileges and resources (Mohamed & Mohamad, 2011).

Lastly, there are also conflicting pressures arising from the blurring of the distinction between public and private ownership, with many organisations of intermediate status

with the government retaining large stakes even after privatization (Drummond and Al-Anazi, 1997); SEC and STC, in this study, are in such a position. This means that such organisations may be subject to competing pressures; on the one hand to contribute to meeting social objectives, and on the other, to respond to market influences, meet changing customer demand, and generate profit for shareholders. Such tensions will add to the complex pressures facing organisation levels, especially in heavily regulated industries such as utilities.

Thus, on the one hand, leadership in the utilities sector is constrained by technical considerations. On the other, it is presumed that there is a competing set of constraints, derived from culture, similar to the situation Common (2011) observed in Oman, where leadership is said to be constrained by cultural factors, traditional forms of authority and governance, and extensive government regulation. All the points mentioned above are discussed in more detail in the Literature Review (Chapter Two).

Another factor motivating the decision to focus on the utilities sector is that, as these are national-level organisations providing basic public services, they have stronger interaction with society than many other organisations and may be particularly subjected to cultural influences. In some cases, such as Saudi Electricity Company, they were formed by the consolidation of regional-level organisations, so they have had to adjust to the change from a regional to a national perspective. Also, although they provide public services, privatization has introduced a more commercial orientation, which may make them subject to conflicting social pressures. Moreover, the leadership and the majority of employees in all these three organisations are Saudis, so it is most likely that these organisations will provide a good representation of how national culture influences leadership roles and behaviours.

Before introducing the sector and companies in which the research was carried out, it would be appropriate to provide a broad overview of the national context, particularly since it is national culture that is the focus of this study. Accordingly, the next sub-section outlines some key aspects of the historical background and current features of the Kingdom, which are thought to influence its culture, thereby providing a foundation for the more detailed discussions in Chapter Two.

### **1.7 Overview about Saudi Arabia**

The Arabian Peninsula has gone through three historical phases: the first Saudi state (1744 – 1818), the second Saudi state (1824 – 1891), and the existing modern realm of Saudi Arabia.

The first Saudi state was established in the year 1744, when Prince Mohammad ibn Saud, as a political leader, and Imam Mohammad ibn Abdulwahhab, as a religious scholar, formed an alliance to establish a political and religious sovereignty determined to clean up the Arabian Peninsula of wrong practices and deviations from Islam, such as offering prayers to saintly figures and venerating trees and stones (Facey and Hawkins, 1997). They emphasized that all this work should be implemented by means of debate and scholarly preaching. At this time, Ibn Saud held part of the region of Najd, in the centre of the Arabian Peninsula (AlRasheed, 2002). Much of the peninsula was occupied by nomad tribes, who did not recognize territorial boundaries in the modern sense and whose relations were characterized by conflict and competition, mediated by negotiation (Wilkinson, 2000). Ibn Saud's campaign not only expanded his territory considerably, but also united the tribes around a strict, conservative interpretation of Islamic doctrine which remains influential to the present – day. This state was considered as a challenging force to the Ottoman Empire. However, it lasted for 74 years, until it was brought down on 11 September 1818 (AlRasheed, 2010).

Then, the second Saudi state emerged in 1824 with restoration of the monarchy after a period of instability from 1818 to 1824. During the period of the second Saudi state Britain and the Ottoman Empire competed for control of the region, the area having economic and strategic importance as the gateway to India. Compared to the first Saudi state period, the second Saudi realm was marked by less religious zeal and far less territorial expansion. It was also marked by fierce internal strife and severe conflicts among the members of the Saud clan, which weakened their power and eventually led to the dynasty's downfall in 1891 (AlRasheed, 2010).

The tribes in the Arabian Peninsula fought a destructive and devastating series of wars to control the region. The situation changed dramatically with the emergence of Abdulaziz Al Saud, who laid the groundwork for the new state of Saudi Arabia (AlRasheed, 2002). His unification of the region brought together all competing tribes into a modern stable country. Unlike most of the other Arab Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia was independent of Western control. In the 1927 Jeddah Treaty, Britain recognized Abdulaziz as King of the Hejaz, Najd and other dependencies (Yamani, 2004). King Abdulaziz was able to compromise precisely between modernization and religion and maintain a delicate balance between them (Cordesman, 2009). The new Saudi state took the Quran and shariah law as the basis of its constitution and the King opposed the socialist and secularist tendencies of some Arab nationalist movements in the region. At the same time, he pursued diplomatic relations with Britain and Europe, and adopted a development agenda including sedenterization of nomad populations and establishment of formal education. His successors have followed a similar policy.

When Saudi Arabia became an independent official state in 1932, it was subsequently confronted with severe challenges, particularly, the worldwide economic recession in the 1930s. However, fortunately, geologists made a valuable discovery of enormous



reservoirs of oil that significantly buoyed the country's economy (Wilson, 1994). Oil was significant for Saudi culture in a number of ways. It created a rentier economy dependent on oil wealth, in which the tribal tradition of mediation was reframed as a way of allocating the economic and social benefit brought by oil wealth (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011a). Since the oil boom of the 1970s, Saudi Arabia has been classed as a rentier state. A rentier state is one where external resources (termed rent) from abroad constitute a large part of the economy (Okruhlik, 1999). These rents are accrued from national resources, leading Adam Smith in 1776 to distinguish them from other sources of revenue, such as wages and profits (Smith, 1960). As Kropf and Ramady (2015) point out, every economy has some elements of rent, but a rentier economy is distinguished by the dominance of this source of revenue. Today, the term is commonly used in reference to the oil states, such as Saudi Arabia, that rely heavily on income derived from international petroleum sales (Okruhlik, 1999). In Saudi Arabia, oil rents accruing directly to the state enabled the rapid development of public services during the 1970s, including an increase in electricity generation from two billion kilowatt hours per year in 1968 to 44 billion in 1986 (Hertog, 2009).

Some analysts have associated behavioural attitudes with the rentier condition. Beblawi (1987) for example, speaks of a contradiction between production and rentier ethics, due to the departure from the causal link between work and reward. This is because substantial rents can sustain the economy without strong domestic production; the majority of the population are involved in the distribution or allocation of the benefits from rents, rather than in production (Beblawi, 1987). Beblawi estimates that in the Arab states, only around 2 to 3 per cent of the workforce is engaged in the production of oil wealth. This does not, of course, preclude the possibility of productive activities in other sectors; the utilities organisations which are the focus of this study are production organisations, although it can also be said that the activity of SEC and NWC in the Saudi context is also connected

with the distribution of oil wealth via the expansion of public services. Nevertheless, as Okruhlik (1999) suggests, this means that (contrary to the Marxist view of statehood and economy), most people do not derive their identity from their relation to means of production; family, tribe, region and religion are more important in this respect.

One reason for the importance of these factors is that the benefits of the rentier economy are not distributed equally, so people rely on formal and informal patronage (Hertog, 2009, Kropf & Ramady, 2015). Citizens' welfare, in terms of, for example, public sector jobs and access to infrastructure, are governed by family connections, friendships, regional affiliation and the like Okruhlik (1999). Beblawi (1987) mentions the association of rentierism with a large tribal tradition of exchange of patronage for loyalty, while Okruhlik (1999) and Justin (2015) draw attention to regional inequalities in the distribution of oil wealth, such that some provinces have less developed infrastructure than others. According to Justin (2015) the impact of rentierism is still felt to the present day, although the caution induced by previous cycles of boom and bust has resulted in more recent encouragement of the private sector, which is increasingly involved in water and power services.

These impacts of rentierism are pertinent to the utilities organisations in focus in this study. They were formed as public organisations to distribute oil wealth in the form of services and infrastructure. Although they can be considered production organisations, the services of water and electricity companies, specifically, have been heavily subsidized, and these companies have not relied on the efficiency of production or the profitability of their activities for survival.

The discovery and exploitation of oil also brought an influx of foreign workers, both to exploit oil concessions and to implement the development projects oil funded in the absence of a sufficient body of skilled Saudi manpower. On the one hand, this introduced

Western values and business practices; on the other, it prompted concerns to preserve Saudi culture from outside influences (Idris, 2007).

The formal name of the country is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Al Mamlakah Al Arabiyah Al Saudiyah), and the short form that is commonly used is Saudi Arabia, which will be used in this study. It is the biggest among the six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) which binds together Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, and one of the largest in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia has a total area of 1,960,582 square kilometres (Cordesman, 2009). It is bordered by the Red Sea from the west and the Arabian Gulf from the east, representing vital world trade arteries. The south – east frontier is with Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and part of Oman, and the southern boundaries are with Oman and Yemen. The northern borders are with Kuwait, Iraq, and Jordan (Wilson, 1994). Saudi Arabia has expanded in population from 3.2 million in 1950 (Cordesman, 2009) to around 28,000,000 in 2015, including 8.500.000 non-nationals. Saudi Arabia, currently, derives its importance mainly from the fact that it is the birthplace of Islam and regarded as the spiritual home for all Muslims everywhere on the one hand and because of the tremendous oil reserves that rank the country as the biggest oil exporter in the world on the other hand (Wilson, 1994).

### **1.7.1 Utility Sector in Saudi Arabia**

The utility sector in Saudi Arabia consists of electricity, water and telecommunications companies. There is no large gas company, although bottled gas is available from a variety of distributors. The utilities sector is considered to be the major component of the public sector, as despite years of structural reforms, its companies are still owned by the state, either totally (like the National Water Company, NWC) or partially via majority stakeholdings (like Saudi Telecommunications Company, STC or Saudi Electric Company, SEC). The government dominates the utilities sector companies, while the

private sector does not have a leading role in management but just participates in companies without having any influence on the corporate decision making process. The government realizes the importance of this sector to the people, and then for the national security and stability, so it pays special attention to giving human resources and skilled labour formation a top priority. In addition, the state provides generous subsidies when needed (Sager, 2007). This study focuses on three companies, one for each of the main utilities. Although the three companies have certain similarities, as large production, task-oriented companies, with a hierarchical, bureaucratic structure, there are also important differences between them. These differences can be seen in three main areas: the ownership structure of the company, the degree of profit orientation and the cost of services to customers, relative to production costs, and the extent and nature of the customer interface.

#### **1.7.1.1 Saudi Electric Company (SEC)**

Electricity service in Saudi Arabia was initially provided by many small fragmented firms scattered across the country, In 1977, these firms were replaced by four regional electricity companies located in the Central, Eastern, Western and Southern Regions in addition to ten other small firms running in the northern part of the Kingdom, as well as some other electricity operations managed by the General Electricity Corporation (Idris, 2007). Then, in April 2000, all these organisations were merged into one organisation named Saudi Electricity Company (SEC) which was established as a Saudi joint stock company. Since then, the company has implemented a job nationalization programme or so called Saudization that has yielded a total of 31,661 employees constituting the total workforce of the company by the end of 2014 (SEC Annual Report, 2015). SEC is 51% government-owned. The cost of service provision is high, particularly as some regions are still comparatively lacking in infrastructure (a legacy from the era when electricity

was provided by a number of separate regional companies, some of them small and serving a limited area). Thus, extending services to some underserved rural areas involves major, high-cost projects. However, cost to customers is very low, as the service is heavily subsidized by the government. The company pays a dividend to shareholders, but does not generate profit for the government, whose shareholder dividend is swallowed up by the subsidy payments. Generally there is little direct interface with consumers; the contact that does occur is mainly through technicians involved in installation, maintenance and repair.

#### **1.7.1.2 Saudi Telecommunications Company (STC)**

Saudi Telecommunications Company (STC) is the largest service provider operating in all telecommunications services such as mobile, fixed line and broadband businesses in Saudi Arabia. STC is the largest telecommunications company in the Middle East (AlAdaileh and AlAtawi, 2011). The government – controlled company was originally entirely government – owned (formerly named as the Ministry of Telecommunications) and primarily provides basic telecommunications services, which include mobile, fixed local, national, and international telephone services; telex; and telegraph and data services (Idris, 2007). The company's headquarters are located in Riyadh and its 17,000 employees operate from 13 major district offices and numerous customer service bureaus located all around the Kingdom (STC Annual Report, 2015). STC is 80% government owned, and it is a mainstay of the Saudi economy, being the third largest source of revenue to the treasury, after oil and customs duties. For this reason, it is highly profit oriented. Although operating costs are relatively low, the cost of services to customers is high. For many years, STC had a monopoly of telecommunication services and even though in recent years, the sector has been opened and two other companies authorized to operate in the Kingdom, STC still has the lion's share of business in this field. The

customer interface, moreover, is high, with contact through networks of shops and service bureaus.

### **1.7.1.3 National Water Company (NWC)**

National Water Company (NWC) is a government owned company established in 2006 to manage provision of drinking water and ensure sanitation through effective waste water management. NWC provides services through its several branches spread across the Kingdom with an organisation of 8,000 employees. The company has a public service remit, with a duty to provide water for everyone, as a necessity of life. In an arid region such as Saudi Arabia, this is a complex and challenging task, involving obtaining water from underground aquifers, or through desalination. In normal circumstances, there is little or no direct customer interface. The other services provided by the NWC are the preservation of natural water resources, protection of the environment, and making maximum use of Treated Sewage Effluent (TSE) in accordance with the latest international standards (SAWR, 2015).

Since the government of Saudi Arabia has paid particular attention and focus to the water sector, a decision has been taken by government official decree to expand the base of NWC through public offering of shares. NWC is potentially to be listed as a public limited company by the end of 2016 (NWC Annual Report, 2014).

## **1.8 Outline of the Thesis**

This thesis is divided into seven chapters, including this introductory chapter. The remainder of the thesis proceeds as follows:

Chapter Two contains a review of literature on leadership and culture. In the first part, the concept of leadership is defined and historical developments in approaches to leadership are outlined. Particular attention is given to Transformational leadership as a

popular modern trend which may fit well with some aspects of Saudi culture, but less well with others. The second part contains a review of literature on national culture. After defining culture in general terms, it introduces a number of widely – cited models that have been used to identify and measure dimensions of national culture. Previous research evidence on culture dimensions in the Middle East and Arab world is reviewed, and an account is given of cultural features ascribed to Saudi Arabia. The last part of the chapter reports research evidence on leadership in the context of culture, with particular reference to research conducted in Arab, Gulf and Saudi contexts.

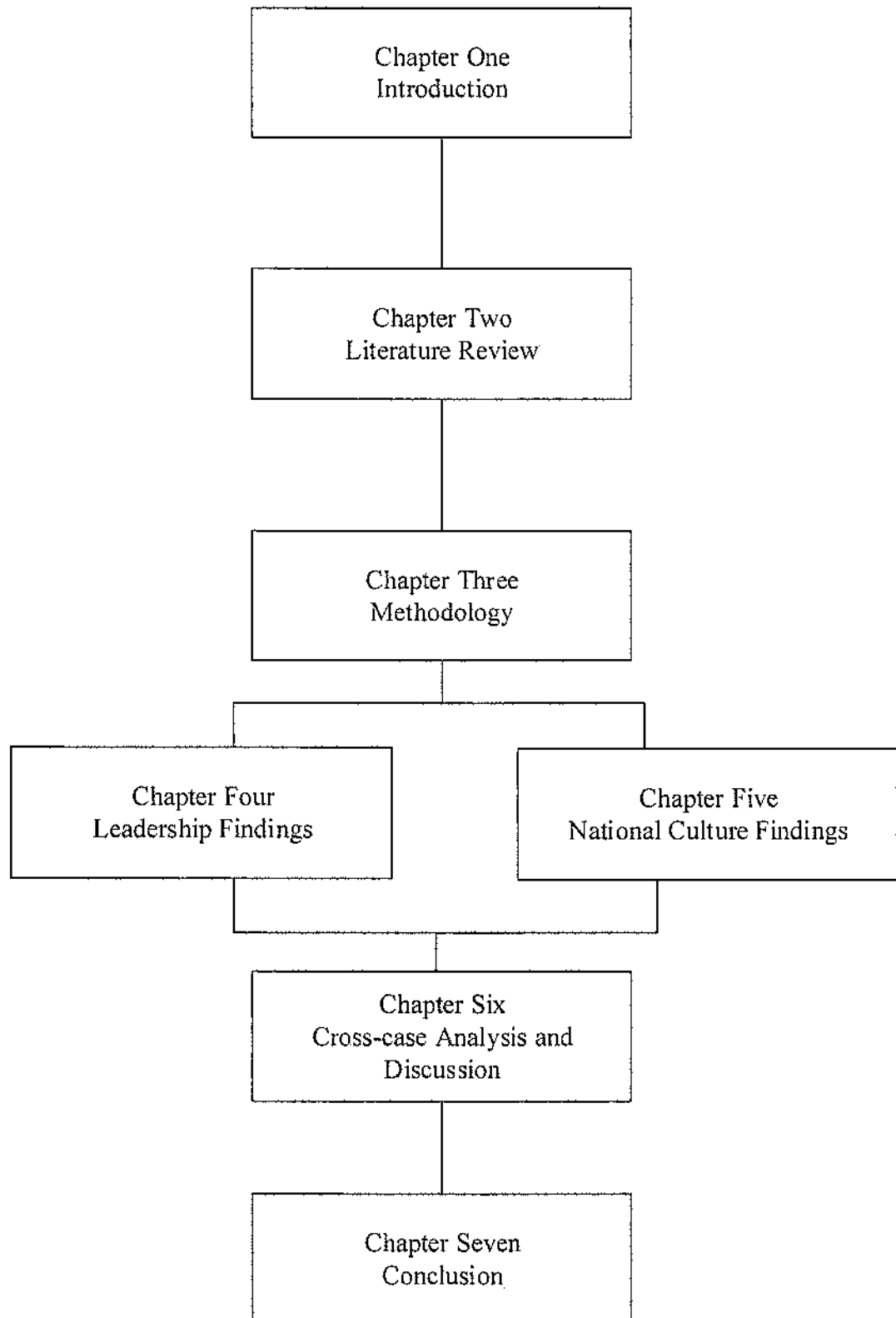
The third chapter explains and justifies the research methodology. The rationale is provided for the selection of an interpretive, inductive approach, implemented through a case study strategy involving three public sector utilities companies. The procedures adopted for collecting data by means of semi-structured interviews are described, and the data analysis process is explained. Research quality issues and ethical considerations are also addressed.

Chapters Four and Five present the research findings, related to leadership and culture, respectively, derived from a within-case analysis. For each case company in turn, the collected data are analysed, thematically.

In Chapter Six, a cross-case analysis is provided, in which themes are compared across all three companies, in order to find patterns of similarity and difference. The research findings are also discussed in relation to culture and leadership literature, in an attempt to shed new light on salient culture effects in the Saudi context. This study identifies seven key influencing factors: Islamic values, Social norms, Tribalism, Regional affiliation, Wasta, Education and Technology.

Chapter Seven concludes the thesis with a summary of the main findings, as assessment of the study's limitations and contributions, implications and suggestions for further research. (See figure 1.1 below).

Figure 1.1: The Structure of the Thesis





## **CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Introduction**

In the previous chapter, attention was drawn to the impact of globalization on business and management, and questions were raised as to the way in which leaders in Saudi organisations are negotiating the balance between traditional cultural values and modern influences on ways of leading organisations. In order to provide a theoretical foundation for this study's investigation of how national culture influences perceptions and practices of leadership in Saudi utilities organisations, this chapter offers a review of relevant theory and previous empirical research. The chapter is structured in three sections. The first addresses the concept of leadership, beginning with definitions and a discussion of the differences and overlap between leadership and management, before considering leadership models and theories. The second section is concerned with culture and ways of understanding it, including the models of Hofstede, Trompenaars and Schwartz, the GLOBE study and the Values for Work framework. Saudi national culture and the factors that have contributed to shape it are also discussed. In the third section, the themes of the previous sections are brought together in a discussion of leadership in the context of culture. The purpose of this is to review previous evidence regarding leadership values and styles in Arab, Gulf and specifically Saudi societies, in order to highlight the need for the current study and provide a rationale for the selection of themes and issues for investigation.

### **2.2 Leadership Literature**

Since early times, humans have valued leadership and sought to understand what makes an effective leader. However, leadership is a complex notion, open to a variety of conceptualizations. Grint (2005), for example, suggests that leadership can be

conceptualized as a person, a result, a position, or a process. Leadership as a person implies that it is who a person is, that makes them a leader. However, this view ignores the fact that leadership is relational, because a leader needs followers; hence, leadership is a function of a community, not simply an attribute of one person. The “person” perspective also fails to recognize that leadership is also embodied in non-human forms such as clothing, adornments, and technologies (Grint, 2005). Leadership as “results” suggests that people become leaders because of what they achieve. This, too, is problematic, because “even nominal ‘failure’ can be configured as successful leadership” (Grint, 2005:3); Grint cites the case of leaders of slave rebellions in Roman times as an example. The third perspective, leadership as position, suggests that leaders are leaders by virtue of where they operate; for example, Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and headteachers might be regarded as leaders through their positions in their organisations; such a notion, however, may not fit well with the trend to leaner, flatter organisations, where more authority is delegated. Finally, leadership as “process” implies that leadership is about how leaders get things done, and Grint (2005) suggests that what is considered acceptable or legitimate in this process is culturally determined; “culture” in this sense could be an occupational culture, such as military culture.

Northouse (2010:3) draws together the main components of the multiple definitions of leadership to define it as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal”. This definition sees leadership as a process, that is, an interactive event, rather than a function of a designated position, or of particular personal attributes. It involves influence; there can be no leadership without it. It occurs in a group context; the group may be a small work group or a large organisation, but the principle remains, that leadership is seen and enacted in relation to other people. Finally, leadership is directed towards a particular purpose, which is shared with followers. In

other words, Northouse (2010) suggests that leaders and followers are trying to achieve something together.

As Northouse (2010) goes on to note, leadership is related to other concepts, such as power, although they are distinct. Power is part of leadership, because it implies the ability to exert influence. French and Raven (1959, as cited in Northouse, 2010:7) identified five bases of power, by which a leader may influence followers:

- Referent power, based on identification with and liking for the leader.
- Expert power, based on relevant knowledge and competence, in the eyes of followers.
- Legitimate power, conferred by a particular position or status.
- Reward power, based on the ability to confer rewards on others.
- Coercive power, based on the ability to punish others.

Referent and expert power are classed as personal power, as they are derived from the personal attributes of leaders. Legitimate, reward and coercive power are all types of position power, related to an individual's position in the organisation hierarchy. These types of power, as can be seen, are closely related to the conceptualisations of leadership described by Grint (2005) and summarised above. Thus, it could be argued that Grint's typology, at least in its first three categories, actually relates to the nature and source of the leader's power.

### **2.2.1 Leadership versus Management**

A number of writers have seen leadership and management as conceptually and functionally distinct. Kotter (1990), for example, viewed management as concerned primarily with the maintenance of order, stability and consistency, whereas leadership is more concerned with vision, movement and change.

Such an image of leadership appears to be implied by Grint's (2000) discussion of the nature of leadership, when he argues that leadership is essentially concerned with "who, what, how and why" questions. First, "who" is the organisation (or other relevant entity)? The leader constructs an identity of a community that followers can feel part of. Then, "what" does the organisation want to achieve? This is a question of strategic vision, requiring the exercise of imagination. This may involve looking back, for example recalling a real or mythical "golden age" as a way to mobilize followers, or looking forward to imagine an ideal future. Then comes the question of "how" to achieve it, that is, deciding organisational tactics. This, Grint (2000) acknowledges, entails a number of difficulties, because followers may not comply with leaders, compliance may be distorted by followers' interests, or resources may be inadequate to allow implementation of the tactics as intended. Underlying all these questions, ultimately, is the "why" question, that is, "why" should followers accept the leader's identity construction, strategic vision and operational tactics? This requires persuasive communication; leaders need to "sell" their future vision to persuade people to follow, so in that sense, leadership is a performance (Grint, 2000).

A traditional, popular view distinguishes between such a role of direction-setting, vision, and persuasion, attributed to leadership, and the focus on routine and control as the role of management, even to the extent of thinking they should be performed by different people (Grint, 2005). However, not only are both essential for the health of an organisation (Kotter, 1990) but writers such as Schriesheim and Neider (1993) see leadership as part of the larger job of managing; they point out that managers perform a multitude of roles, of which the interpersonal role commonly labelled "leadership" is just one.

In the Arab world, similarly, a perceived distinction between leadership and management roles has been reported, along with a recognition that in practice the roles may be blurred, or both present in the same person. Abdalla and Al-Homoud (2001), in a study of the view of leadership hold by managers in Kuwait and Qatar, found that the respondents perceived differences between the two. They saw leaders as more future-oriented, concerned with long-term planning and dealing with major and uncommon problems. In their view, good leaders should be creative, visionary and persuasive, and their power is derived from their personality, aptitude and the acceptance of subordinates. In contrast, they perceived managers are more short-term oriented, and dealing with routine problems. They thought that managers derive their power from rules and regulations, knowledge and position. Nevertheless, they envisaged that a manager might also possess leadership characteristics, so that an individual occupying a managerial position in the organisation structure might still influence colleagues and subordinates through their personal qualities. In practice, leadership studies have often failed to distinguish between the two roles, the GLOBE study (House et al, 2004) discussed later in this chapter, for instance, investigated "leadership style" among a sample of 17,000 managers. In the next two sections of this chapter, therefore, studies are included on the basis of the values and practices they investigate, irrespective of the terminology used to denote these subjects.

### **2.2.2 Leadership Models and Theories**

Evidence of a link between leadership effectiveness and organisation effectiveness (House, 1988) has given impetus over the years to development of a variety of leadership "theories" or "models" (Bass, 1990; Yukl, 1994) seeking to explain what constitutes leadership effectiveness, with implications for leader selection and leadership development.

### **2.2.2.1 Trait Theories**

A popular early approach to leadership in the last half of the twentieth century was so-called “trait theories”. The focus of such approaches was on trying to identify a set of attributes that characterized leaders as opposed to non-leaders, or distinguished effective from ineffective leaders. The assumption of the “trait” approach is that the “right” leader, with the “right” attributes, will succeed in any situation. The implication is that the concern should be with the selection of leaders, rather than their development (Grint, 2000). However, although certain traits such as intelligence were commonly linked with successful leadership, no set of traits was found that characterized all leaders, or reliably distinguished them from others (Bass, 1990).

As Northouse (2010) points out, the trait approach is highly subjective and, moreover, not helpful for training and development purposes as traits are psychological structures which are not easily changed. Moreover, the trait approach, in focusing on the leader, neglects the fact that leadership takes place in relation to other people, and in a particular context.

### **2.2.2.2 Behavioural or Style Approach**

Following the “trait” phase, attention turned to what came to be known as the behavioural approach. The aim of leadership behaviour theories was to identify leadership styles and try to determine which style was generally most effective (Schriesheim & Neider, 1993). This approach describes components of leaders’ behaviour on two main dimensions: task-oriented and relationship-oriented. It recognizes that leadership entails enactment of both these types of behaviours, and focuses attention on the balance between them (Northouse, 2010).

This approach had the advantage of over the trait approach that it implied leadership qualities and skills were not necessarily innate, but could be learned. This approach, too, however, proved unsatisfactory (Bass, 1990), as research failed to show a clear link between leadership styles and performance outcomes (Yukl, 1994) or to find a universally effective leadership style (Northouse, 2010). Nor did it adequately take account of differences in situational demands (Schriesheim and Neider, 1993).

### **2.2.2.3 Contingency and Situational Approaches**

Disillusion with the behavioural approach led to the growing popularity in the 1970s of the contingency and situational approaches, which viewed leadership effectiveness as a function of three interacting components: the leader, the subordinates, and the specifics of the prevailing situation (Yukl, 1994). While Schriesheim and Neider (1993) use the terms contingency and situational interchangeably, others, including Grint (2000) and Northouse (2010) distinguish them. According to Grint (2000) the contingency approach views the characteristics of both individual and context as critical. Effective leadership requires self analysis and situational analysis and the leader should act when the two coincide. This approach, like the behavioural approach, views leadership styles as task or relationship oriented. It also looks at three situational variables: leader-member relations, task structure, that is the extent to which task requirements are clearly known and specified, and the amount of the leader's position power. The theory suggests that certain leadership styles are effective in certain situations. Contingency theory matches the leader and situation; it does not expect the same leader to be effective in all situations. However, contingency theory does not explain why people with certain leadership styles are more effective in some situations than others (Fiedler, 1993) nor does it suggest what an organisation should do when there is a mismatch between the leader's style and the work situation (Northouse, 2010).

The situational approach focuses more on context, implying that the individual may be flexible to move between a repertoire of styles to suit the situation (Grint, 2000). Essentially, it requires leaders to evaluate employees' "development level" or competence and commitment in relation to a particular task, and adapt the degree to which they are directive or supportive accordingly (Northouse, 2010). Blanchard et al. (1985) on this basis identified four leadership styles: Directing (high directive – low supportive); Coaching (high directive – high supportive); Supporting (high supportive – low directive) and Delegating (low supportive – low directive). For each level of employee development, there is a specific prescribed leadership style. This approach is practical and offers clear guidance for leaders. However, there is a lack of strong, consistent research evidence to support the model (Fernandez & Vecchio, 1997; Vecchio et al. 2006). Moreover, it does not account for the effect of personal characteristics on the prescriptions of the model. Vecchio and Boatwright (2002) found that more educated and experienced workers, for example, preferred less structure. In the context of this study, it might be suggested that national culture, too, might affect preferences for a particular leadership style.

#### **2.2.2.4 Transformational Leadership**

In the early 1990s, Schriesheim and Neider (1993), reviewing earlier trends in leadership research, identified three shortcomings: lack of contextualization of leadership within a broader range of roles performed by organisation managers; insufficient recognition of leadership as an interpersonal influence process, and a too-narrow, simplistic conceptualization of leadership style. However, they drew attention to ways in which a "new wave" of leadership thinking was beginning to address such issues.

A popular approach in the "New Leadership" paradigm (Bryman, 1992) which "gives more attention to the charismatic and affective elements of leadership" (Northouse, 2010:171) is transformational leadership. It is a wide-ranging approach concerned with



an exceptional form of influence based on emotions, values, ethics and vision, that satisfies followers' needs and inspires them to achieve beyond expectations (Northouse, 2010). Transformational leadership is distinguished from transactional leadership, which focuses on exchange between leaders and followers. As later developed by Bass (1990), transformational leadership consists of four factors:

- Idealized influence or charisma: leaders act as strong role models, trusted, respected and emulated by followers.
- Inspirational motivation: leaders communicate high expectations to followers and inspire them to commit to and participate in a shared vision.
- Intellectual stimulation: leaders encourage creativity and innovation.
- Individualized consideration: leaders are supportive and attentive to the needs of followers.

Transformational leaders express strong values and ideals, but are also tolerant of opposing viewpoints and empower followers (Northouse, 2010). A strength of this approach is its recognition that leadership is a process arising from the interaction between leaders and followers. Another is that it gives leadership a moral dimension (Northouse, 2010). Moreover, research evidence (e.g. Yukl, 1994) suggests the effectiveness of transformational leadership. However, this approach can be criticized as being conceptually somewhat vague. It is potentially problematic in treating transformational leadership as a disposition, rather than a behaviour that could be learned. Moreover, it focuses on the transformational power of the leader who inspires followers, so it does not account for shared leadership or mutual influence. There is, also, the possibility of abuse; the values, vision or direction inspired by the transformational leader may not always be beneficial, and it is unclear how followers challenge a leader's vision (Northouse, 2010).

## **2.3 Culture Literature**

### **2.3.1 National Culture**

From early childhood, individuals learn patterns of thinking, feeling and behaviour (actual or potential) derived from the social environment, which are commonly referred to as culture. Hofstede et al. (2010:5) refer to such patterns as “mental programming” or “software of the mind”. In contrast to personality, which is specific to the individual, and “human nature”, which is universal (for example, the ability to feel basic emotions such as fear and anger, and the need for interaction with others), culture is shared by a specific group or category of people – for example members of a particular organisation, or profession, or a regional or ethnic grouping. It is composed of attitudes – emotions and beliefs, norms – informal rules that govern what is normal and abnormal in a particular society, and values – notions about what “ought” to be. Values, the deepest layer of culture, are broad tendencies toward certain preferences, for example what is considered good, safe, decent, moral, beautiful or natural (Hofstede et al. 2010). They are manifested in “practices” including the use of symbols such as language or style of dress, role models or icons of persons thought to embody desirable characteristics, and rituals – collective actions that serve social purposes.

A number of writers have asserted the importance of culture for understanding thinking and behaviour, at organisational and national levels. At the national level, one of the best-known frameworks for understanding cultural differences is the one proposed by Hofstede (1980, 2001; Hofstede, et al. 2010).

Based on employee attitude surveys conducted in IBM subsidiaries in 66 countries, in the 1960s and 1970s, Hofstede originally extracted four dimensions (each conceived as a continuum) which he claimed differentiate national cultures and have implications for behaviours in the workplace, among other contexts. These dimensions were:

Power distance (PD), defined as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede et al. 2010:61). In high PD societies, centralization of authority is popular. Subordinates expect to be told what to do, bosses are autocratic, and importance is attached to privileges and status symbols. In contrast, in low PD societies, decentralization is popular, subordinates expect to be consulted, bosses are more democratic, and privileges and status symbols are frowned upon.

Individualism (IDV), defined as a society in which ties between individuals are loose and everyone is expected to look after him or herself and his or her immediate family. Opposite to (or scoring low on) IDV is collectivism, where people are integrated into cohesive groups which protect them, in exchange for loyalty. In high IDV societies, occupational mobility is higher, hiring and promotion should be based on rules and skills, and the needs of the task are prioritized over relationships. In more collectivist societies, occupational mobility is lower, and relationships, in-group affiliation and the preservation of group harmony have strong influences on hiring, promotion and management practices.

Masculinity (MAS): this dimension reflects the extent to which a society espouses “masculine” values such as assertiveness and “feminine” values such as harmony. In highly masculine societies, management is decisive and aggressive, strength prevails, and work is humanized by job enrichment. In more feminine cultures, management relies more on intuition and consensus, conflicts are resolved by compromise and negotiation, and work is humanized by personal contact and cooperation.

Uncertainty avoidance (UA) is concerned with the extent to which a society is tolerant of or comfortable with uncertainty, lack of structure and ambiguity. Societies high in UA seek to reduce uncertainty with extensive use of formal laws and informal rules of behaviour, and may also seek certainty through adherence to religious or other ideological

beliefs. Uncertainty avoiding societies are characterized by longer service with one employer, emphasis on precision and formalization, belief in experts and technical solutions, and involvement of top managers in daily operations. In contrast, weak uncertainty avoidance is associated with more changes of employer, tolerance for ambiguity, belief in common sense, and top managers' concern with strategy.

Subsequently, Hofstede (1991) added a fifth dimension, based on data for 23 countries that participated in the Chinese Value Survey (CVS). This dimension, termed long-term versus short-term orientation (LTO) represents the extent to which a society fosters "virtues oriented toward future rewards – in particular, perseverance and thrift" versus "virtues related to the past and present – in particular, respect for tradition, preservation of 'face' and fulfilling social obligations" (Hofstede, 2010:239). In the workplace, high LTO is associated with a focus on market position, shared aspirations of managers and workers, investment in personal networks and emphasis on adaptability and learning, whereas low LTO is associated with a focus on the "bottom line", psychological separation between managers and workers, fluctuating personal loyalties, and emphasis on achievement.

Much more recently, Hofstede et al. (2010) proposed another dimension based on Michael Minkov's analysis of the World Values Survey and which is called indulgence versus restraint (IVR). It concerns the extent to which a society "allows relatively free gratification of basic and natural human desires related to enjoying life and having fun" (Hofstede et al. 2010:281) or conversely, favours restraint by strict social norms and prohibitions.

Although frequently cited by management authors interested in culture, Hofstede's theory has also been strongly criticized. A trenchant critique is offered by McSweeney (2002a), who challenges Hofstede's methodology and conclusions. He questions the

representativeness of Hofstede's (1980) sample since, although the number of questionnaires used overall was large, the number of respondents per country was small; moreover, the data were from a single company and largely confined to marketing and sales employees. McSweeney (2002a) challenges Hofstede's (1980) assumption that organisational, occupational and national cultures are entirely discrete and, hence, the validity of his claim that the differences he observed could only be attributable to national culture. McSweeney's contention is that organisation and occupational cultures may be multiple and mutable. Even if Hofstede's first assumption is accepted, moreover, McSweeney (2002a) questions whether national culture is necessarily either uniform as claimed by Hofstede in his early work (Hofstede, 1980) or a central tendency as described later (Hofstede 1991) and accuses Hofstede of circular reasoning in "finding" a difference he has pre-assumed to exist, and of ignoring within-country differences in the data. He also criticises Hofstede's claim that the differences identified were a consequence of national culture, since the data could have been stratified in a variety of ways, any of which would probably have produced differences.

A further weakness observed in Hofstede's work is his claim to identify national cultural characteristics based on answers to fixed-choice questions, which appears inconsistent with the conceptualisation of culture as a "force". Challenging the "identification" of cultural dimensions, McSweeney (2002a) goes on to point out the illogicality of Hofstede's addition of the fifth dimension, long versus short term orientation, since the survey on which it was based, the Chinese Values Survey, also indicated the irrelevance, in the Chinese context, of Hofstede's Uncertainty Avoidance dimension. If Hofstede considered CVS to be valid, he should have downgraded UA in his model as well as adding long/short-term orientation; if he thought the CVS was flawed, he should not have added the fifth dimension to his model.

Finally, McSweeney (2002a) questions Hofstede's assumption that national culture is situationally non-specific and wonders whether the same results would have been obtained had Hofstede analysed data for other categories of employees (such as blue-collar workers), or non-workers, or if the surveys had asked about a wider range of (non-workplace) issues or been conducted outside the formal workplace.

Overall, the contention is that Hofstede's claims go beyond what is warranted by the data, and that they are unbalanced, focusing too heavily on "proving" his prior assumptions (McSweeney, 2002a).

Responding to what he referred to as McSweeney's (2002) "diatribe", Hofstede (2002: 1355) comments on McSweeney's (2002a) failure to acknowledge the validation of the country differences in the IBM database on other data. He refers specifically to data from 362 managers from a variety of organisations in 30 different countries, obtained in a survey conducted by Hofstede while at IMEDA, an international business school in Switzerland. Hofstede asserts that these and many other validations, including cross-national survey and test data from other studies, and a number of representative samples of entire national populations, were summarized in his 1980 work. Moreover, he cites independent validations by other authors in various disciplines, replicating the IBM surveys in a variety of organisations and with different types of samples, either listed in Hofstede (2001) or completed subsequently (for example, Mouritzen and Svara, 2002; Nimwegen, 2002)

Hofstede rejects McSweeney's (2002a) accusation that he too-rigidly attributes differences in behaviours to national cultures, asserting his recognition that not only do other causative factors exist, but also, culture, like "values" and "dimensions", is only a theoretical construct, maintained only so long as they prove useful in explaining behaviour, to be dropped if a better alternative appears. He also notes that the possibility

of cultural variety within and between units of the same organisation is addressed in a separate project carried out in the 1980s and argues from that study that national culture and organisational culture are different components related to “values” and “practices” respectively – the latter open to modification, the former more stable.

Finally, in response to McSweeney’s (2002a) criticisms of Hofstede’s (1980) interpretation of survey data, Hofstede (2002) argues that the same criticisms could be applied to all survey and test-based cross-cultural studies; his use of statistical inference was common practice among social scientists.

In a subsequent round of debate, McSweeney (2002b) criticizes Hofstede’s (2002) reply for adopting a variety of evasive strategies. In claiming to have answered criticism elsewhere, he still fails to rebut McSweeney’s (2002a) key arguments; moreover, Hofstede (2001) contains the same methodological flaws observed in his original analysis. Hofstede’s (2002) invocation of others who support his work is dismissed, given that he neglects to mention earlier work by others on the dimensions for discovery of which he claims credit. McSweeney (2002b) also points out the ungracious (and, as it happens, unfounded) personal insults with which he sprinkle his response to McSweeney, whom he sarcastically suggests has not read crucial parts of his work and is “unfamiliar” with statistical inference; in other words, attacking the critic rather than addressing the criticism. Hofstede (2002) is also accused of evading a key criticism by denying his previous assertions; his disingenuous claim that culture is merely a “construct” contradicts the strong empirical assertions made in all his books and articles. McSweeney’s (2002b) final riposte concerns Hofstede’s (2002) accusation that he ignored “validation” of his findings. In reply, McSweeney (2002b) not only refers to several previous criticisms of methodologically flawed validations, but also unpacks in some detail two of Hofstede’s validity stories, pointing out unjustified generalization

from single events, neglect of readily – available counter – evidence and failure to consider explanations other than the causative influence of national culture.

A subsequent entry into the debate by Williamson (2002) however, finds McSweeney's (2002a,b) position also to be flawed. Williamson (2002) approaches the debate from a paradigmatic standpoint, arguing that Hofstede works within the functionalist paradigm, adopting realist and deterministic assumptions and using statistical techniques to conclude universal generalizations. McSweeney (2002a) is criticised for adopting two incompatible approaches in his critique of Hofstede, on the one hand criticizing Hofstede's logic within evaluative criteria adopted from the functionalist paradigm adopted by Hofstede, and on the other hand, rejecting this paradigm by challenging Hofstede's functionalist assumptions. In Williamson's view, based on detailed examination of each of the "assumptions" identified by McSweeney (2002a) and the latter's critique of them, McSweeney argues mainly from the functionalist paradigm, but fails to falsify Hofstede's model. This critique is said to suffer from confusion as to the paradigmatic standpoint from which his critique proceeds, occasionally shifting to an interpretive approach, for example when objecting to implausibility or criticizing the limited equivalence of meaning characterizing cultural survey instruments, without acknowledging the shift in assumptions. Accepting his viewpoint uncritically might lead to a rejection of all functionalist models of national culture, or of the phenomenon of national culture, thereby losing valuable insight into "what is otherwise a black box of cultural functions" (Williamson, 2002, 1391). Nevertheless, Williamson accepts the value of warning against an assumption of cultural uniformity or homogeneity, against seeing values and behaviour as wholly determined by cultural background, and against confusing scores for cultural dimensions with the constructs they try to approximate. He concludes that at present it would be premature to abandon either functionalist or interpretive



approaches to understanding culture and that more research using a variety of methods and taking different paradigmatic stances is still needed.

Although Hofstede's work on national culture has attracted criticism, he is not alone in finding evidence of differences in cultural dimensions based on nationality. Trompenaars (1993) and Schwartz (1992, 1994, 2006) for example, both offered typologies of national culture dimensions based on cross-cultural investigation. Trompenaars (1993) surveyed over 15,000 managers from 28 countries, over a period of ten years. The results indicated seven dimensions of national culture difference, expressed in terms of pairs of alternative values. One of these, denoted "Achievement versus Ascription", is concerned with the extent to which power and status in a society are based on what someone does (achievement) or who someone is (ascription). Trompenaars found the Arab world to be ascription oriented, believing that "respect depends on the background of the family". Saudi Arabia was found to score highly on agreement with this statement. Another dimension, "Universalism versus Particularism" reflects the relative importance attached to general principles versus unique circumstances and relationships. Eastern (including Arab) countries were found to be more particularistic than those in the West. This suggests that individual circumstances and personal relations may be prioritized over formal rules and procedures in relationships within organisations.

Two other dimensions of Trompenaars' (1993) framework, namely, "Equality versus Hierarchy" (similar to Hofstede's Power Distance) and "Person orientation versus Task orientation" are suggested by Trompenaars (1993) to explain models of organisation. He reports that Arab countries score high on hierarchy and person orientation and suggests, therefore, that Arab countries should be inclined to adopt what he calls the "family" organisation model. In such a model, power in organisations is political, in the sense that

it is broadly defined by authorities, rather than originating in roles or tasks, and it is exercised through organisation members “acting with one accord” (Klein et al. 2009, 48).

Schwartz (1992, 1994, 2006), similarly to Trompenaars, expressed national culture in terms of bipolar dimensions. This model was based on a survey of the structure of the fundamental value system involving 88 samples of students and professors from 40 countries. Similarities to Hofstede’s (2010) “Individualism versus Collectivism” and “Indulgence versus Restraint” dimensions can be seen in Schwartz’s (1994) “Conservatism versus Autonomy” dimension. This concerns the extent to which persons are seen as “autonomous entities versus embedded parts of groups” (Klein et al. 2009: 48). Arab countries score high on conservatism, meaning they emphasize social order and respect for tradition. Such cultures are concerned with propriety and favour restraint of behaviours or tendencies that threaten group solidarity and the status quo. In contrast, high – autonomy cultures perceive each person as an autonomous bonded entity and encourage individuals to find meaning in and to express their own unique preferences, traits, emotions and motives.

Another of Schwartz’s dimensions that invites comparison with Hofstede (1991, 2001, 2010) is “Hierarchy versus Egalitarianism” (Schwartz, 2006). This dimension reflects contrasting ways of managing interrelationships among people in order to assure socially responsible behaviour. In high – hierarchy cultures, behaviour is governed by a hierarchical system of ascribed roles, in which unequal distribution of social power, authority and wealth is accepted and legitimated, similar to Hofstede’s (1991, 2001, 2010) Power Distance dimension. At the Egalitarian end of the spectrum, in contrast, individuals are seen more as moral equals with shared interests (Klein et al. 2009). Arab countries score high on Hierarchy, which suggests organisational culture may be characterized by unequal power – relations and dependence of subordinates on managers’ approval.

A more elaborate classification of cultural dimensions was adopted in the first phase of the “Global Leadership and Organisational Behaviour Effectiveness” (GLOBE) research project reported by House et al. (2004). The project, which investigated culture as it relates to leadership in 62 countries, began with the grouping of countries into clusters on the basis of nine dimensions, which can be directly or indirectly linked to Hofstede’s dimensions. The dimensions used in the GLOBE study were as shown in Table 2.1, below.

Table 2.1: Comparison of GLOBE Dimensions with Hofstede’s

Power distance	As in Hofstede
Uncertainty avoidance	As in Hofstede
Gender equality	The extent to which a society minimizes gender-role differences
Collectivism-in group	The extent to which pride, loyalty and cohesiveness reside in family or organisation
Collectivism-institutional	The extent to which organisations and society encourage and reward collective action and collective distribution of resources
Future orientation	The propensity to plan, invest in the future, and delay gratification
Performance orientation	The propensity to encourage and reward performance improvement and excellence
Assertive	The extent of being assertive, aggressive and confrontational
Humane orientation	The extent to which individuals are rewarded for being fair, altruistic, generous, friendly, caring and kind

Source: compiled by author based on Hofstede (1991) and House et al. (2004).

While Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance and Future Orientation are the same as the corresponding dimensions in Hofstede (1991) the other dimensions can be seen as elaborations of Hofstede. Hofstede’s single Collectivism dimension is separated into two aspects, in-group and institutional. The remaining dimensions capture a range of attitudes and practices that Hofstede encompasses within the single Masculinity versus Femininity dimension. Performance Orientation and Assertiveness capture behaviours that Hofstede (1991) sees as associated with the Masculine end of the continuum while Humane Orientation captures behaviours associated with the Feminine end of the continuum by

Hofstede. Gender Equality, too, has links to Hofstede's Masculinity versus Femininity dimension.

Based on these dimensions, the GLOBE study grouped the countries from which data were collected into ten clusters; members of a cluster are characterized by cultural similarities. GLOBE identified a Middle East cluster which included two Gulf countries, Kuwait and Qatar, as well as Egypt and Iran (data were not collected for Saudi Arabia). All the countries in the cluster have Islam as a common denominator, while Kuwait and Qatar have a similar Arab linguistic and ethnic background, all points of similarity with Saudi Arabia.

The GLOBE data show the two Gulf states as characterised by collectivist values and practices, with a preference for personalized relationships, and extensive and deep in-group influence. Indeed, in terms of in-group collectivism, Kuwait with a score of 5.80 (on a scale of 1-7), emerged as one of the most collectivist of all the countries investigated. Both scored lower than the world average on Assertiveness and Future Orientation. Kabasakal and Dastmalchian (2001) attribute the latter finding at least in part to the Islamic concept of Fate, which promotes the acceptance of all eventualities as preordered and coming from God. Nevertheless, they also point out that organisational practices may differ from those of society at large, as evidenced in a Turkish study by Kabasakal and Bodur (1998). Such differences, they suggest, may be related to task requirements and the education level of the workforce. Such a finding raises a question as to how well cultural values as measured by instruments such as the GLOBE survey will be translated into organisational values and practices.

Another note of caution regarding the GLOBE results concerns the extent to which cultural values and practices may differ even within a cluster. Some differences were found between Kuwait and Qatar, for instance, on Uncertainty Avoidance, and on Gender

Equality. At first glance, the scores for Uncertainty Avoidance appear quite close, 4.21 for Kuwait and 3.99 for Qatar. However, these scores place Kuwait as above the global average (4.10) for this dimension, while Qatar scores below the average, suggesting a greater tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity. The difference is still greater for Gender Equality, Kuwait scored a very low 2.58, while Qatar scored 3.60 on this dimension, above the global average of 3.32, suggesting that gender-normative values are less rigid in Qatar than in Kuwait. Given the existence of such differences between these two Gulf states, caution should obviously be exercised in making generalizations about “the Middle East”, “Arab societies” or “Gulf countries”. Whilst culture studies such as GLOBE provide some insight into ways in which cultures may differ, it is important to be mindful of their limitations.

#### **2.3.1.1 The Values for Work (VFW) Framework**

While Hofstede’s work reflects national values, another approach to exploring cultural values which is particularly relevant to this study is the examination of specifically work-related values. A number of studies have made use of the Values for Work (VFW) Questionnaire developed by Flowers and his associates (Flowers, 1975) based on a framework proposed by Graves (1970). It consists of six value dimensions, as follows (Yavas & Rezayat, 2003):

1. Existential: a high tolerance for ambiguity and those with different values.
2. Socio-centric: a high need for affiliation and little concern for wealth.
3. Manipulative: materialistic and calculating in order to achieve an end.
4. Conformist: having a low tolerance for ambiguity and needing structure and rules.
5. Egocentric: aggressive, selfish, restless, impulsive.
6. Tribalistic: submissive to authority and/or tradition.

Some correspondence can be seen between these dimensions and certain of Hofstede's (1980) categories; the Existential and Conformist dimensions could be said to reflect similar concerns to Hofstede's Uncertainty Avoidance, although this framework treats them as separate dimensions rather than points on a continuum as Hofstede's does. Similarly the Socio-centric and Egocentric dimensions bear some resemblance to Hofstede's notions of Collectivism and Individualism, although Egocentrism is described in wholly negative terms, while Hofstede's Individualism has both negative and positive connotations. Finally, the VFW dimension of Tribalism incorporates meanings similar to Hofstede's Power Distance dimension.

The VFW framework has been used previously in the Saudi context, to assess change in work-related values over time (Ali & Al-Shakis, 1985) and to compare the values of Saudi and expatriate managers in a variety of organisations, including manufacturing and service organisations, in Saudi cities (Yavas & Rezayat, 2003). However, the latter warn that in their study, only four of the six dimensions, Socio-centric and Tribalistic, met the 0.5 criterion recommended by Nunnally (1978) for the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of internal consistency reliability. Yavas and Rezayat (2003) report very similar mean scores and rankings of the six dimensions of VFW for both Saudi and expatriate managers and conclude that interaction and socialization between local and expatriate managers may be causing a tendency towards cultural convergence. However, given the low reliability scores reported, their findings and conclusions should be viewed with some caution.

### **2.3.2 Saudi National Cultural Factors**

People normally bring to the workplace not just their skills and experiences but their personalities and their own characters, and on a wider scale, their culture. A number of writers have suggested ways in which cultural factors may affect workplace behaviours and values in the Arab world.

### **2.3.2.1 Islamic Values**

As Tayeb (1997: 354) notes, religions have a certain influence on the cultural characteristics of people and institutions in many countries, even those with secular constitutions, but “in countries which are expressly modeled after a religious ideal, this influence is of course far more extensive and inclusive”. Thus, although across the whole region, Islam is the dominant religion, the nature and extent of its influence differ from state to state. This variation is explained by Hutchings and Weir (2006a) in their typology of relations between religion and state. They distinguish between secular states, such as Turkey, where there is strict separation between religion and state; Muslim states, such as Egypt and Jordan, which adopt Western political, legal and social models; and Islamic states, where the Qura’an is the basis of political and socio-economic order, Islam determines social and legal actions, and there is no division between religion and public life. Saudi Arabia falls into the latter category.

Saudi Arabia has been an Islamic country since it was founded in 1932. Indeed, historically, the influence of Islam long pre-dates the modern kingdom. In the eighteenth century, the ruler of Najd, Prince (Imam) Mohammad ibn Saud (whose descendant, Abdul-Aziz Al-Saud, established Saudi Arabia as we know it today) invoked a strict interpretation of Islam in an effort to weld a political and religious sovereignty from the warring tribes of the location of two of Islam’s most sacred sites, at Makkah and Madinah. Saudi Arabia takes seriously its role as the birthplace of Islam and leader of the Muslim world, which is considered to confer a special duty and mission to uphold Islamic doctrine. It derives its constitution from the Qura’n and sunnah (the sayings and doings of Prophet Mohammad), which are called the revealed sources, and have the highest priority as sources of knowledge to develop leadership principles (Khaliq & Ogunsola, 2011; Ali, 2005). Islam in Saudi Arabia continues to be a crucially important ideological force. The robust growth of Islam has developed to counteract the popular influence of

democratization, liberalization and socioeconomic reforms (Hawrylak, 1995), recently reflected by the “Arab Spring” uprisings, in which a wind of change has blown through some Arabian countries, pursuing reform. To the Saudis, Islam embodies a way of life and a framework for individual behaviour as well as for the society and state (Hawrylak, 1995). Thus, Islam is widely cited when discussing Arab and Saudi culture, as the cornerstone of the Saudi constitution, which pervades every aspect of life. Consequently, the national culture of Saudis is characterised by Islamic values (Tayeb, 1997). Keeping in mind that culture is considered as “a soft power”, this has exerted a tremendous influence on lifestyle and the society itself. Islam advocates obedience to authority, provided that the ‘authority’ upholds Islamic values. Bjerke and Al-Meer (1993) view this factor as a contributor to the high Power Distance score of 73 they found for Saudi firms, whereby it is expected and accepted that superiors enjoy privileges. In fact, this score is higher than those for other Muslim states reported by Hofstede (2010), for example Turkey, 66; Iran, 58; Pakistan, 55. The authors consider such a score to be in line with Arab and Muslim preferences for status hierarchy, although it may be questioned how far this cultural dimension is attributable to Islamic values, or whether it may owe at least as much to tribal traditions (discussed later, see section 2.2.2.3). They suggest that Islamic values are also associated with high Uncertainty Avoidance (their sample scored 74 on this dimension), religion being one of the mechanisms by which societies try to reduce risk and uncertainty. They noted that this value is associated with resistance to change, loyalty to employers, aversion to conflict, strict adherence to Islamic teachings, and intolerance of any perceived deviation from such teaching.

Islam asserts the dignity of work, and encourages a sense of responsibility. Some writers like Ali (2005) and Weir (2008) have suggested that Islamic values have implications for organisation management. Iles et al. (2012) noted the emphasis on reward and fair ways, while Yousef (2000) in the UAE found that items on his “Islamic Work Ethic” scale, such



as co-operation and hard work, influenced employees' attitudes toward organisation change, organisation commitment and job satisfaction. Tayeb (1997) and Khan et al. (2010) present similar discussions of work-related values in Islam and their implications, arguing, for example, that leadership is a trust, and there is a psychological contract between subordinates and managers, whereby subordinates should show commitment to work, adhere to agreed terms and demonstrate individual accountability within a framework of cooperation. Meanwhile, managers are expected to show humanity and fairness towards subordinates. These authors also highlight the Islamic value of consultation in decision-making, although they note that in practice only selected individuals are consulted and actual decision-making rests with the leader, consistent with Bjerke and Al-Meer's (1993) finding of high power distance and a tendency to resolve uncertainty by the exercise of authority. Bjerke and Al-Meer (1993) suggest that although Saudi managers prefer informality and a personal approach, in practice, there is little opposition from subordinates and participation in decision-making is limited; subordinates have high dependence needs and expect managers to act autocratically. Indeed, Iles et al. (2012) suggest that joint decision-making may be seen as a sign of weakness. Common (2011) describes a similar situation in Oman, noting that employees expect managers to lead and are uncomfortable with the delegation of decision-making authority.

Another way in which Islamic values have been claimed to influence Saudi culture is through the association with fatalism, an assumption that outcomes in life and business are governed by God's will. Hutchings and Weir (2006a) suggest this can lead to a lack of interest in or sense of responsibility for performance.

Saudi Arabia's strict interpretation of Islamic law has been held responsible for women's limited career opportunities; they are allowed to enter business and professions, but in

segregated workplaces. Moreover, their work opportunities are constrained by the fact that they are not allowed to drive cars, and cannot travel without written permission from their husbands or fathers. However, the attribution of those restrictions to Islam can be challenged, since as Tayeb (1997) acknowledges, there are wide variations in behavioural norms even among Islamic states. Thus, although Islamic norms do undoubtedly influence many aspects of life in Saudi Arabia, including the world of work, it can be argued that some behaviours owe more to social and tribal norms than to Islam. Indeed, Tayeb (1997) admits the difficulty of isolating the effects of Islam from those of other socio-cultural institutions.

#### **2.3.2.2 Social Norms**

Societal context is an influential factor on national culture which in turn extends to influence the leadership process, since exercise of leadership depends on how leadership is conceptualized (Common, 2011) and managers and leaders manifest cultural interpretations in the way they perform the tasks and implement the organisations' strategies (Tayeb, 1995). Some Saudi social norms are described in positive terms. For example, Bjerke and Al-Meer (1993) note the concern for friendly relations and importance of group solidarity. At-Twajri et al. (1994:65) describe a "societal tradition of mutual dependence", which they considered explained their finding that Saudi managers were seen as more likely than US managers to help subordinates do their job or tell them how to do it.

Atiyyah (1993) describes the traditional social system in favourable terms, suggesting that strong family and kinship ties, and established values and norms controlling behaviour and interpersonal relationships fostered courage, honesty and interpersonal trust. He goes on to suggest, however, that this social system is being steadily eroded by the incursions of modernization, with a concomitant loss of traditional values. Responses

such as fear of change or loss of cultural identity may lead to increased conservatism, or to a focus on material wealth or power and influence as sources of security.

There are also social norms which, although not inherently negative, may pose difficulties in a business context. Hutchings and Weir (2006a), for example, note a preference for tacit, indirect communication styles. In particular it is difficult to say 'no' to someone face-to-face, or to convey negative information directly. This has obvious implications for such situations as challenging a decision, suggesting that a target cannot be met, or criticizing performance, especially as a leader is expected to protect his dependents from shame. Negative appraisals or information, if not avoided, may be covered in evasive language, as such messages should not be allowed to disrupt harmony.

Moreover, in Saudi Arabia, as in the Middle East generally, there are some social habits which may be considered as obstacles that hinder the leadership process, as conventionally understood, in the workplace. *Wasta*, which is an Arabic term that means "the intervention of a patron in favour of a client in attempt to obtain privileges or resources from a third party" (Mohamed & Mohamad, 2011:412), for example, in Saudi organisations, is regarded as one of the most prominent social ills. Smith et al. (2012) define *wasta* as reliance on interpersonal linkages that have no formal status, while Iles et al. (2012) describe it as a social network of interpersonal connections involving the exercise of power, influence and information sharing through social, political and business networks. According to Janahi et al. (2013), *wasta* involves personal relationships with those whom one respects, which influence one's decisions. A *wasta* network starts with family, and extends to encompass a wider community of friends and acquaintances (Iles et al. 2012), bound by reciprocal obligations (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011b). It is a form of favouritism that provides individuals with advantages on the basis of their connections, rather than merit or entitlement (Aldossari & Robertson, 2015). It is similar

to nepotism and cronyism, but wider in scope, since nepotism and cronyism refer to favouritism on the bases of kinship or friendship, respectively, while *wasta* is based on a wider network; the beneficiary and the patron may not know each other personally, but may be linked indirectly through their respective networks. Indeed, Al-Ramahi (2008) has claimed that some patrons may even sell their *wasta* services. It is also different from, for example, bribery because it does not involve direct exchange of mutual favours. The obligations involved are more implicit and indirect (Loewe et al. 2008)

*Wasta* pervades most aspects of life. The culture of *wasta* in the Arab world is well illustrated by a number of proverbs, for example, “He who has a back will not be hit on his stomach” (meaning those who are supported by strong others will not be put down); “Seek whom you know, so that your needs will be fulfilled” (people tend to serve those they know; without knowing anybody, it is difficult to get what you want); “No-one can climb up except those who have a ladder” (rising to high levels, or receiving important benefits, depends on having the right connections) (Taymor, 1986).

Historically, *wasta* was a way of managing relations between families and tribes through the use of an intermediary who would intercede between conflicting parties (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993). Ali et al. (2013) similarly trace the origins of *wasta* to the management of relations between families and tribes, often through the mediation of the “sheikh”, and see it as a reflection of the Arab emphasis on the power of social factors. Variations on *wasta* have been the norm in most Arab societies for centuries, and Barnett et al. (2013) suggest that this is because at some point it was perceived to provide better solutions to social problems and resource allocation than could be achieved otherwise. Mediation of conflict helped to maintain the unity, integrity and status of the tribe within the broader society. As Hutching and Weir (2006b) point out, as a form of conflict resolution in a hostile environment, *wasta* inhibited revenge following personal injury, and bound

families and communities for peace and well-being; it benefited society as a whole. They note, however, an evolution from this original, intermediary form of *wasta* to an intercessionary form, whereby a protagonist intervenes on behalf of a client, so that in competitive situations, those with the strongest *wasta* (the most powerful allies) are the ones who succeed. Thus, a shift can be seen from a top-down influence serving the interest of the tribe, to a bottom-up process furthering the interests of individuals (Barnett et al. 2013).

Mohamed and Mohamad (2011) identify a number of factors that may have contributed to entrenching the culture of *wasta* in the Arab states. For example, many Arab states, in the early years of independence, faced internal instability and external threats, so autocratic authority on the part of political leaders and unequal distribution of power and wealth became the norm. With the emergence of a powerful, dominating elite and in the absence of institutional structures, social networking becomes the key to conducting transactions (Peng & Luo, 2000). The creation of rentier economies by the discovery and exploitation of oil was another factor, as it meant wealth came from abundance of resources rather than being generated by the skill and effort of citizens. Leaders acquired extensive power as distributors of resources, so the link between work and income was broken, and income came to be viewed as a windfall gain arising as a result of connections (Yates, 1996). Moreover, the security of oil revenues has been a disincentive to the creation of a competitive and diversified economic base. When oil prices fall, employment can be adversely affected, increasing the temptation to use every means possible, including *wasta*, to secure a position (Mohamed & Mohamad, 2011).

Throughout the Arab world, social networks play an important role in all aspects of decision-making, and the influence of social and family connections carries over into the workplace, including career advancement (Al Harbi, et al, 2016). The role of social

networking in this respect is not unique to Arab organisations – the importance of organisational networking and interpersonal relationships for access to information, advice, opportunities and promotions has been reported in Western literature (Cleveland et al. 2000; Ogden et al. 2006; Singh et al. 2006); particularly from a gender perspective. Wasta, however, is a distinctly Middle Eastern phenomenon based on strong social connections secured through strong networking (Hutchings & Weir, 2006a).

In its present form, it is used to secure material benefits such as a job, university admission or promotion (Hutchings & Weir, 2006b; Common, 2011), by invoking the power and influence of those with influential occupational roles, in order to achieve a goal (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993). In most Arab countries, it is the only way for many people to get employed (Ali et al. 2013). Whiteoak et al. (2006) report the use of wasta in the workplace to influence the competition for appointment or promotion. This fosters the career progress of those with influential connections, while those who lack such connections or try to play by the rules are disadvantaged (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1994). Thus, as Common (2011) reports in the Omani context, two parallel sets of leadership or managerial behaviour can be identified, whereby ascriptive social criteria are still used in decisions on selection, recruitment and promotion, despite the existence of formal systems based on merit, and these depend on the 'in-group' or 'out-group' status of the individuals concerned. Moreover, many aspects of management are decided on the basis of personal relations rather than competence (Metcalf, 2006). The role of wasta in career advancement has frequently been noted;

*"In Saudi Arabia, and in the rest of the Arab states, pay is determined without regard to merit and performance, and the promotion and salary increases are largely determined by personal connection and manoeuvre, nepotism and sectarian and ideological affiliation"* (Ali & Swiercz, 1993:40).

Tlaiss and Kauser (2011a) explore the role played by *wasta* in the career success of Middle Eastern managers drawing on their research in the Levant and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, of which Saudi Arabia is one. In their study (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011a) involving a survey of 200 managers, more than 90 per cent reported the absence of networking in their organisations and 89 per cent said they had never had a mentor. By contrast, 89 per cent admitted using *wasta* in their career, although more than half claimed that they would like to see such practice curbed. The majority of managers interviewed said that education and experience were not enough to succeed, without *wasta*. A distinction emerged between internal and external *wasta*; external *wasta* with politicians or wealthy, influential people, can help people to get a job, but to get promoted needs internal *wasta* – an influential ally within the company. From the point of view of a manager granting requests made through the use of *wasta*, one interviewee explained that she would not appoint anyone who was not qualified, but within a pool of qualified candidates, she would hire someone with *wasta* because “this *wasta* will owe me a favour” (p20). This illustrates the complex reciprocal obligations involved in *wasta*, and explains two earlier findings reported by the same authors (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011a); the time spent cultivating connections in public and private spheres, not only when needing a push, but as a protective measure in case of future need; and the situation that those in charge of decisions may grant a request from an intermediary they do not know personally, for future benefit by gaining *wasta* for their own network. Whilst many respondents acknowledged that *wasta* is unfair to those who lack influential connections, they did not perceive it as corruption because it did not involve bribery; moreover, they saw it as an integral and necessary part of Arab culture, deeply rooted in traditional social norms and values. It is linked to trust within the network group. Thus if an individual is approached as a *wasta* (the term is applied to the intermediary, as well as to the practice

of using mediation) he/she should try to help “as a favour to his/her acquaintances and in order not to betray their trust” (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011b).

The use of *wasta* is in fact inconsistent with Islamic principles regarding employment, which assert the importance of qualification and merit (Ali, 2005). The prophet Muhammad is reported to have said, “He who is in a leadership position and appoints knowingly a person who is not qualified to manage them, he violates the command of God and his messenger” (Ali, 2005: 191). A number of writers, moreover, have criticised reliance on *wasta* as a cause of inefficiency, poor job performance and economic decline (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1994; Loewe et al. 2008; Kilani & Sakijha, 2002, Makhoul & Harrison, 2004). Hunt and At-Twajiri (1996a) found that friendship and personal considerations might be prioritized over organisational goals and performance. Tlaiss and Kauser (2011b) suggest that, because high social status or prestigious connections make success more likely, regardless of qualifications, skills and experience, *wasta* reduces the incentive for individuals to develop skills. Loewe et al. (2008) note that the influence of *wasta* on recruitment can result in overmanning. They also point to a potential loss of productivity due to the encouragement of rent-seeking activities, whereby people spend time and money in building up and maintaining social networks, rather than in productive activity. This suggestion was borne out by one of their interviewees, who reported that she spent most of her time in the office making phone calls, or attending business reunions, in order to build *wasta*. Such reports illustrate how prioritization of network connections such as kin and tribal allegiances runs contrary to the preoccupation with efficiency associated with Western traditions of management (Common, 2011). *Wasta* also has psychological effects; it can create feelings of injustice and frustration among those who are qualified but do not have a patron to support them (Makhoul & Harrison, 2004) and can lead to resentment and social unrest, particularly where favour is granted on the basis of, for example, ethnic affiliation (Al Ariss, 2010).



Mohamed and Mohamed (2011) suggested that the notion of “discounting” from attribution theory (Kelley, 1987) would cause people who used *wasta* to secure a position to be viewed unfavourably, in terms of qualification and competence. Attribution theory concerns how people use information to explain the outcomes of others. When multiple explanations of an outcome are available, people use discounting to eliminate the explanations that seem less plausible, and according to Kelley (1973) they will discount internal explanations where external explanations are available. Applying this notion to *wasta*, it can be suggested that when an employee is known to have used *wasta*, his or her successful outcomes (e.g. selection, promotion, awards etc) will more readily be attributed to his/her *wasta* (the external explanation) than his/her own abilities (the internal explanation).

Such a view was borne out by the finding of Mohamed and Mohamed’s (2011) experimental study among more than 400 business students in Egyptian universities. Participants were given a summary job description and employee specification for the position of a bank teller, and a one-page employment record of a hypothetical employee in such a position. The supposed presence or absence of *wasta* was manipulated by writing “presented *wasta*” in Arabic at the bottom of the record, or leaving this area blank. Participants were told they were participating in a study on selection, and were asked to read the given data, and answer questions about their perceptions of the employee’s competence and morality on seven – point Likert-type scales. Participants viewed employees apparently hired with *wasta* as less competent, and less moral than those hired without. It was suggested that presence of the indicator “presented *wasta*” on the employment history led participants to assume that the employee was hired because of the *wasta*, rather than on merit. It was also suggested that, as a result of favouritism, it may be perceived that *wasta* users receive benefits they do not deserve, and hence that they may be seen as corrupt and morally deficient (Mohamed & Mohamad, 2011).

Attitudes towards the practice of *wasta* are conflicting and often ambivalent, depending on the perspective and experience of those whose opinion is sought. Whilst much literature, especially from Western sources, equates *wasta* with nepotism and cronyism, this view is not necessarily or uniformly held by Arabs, and the practice is not hidden (Barnett et al. 2013). Whilst many claim to disapprove of *wasta* as unfair to those who do not have influential supporters, others consider that it helps people to enforce their rights (Loewe et al. 2008). People normally are daunted and reluctant when they use *wasta* for the first time, despite the controversy noted above. Later on, with time, and in the absence of any mechanism of monitoring, they feel proud to practise such action, especially as it is taken as a kind of magnanimity when it takes the form of intercession. While it has become a prerogative for those who exercise *wasta*, other people, however, may see it as a wrongdoing or misdeed, so this practice has alienated significant and influential segments of society (AlRasheed, 2010).

Despite this ambivalence, scholars point out, there are, nonetheless, a number of factors that contribute to perpetuate the practice of *wasta*. One is the lack – or perceived lack – of alternatives. Loewe et al. (2008), for example, report that 77 per cent of Jordanian managers interviewed thought *wasta* was important or very important for obtaining employment in the public sector. The authors suggest that such is the habit of reliance on *wasta*, that many people lack knowledge of how to achieve their aims without it. A second factor is negative incentives; that is, in a situation where use of *wasta* is widespread, those who do not use it are inevitably at a disadvantage. Barnett et al. (2013) explain this in economic terms in terms of the transaction costs of dealing with the in-group (originally the tribe; more recently, other kinds of *wasta* networks) compared with the out-group. They propose that there is, however, as communities become more interconnected, an opportunity cost in terms of potential benefits foregone by restricting one's dealings to

the in-group, and that wasta will only be abandoned when the benefits of using it are outweighed by the costs.

The practice of wasta could also be controlled by regulation; however, Loewe et al. (2008) point out that this is unlikely to occur in political systems characterized by a hierarchy of clientelistic relations. Perhaps the main reason why wasta is perpetuated, however, is that it is so deeply embedded in social norms. Attempts to regulate it fail because it is intrinsically tied to trust and the social structure (Hutchings & Weir, 2006b). Wasta is seen as part of the culture, associated with values such as solidarity, allegiance and mutual responsibility (Loewe et al. 2008). As Iles et al. (2012) point out, political and philosophical considerations are surface phenomena compared to the deeper infrastructure of family, kin and obligation.

#### **2.3.2.3 Tribal Customs, Traditions and Loyalty**

The early structure of social organisation in the Arabian Peninsula was essentially tribal. Modern state boundaries were imposed by conquest or colonialism, resulting in a situation where tribal allegiance was often stronger and more meaningful than national identity (Barnett et al. 2013). Ali et al. (2013) describe the prevalent tribalism in the region as “an intangible emotion that entails varying degrees of loyalty to a tribe, as well as the social sense of belonging to a certain people” (p537). The extent to which tribal allegiance plays a role in everyday life varies from one individual to another, and one group to another, depending on background, origin, area of residence and status in the community (Rowland, 2009; Ali et al. 2013). However, it is widely suggested that a sense of tribal affiliation is a key feature of social relations in the region, and associated with values of loyalty, communality and reciprocity (Loewe et al. 2008), which extend into organisational behaviours (Common, 2011).

The social stratification system in terms of caste and tribe is prominent in the Saudi social scene and dominates the societal perspective. In Saudi Arabia, adhering to some tribal habits such as hospitality, generosity and courage is regarded as a matter of honour, and failure to maintain this unwritten code is considered as a humiliation to the tribe (Idris, 2007), that will be rejected covertly and overtly.

Rice (2004) similarly asserts the importance in Saudi culture of the Bedouin tribal heritage, which she associates with the values of loyalty, justice, generosity and concern for status. Loyalty, she notes, is directed first towards the family, and then successively to clan, tribe and nation. Family loyalty in particular is a powerful social force that often plays a strong role in job seeking and advancement. In the Arab and particularly Saudi context, writers express cultural values in terms of the power of the family or tribe (AlRasheed, 2002; Shahin & Wright, 2004). For example, attention has been drawn to the authoritarian power of the father in the family or the sheikh (tribal leader or religious scholar) in the tribe, who commands the loyalty and obedience of family/tribe members in return for the protection they provide. The perpetuation of tribal values, may in fact, no less than Islamic values, provide an explanation for Saudi Arabia's high score on Hofstede's power distance scale, reported earlier. As Hutchings and Weir (2006b) point out, this high power distance is manifested in a tendency for power, status and perceived skills to be linked to seniority, charisma and the ability to use force – all characteristics associated with the tribal leader, which enabled him to command allegiance and legitimized his authority. Bjerke and Al-Meer (1993) view this tribal tradition as one of the roots of the high uncertainty avoidance they found to characterize Saudi culture. This patriarchal model, some have suggested, may be mirrored in the workplace, in relations between bosses and subordinates. Saudi society is composed of vigorous family bonds, essentially grounded in cultural values, which influence the behaviour of individuals.

At-Twajjri et al. (1994) suggest that in Saudi Arabia, managers often view business organisations as part of extended family property and subordinates as a second family, which would explain the transfer of tribal roles and values to the workplace. This can make it difficult for a Saudi manager to fire an unsatisfactory employee. It can also lead to Saudi managers seeking to control their subordinates in the same way that they control their families. They are reported to use formal power/managerial authority and to be perceived as more autocratic than their US counterparts. Adding to this their loyalty to family and friends (to whom custom demands they give preferential treatment), Saudi managers were rated by their subordinates as less fair than were US managers (At-Twajjri et al, 1994).

Bjerke and Al-Meer (1993) characterize Saudi society as collectivist, which implies a group-based society with a high need for affiliation (Hutchings and Weir, 2006a). They note the consequent division between in-group and out-group, and the reliance on family and friendship ties for getting things done. Indeed, they suggest that formal structures and procedures in organisations may be a facade, with family and friendship networks dominating operations in practice. At-Twajjri et al. (1994) assert that managerial values are tradition-bound, and so managers face cultural pressure to favour family and friends, which may lead to a sense of obligation to hire kin and friends, and difficulty firing them, irrespective of competence. Moreover, tribal relations mirrored at work place the manager as a supervisor or protector who views subordinates as family. Thus, Saudi managers are concerned for employees' personal welfare and likely to be sympathetic to time off for family problems, or to on-the-job visitors; on the other hand their paternalistic role can be manifested in autocratic, controlling behaviour, and to managers being seen as "punishers".

The collectivist orientation associated with tribal values is likely, the literature would suggest, to have implications for organisational attitudes and behaviours, and leadership

values. Individualism and collectivism reflect the extent to which people see their lives as interconnected with other members of a social system, such as an organisation (Hofstede, 1980; 2001). Hence, prevailing norms as to the degree of individualism or collectivism expected from members will affect relationships between employee and organisation, members' reasons for complying with organisation requirements, and who is appointed to influential positions (Hofstede, 1980). According to Gelfand et al. (2004), in individualist cultures, organisation members have a sense of autonomy and independence and may have only short-term relationships with employers. Organisations are more concerned with performance than employee welfare. Decisions are made by individuals, and incentives and rewards are individually-based. In contrast, in a collectivist society, members have a sense of interdependence and seek long-term relationships. Organisations are concerned with employee welfare, decisions are made by groups, and rewards are based on group contributions, equity and welfare. It is also claimed that individualism-collectivism culture distinctions are associated with ethics-related attitudes (Jackson, 2001). Resick et al. (2009) found partial support for their hypothesis that endorsement of ethical leadership as important for leadership effectiveness would be positively related to a collectivist social culture. They found such an association for specific dimensions of in-group collectivist values, such as loyalty, cohesion, and pride in group membership. On similar lines, Parboteeh et al. (2005) report that members of a collectivist culture are less likely to justify ethically suspect behaviour. However, this finding appears to contradict the prevalence of *wasta*, reported earlier. This may be related to the ambiguity of *wasta*'s ethical status in Arab and Saudi culture, or to the distinction between different forms and levels of collectivism, depending on the group that commands primary allegiance. Thus, the norms that govern loyalty and obligation to one in-group, such as a clan or tribe, may be fulfilled in ways that may appear unfair or ethically suspect to out-group members.

#### **2.3.2.4 Education**

In Saudi Arabia, as in the Arab world generally, faith in education as the cornerstone of socio-economic development has been reflected in growing numbers of schools, higher education institutions and graduates (Atiyyah, 1993).

Atiyyah (1993) draws attention to the appreciable progress in the qualifications and experience of Arab managers since the 1970s. He notes the prevalence of university degrees, as well as the fact that some managers are Western-educated and many have travelled abroad. Increasing numbers have been exposed to Western management methods, either through study or experience in joint venture organisations.

The pursuit of higher education in Saudi Arabia is facilitated by generous government financial provision for university students: all fees, books, room and board and a monthly stipend (Hunt & At-Twajjri, 1996b). In their study of work-related values among 144 managers selected randomly from various organisations, Hunt and At-Twajjri (1996b) found that 76 per cent were college graduates. They found significant differences related to educational level on the rating of two organisational goals: respondents with high-school education or below rated customer service their highest priority, while Ph.D holders rated organisational leadership highest. However, they found no difference related to managers' education level in their ratings of other goals. From these findings, it is not clear how important education level per se may be in influencing managers' attitudes. What may be more important is exposure to foreign ideas and influences.

From the 1950s onwards, in order to support the economic growth of the kingdom with the necessary professionals and managers, large numbers of Saudis have been educated in the USA and in Europe, particularly in the UK, importing external influences on values on their return to work in Saudi Arabia (Hunt & At-Twajjri, 1996a).

According to At-Twajiri et al. (1994) and Moran (2014), the greater Saudi managers' exposure to Western education and multinational management, the less likely they are to act completely in accordance with traditional cultural patterns. They claim, for example, that the use of formal power and reflection of tribalistic, conformist and egocentric values are decreasing and that there is an increasing trend towards existential, socio-centric and manipulative values. Indeed, Ali and Al-Shakis (1985) report such a trend from the early 1980s. This implies greater tolerance for ambiguity and alternative ideas, less insistence on submission to authority and/or tradition, and a more goal-directed approach, based on the VFW framework discussed previously.

#### **2.3.2.5 Technology Changes**

Harris (1993) argues that technological developments are changing work culture, with implications for management. Certain jobs and occupations may be eliminated or automated, while new specialisms and positions may emerge related to the use of new technologies. Harris suggests that in these circumstances, managers will need to adopt a new attitude towards employees as human capital to be enhanced, and must therefore become more committed to and involved in human resource management. Not only employees, but managers too, will need to be prepared for changes in attitudes, roles and skills needed in the new work culture. For managers, in Harris' view, this may mean a broadening of their competencies and social and environmental understandings, to include understanding of communications technologies in offices and plants, strategic planning and forecasting, and a wide range of human resource skills. Harris was writing from a Western, predominantly US perspective. Saudi Arabia has lagged behind the West in the exploitation of new technologies. One reason for this may be that, as Elmusa (2015) points out, technology is "ambiguous", capable of being interpreted differently in different contexts. In Saudi Arabia, he notes, technology has been seen as a way to



integrate the kingdom and to raise the prestige of the country internationally. At the same time, there has been a concern to control the repercussions such as exposure to Western cultural values. The Kingdom's approach historically has been characterized by a wish to have technology without social change. Nevertheless, in recent years, there are signs of a change; with the Government call for STC to install the infrastructure for the Internet in the Kingdom in 1998, projects to provide computers for schools, and government emphasis on bringing the Kingdom into the ranks of the advanced nations, it is reasonable to suggest that Saudi organisation leaders are beginning to experience the changes brought by deployment of new technologies in offices and plants.

#### **2.4 Leadership in the Context of Culture**

Shahin and Wright (2004) questioned the applicability of Western leadership theories to different cultures, given that leadership behaviour and subordinates' responses are likely to be shaped by ideas of what is considered legitimate and appropriate in their society. Thus, behaviours that emerged in Western studies as characteristic of effective leadership may not be perceived as such in non-Western cultures; conversely, other cultures may reveal leadership dimensions that have not emerged in the Western studies on which most current theories are based.

Such a view is supported by the outcomes of their research on the applicability of transactional and transformational leadership styles in Egypt. Like Saudi Arabia, Egypt is an Islamic country; it is a family-centred society where the father or grandfather exercises authority over the family; and it is a state where, historically, issues of social control and resource sharing have been resolved by strong central leadership. Historical and geographical factors, as well as the Islamic social culture, have combined to embed an emphasis on social integration, in the form of cooperation and coordination among people.

Shahin and Wright suggested that, although in Egypt, charismatic leadership is favoured, it takes a different form from transformational leadership as described by Bass and Avolio (1994), having a strong element of authoritarianism, and also features of transactional leadership. They also assumed that in Egyptian culture, social integration between leader and subordinates, and also among group members, would have a major influence on working life.

Their assumptions were borne out by their survey of managers (70) and subordinates (173) in ten Egyptian banks. Their questionnaire incorporated Bass and Avolio's (1995) Multi-factor Leadership Questionnaire Form 5x Short, translated into Arabic, which measures aspects of transformational, transactional and laissez-faire leadership. Further questions were developed to measure social integration and pseudo-transformational leadership – a more authoritarian, personalized style of charismatic leadership. Factor analysis yielded seven factors, three of which were similar to those found in US samples by Bass and Avolio (1994) – “Individual Consideration” was similar to its US equivalent; “Enthusiastic Leadership” contained elements of Bass and Avolio's inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation; “Reluctant Decision-making” contained items of passive management by exception and laissez-faire. Other factors, however, were very different from the US model. “Positive Leadership” combined transformational and transactional leadership, while “Bureaucratic Leadership”, “Social Integration” and “Authoritarian Leadership” emerged as separate factors not included in Bass and Avolio's model, but apparently salient in the Egyptian context. Such findings would seem to support the need for caution when attempting to transfer Western leadership theories to other contexts, and for detailed studies of specific national cultures in order to understand better what constitutes effective leadership in such countries.

Since the present study is conducted within an Islamic culture, it is interesting to consider the possible role of Islamic values in leadership in such a context. According to Khaliq and Ogunsola (2011) Islam, through the text of the Qura'an and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad, offers principles of leadership, constituting a construct that they call Management from an Islamic Perspective (MIP). It encompasses "visionary leadership, strategic thinking, management of change, fair treatment and social justice among employees, sincerity and commitment, and motivational issues" (Khaliq & Ogunsola, 2011:202). Because MIP views management from the perspective of the knowledge derived from Islamic revelation, it is claimed to result in behaviour in accordance with Islamic beliefs (Kazmi & Ahmad, 2013). From an Islamic perspective, leadership is not a privilege or position, but a responsibility or trust, to be exercised in the interest of followers and of humanity in general (Toor, 2007). It is a psychological contract which obliges leaders to strive to guide and protect their followers and treat them justly (Khaliq, 2007 a, b).

Several writers, for example Aabed (2006) and Khan (2007) have offered lists of cardinal Islamic leadership principles which, despite some differences in number and terminology, contain many commonalities. According to these writers, for instance, Islamic leaders should display faith, knowledge and wisdom, consultation, justice and self-sacrifice. Consistent with those principles, Khaliq and Ogunsola (2011) in an investigation of the leadership values espoused by managers in the International Islamic University, Malaysia, found a declared preference for servant-leadership. This is a style of leadership characterized by conscious and altruistic service (Parolini et al. 2009). The servant leader prioritizes followers' needs and empowers others, sharing responsibility and authority to meet a greater need (Khaliq & Ogunsola, 2011).

Despite a common heritage of Islam, however, reports on leadership in the Gulf states reveal conflicting findings. A strong preference for a consultative leadership style has been reported among Arab Gulf executives (Ali, 1993) and in UAE managers (Ali et al. 1995). It has been suggested that leadership in Arab culture nurtures consultative and participative tendencies (Ali et al. 1997) and that this demonstrates the influence of Islamic values (Randeree & Faramawy, 2011). Other studies, however, present a different picture. Dahhan (1988), for example, found a tendency among Jordanian managers to follow an authoritative style. It is not clear to what extent these differences may be related to the timing of the studies, differences of location within the Arab region or differences between declared preferences and actual practice. The latter is the distinction made by Argyris (1993) between 'espoused' and 'exerted' culture, and by Klein et al. (2009) between 'ideal' and 'operational' culture. Klein et al. (2009) note that there is often a disconnect between underlying values and day-to-day operating behaviours.

The GLOBE study (House et al. 2004) referred to earlier in the context of national cultures, investigated leadership as conceptualized and practised in the 10 country clusters identified in the first part of the project. Topics examined in this large scale survey (involving more than 17,000 middle managers from 951 organisations) included the origin of leaders, moderation, role demands of leaders, antecedents to preferred leader behaviour, leader prototypes, preferences for leadership styles, leadership behaviour patterns and the behavioural impact of leadership. The study was underpinned by the Value-Belief theory (Hofstede, 1980, 2001, Trompenaars, 1993) suggesting that values and beliefs held by members of a culture influence behaviour and ideas about what is legitimate, acceptable and effective. The GLOBE researchers also followed the implicit leadership theory expounded by Lord and Maher (1991). The theory holds that individuals have implicit beliefs and assumptions about the attitudes and behaviours of

leaders, which shape their expectations. In the GLOBE study it was assumed that this applies at the societal level also.

Six types of leadership were identified in the GLOBE study:

Charismatic value-based (CVB): the ability to inspire and motivate based on firmly-held values.

Team-oriented (TO): effective team building around shared goals.

Participative (P): involving others in making and implementing decisions.

Humane-oriented (HO): supportive and considerate.

Autonomous (A): independent and individualist.

Self-preserving (SP): face saving, procedure bound and status conscious.

Although, as noted previously, the GLOBE study did not include Saudi Arabia, data were collected for three other Arab states which in the earlier (cultural dimensions) part of the project had been found to cluster together: Egypt, Kuwait, and Qatar. The scores on the six leadership dimensions (where 1 – 3.5 indicates dimensions thought to inhibit effective leadership, 3.5 – 4.5 is neutral, and 4.5 – 7 indicates dimensions thought to contribute to effective leadership) were as shown in Table 2.2:

Table 2.2: Scores on GLOBE Leadership Dimensions for Three Arab States

Dimension	Egypt	Kuwait	Qatar
CVB	5.57	5.90	4.51
TO	5.55	5.90	4.75
P	4.69	5.03	4.76
HO	5.14	5.21	4.66
A	4.49	3.39	3.38
SP	4.21	4.02	3.92

Source: Den Hartog et al. (1999)

From these scores, it seems that leadership dimensions most seen as contributing to effective leadership were CVB and TO, although the scores and ranks for these dimensions were lower than in other regional clusters (House et al. 2004). Two dimensions, A and SP, have neutral scores across all three countries; nevertheless, the perception of SP in the Middle East cluster was the second highest among the ten clusters.

Abdalla and Al-Homoud (2001) subsequently used the GLOBE methodology to collect data for Kuwait and Qatar, and their factor analysis revealed a S-factor structure consisting of “Charismatic value based” (combining GLOBE’s CVB and TO dimensions) “Considerate leadership (combining HO and PO), Performance Oriented, “Autocratic”, “Self-protective”, and a fifth factor that differed for the two countries and was named “Traditional/Tribalistic” in the case of Kuwait and “Self-sacrificing” in the case of Qatar. Three of these dimensions were seen as contributing to effective leadership: Charismatic / Value based, “Self-protective”, and “Considerate leadership”, in that order.

The authors asserted that their study confirmed the reliability and validity of the GLOBE measures for the Gulf region and, moreover, that the similarity in leadership preferences between Kuwait and Qatar suggests generalizability to different Gulf societies.

An interesting feature of both the GLOBE results and those of Abdalla and Al-Homoud (2001), however, is that the profile of leadership preferences reported differs from actual leadership profiles reported in previous studies, which suggest that Arab leaders are paternalistic, centralized, and inclined to put personal relations before efficiency (Abdel-Rahman, 1994; El-Tayeb, 1986) consistent with local social values. These studies were admittedly much earlier. However, Abdalla and Al-Homoud (2001) themselves, in setting the background to their study, describe managers or organisational leaders as playing the role of tribal leader (Sheikh), centralizing authority and conferring protection and patronage on in-group members. They also describe a power-stratified culture where

organisations work through hierarchical relations and subordinates/juniors defer to seniors.

In seeking to explain the apparent discrepancy between what is viewed as desirable and what is actually practised, Abdalla and Al-Homoud (2001) suggest that the states of the region are in transition, resulting in dual values, especially among the more educated. Leaders are trying to change, but they belong to the traditional culture, and cannot risk alienating their main source of support, which would render them vulnerable.

Such a view is supported by Ogburn's (1922) theory of "cultural lag" (as cited in Allport, 1924). Ogburn argues that cultural transition is a lengthy and uneven process and that, while infrastructure and technology may change very rapidly, social life changes more slowly, so that old and new forces may coexist. An illustrative example in this regard is Oman's reported adherence to a powerful traditional culture, despite economic and lifestyle changes (Common, 2011). This may be salient, too, in the context of Saudi Arabia, which has also been described as a society in transition, experienced through technological transformation and expatriate skills.

At the same time, however, caution should be exercised in assuming similarities among Arab and Gulf states; as the findings reported above indicate, some differences have been found, which may have a number of explanations.

Neal et al. (2005) challenge monolithic conceptions of the "Arab World" and "Arab Leadership" by demonstrating important regional similarities and differences in leadership authority values in states within the "Arab World". They examined ideas about effective leadership style, characteristics, values and actions held by women managers in Oman, Lebanon and the UAE. The study employed a modified version of Weber's (1979) typology of authority, as a framework. Weber described three ideal – types of authority: "rational-legal" characterised by impartiality, strict rules and procedures and focus on

efficiency; “traditional” (including paternalist), characterised by centralization, invocation of historical precedent, and subordinates’ loyalty in exchange for reward (material or symbolic) from the leader; and “charismatic”, rooted primarily in the personal identity and characteristics of the leader. Neal et al. (2005) added a fourth type, “interactive”, to take account of post-Weberian developments in leadership, specifically the emergence of participative / transformational ideologies and consequent adoption of teamwork and flexible management structures observed in the West.

A survey reflecting these values, to be rated on a Likert – type scale, was administered to a sample of women enrolled in upper-division business classes. Of the 320 usable responses obtained, 112 were from Lebanese citizens, 100 from Omanis and 108 from UAE citizens. The findings suggested significantly higher support for charismatic authority in Lebanon than in the two Gulf countries; the latter, meanwhile, attached greater importance to “traditional” (and specifically religious) values than in Lebanon. Such differences may reflect the greater “Westernization” of Lebanon (where, for example, women dress more informally than in the Gulf, and mix with men socially and at work in a manner that is not accepted in the Gulf states), but may also reflect other factors such as the degree of ethnic diversity in the population, or the impact of war. Moreover, Neal et al. (2005) suggest that differences in cultural values within the Arab world may be changing as the Gulf wars and increasing tension between the Arab world and the West have led to increasing Islamicist radicalism among Arab women, reflected, for example, in the adoption of hijab by young women in families where females had not been accustomed to cover the head (Haddad, 2003). Thus, it is important to recognize the multiplicity of factors that may influence values and behaviours within a given state and to be wary of rigid assumptions about the impact of culture.



#### **2.4.1 Leadership Style in Saudi Arabia**

Muna (1980) described the preferred decision-making style of Arab executives as consultative, and this would appear to be in line with Islamic and social values. In practice, however, Wright (1981) claims that managers in Islamic organisations seldom delegate authority to their subordinates, while Ali (1988) and Hudson (1977) described Arab culture as authoritarian. Ali and Swiercz (1993) describe what they call a pseudo – consultative style, whereby managers create a feeling of consultation by adopting a particular style, but their behaviour is firmly located within the authoritarian and hierarchical structure of the organisation, and the aim is to encourage acceptance of decisions already made by managers and to enhance the manager’s image, rather than genuinely to empower subordinates. In a study among 83 managers in the Saudi cities of Riyadh, Al-hasa and Dammam drawn from various types (public and private) and sizes of enterprise, using a modified version of a Leadership Decision Style scale used by Muna (1980) and Vroom and Yetton (1973), they found that 11 per cent of respondents claimed to use a predominantly autocratic style, 28 per cent a pseudo-consultative style, 39 per cent a consultative style and 20 per cent a participative style. Only two individuals reported adopting a predominantly delegative approach. Ali and Swiercz (1993) suggested that the findings on participative leadership, which contradict those of earlier studies (e.g. Badawy, 1979) might be attributable to Western influence through education and business contacts. Their findings support, to some extent, Muna’s (1980) claim that consultation is Arabs’ preferred decision style, in that this style attracted the largest concentration of responses; nevertheless, the other four styles investigated, together, accounted for almost two-thirds of responses. More than a quarter of the managers reported adopting a pseudo-consultative style, which the researchers attribute to a historical conflict between the consultative tradition and absolutist values. Historically, throughout the region, coercive force has been used to overcome instability. Thus, some

Arabian managers “display a pseudo-consultative style to create a supportive and cohesive environment around themselves” (Ali and Swiercz, 1993:40).

Whilst these studies afford some interesting insight into ways in which Arab (and specifically Saudi) leadership styles may be influenced by cultural factors, they suffer from two notable limitations. First, they tend to reflect managers’ rather than subordinates’ perspectives, although managers’ perspectives of themselves as consultative, participative and so on may not be shared by their subordinates. Second, they make sweeping claims about Arab managers, without distinguishing between different types of organisation. They may include different types of organisation in their research samples, but fail to use this as a distinguishing factor in analysis. Drummond and Al-Anazi (1997) attempt to overcome these imitations by comparing leadership styles among a range of organisations, public and private, from the perspective of subordinates. The basis of comparison is the assumed level of bureaucratic formality. The assumption was that higher levels of transformational leadership would be associated with lower levels of bureaucratic leadership, and the converse would apply for transactional leadership.

In Saudi Arabia, the public-private distinction is blurred by the existence of many organisations of intermediate status, ostensibly privatized but with varying degrees of government participation and control. Drummond and Al-Anazi therefore surveyed four organisations of different ownership status: the Saudi British Bank, as a corporation; SABIC, the industrial holding group, which is 70% private owned, as a semi-private organisation; Saudi Telephone Company (at the time, under state ownership but managed by a private company under contract) as a semi-public company; and the Saudi civil service as a “pure” bureaucratic organisation. Leadership styles were measured using Bass and Avolio’s (1989) MLQ. The findings did not conform to expectation, in that both transformational and transactional leadership styles were significantly lower within the

civil service than other organisations, and transactional leadership was significantly higher in SABIC than in the telephone company. No other comparisons were significant. The researchers suggested the apparent absence of strong leadership influence in the civil service may be due to high reliance on rules, regulations and procedures, which might substitute for leadership influence. Alternatively, they suggest, the civil service, as the organisation least exposed to Western influences, may more strongly reflect the strong religious discipline characteristic of Saudi culture, leading to heavy reliance on employees' self-discipline. These interpretations are speculative, however (for example, the researchers present no concrete evidence as to the relative levels of Western influence in the different organisations) and so further investigation is warranted.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has reviewed previous theoretical writing and empirical studies on the subjects of leadership, national culture and the interaction between them, in order to provide a foundation for this research. Leadership has been shown to be concerned with the exercise of influence over others, in pursuit of a goal, and to have a contested relationship with management. A number of leadership models and theories were reviewed, with particular emphasis on the transformational style, for which a well-established measurement scale exists, and which has been widely discussed and investigated in a variety of contexts, including the Middle East.

The second part of the chapter concerned national culture, and several frameworks were introduced, which have been used by researchers in an attempt to understand cultures, measure cultural values, and identify similarities and differences among individual countries or country clusters. None of the studies on which these frameworks are based report data for Saudi Arabia, although Saudi data using Hofstede and VFW have been collected in subsequent studies. Some cultural traits of other Gulf countries, such as Qatar and Kuwait were identified, but the need was observed for caution in applying these findings to Saudi Arabia. Based on a variety of Arab and Western sources, however, a number of influences were identified, which have been suggested to shape the Saudi culture in general, including organisational behaviour. These include Islam, social norms (such as *wasṭa*), tribal traditions and values such as loyalty and collectivism, and the more recent influences of education and technology.

The third section considered leadership in the context of culture, on the assumption that Western leadership models and theories may not fit well with different cultures. Previous empirical studies in the Arab world report conflicting findings with regard to preferred leadership styles, which may be due to change over time, to historical and

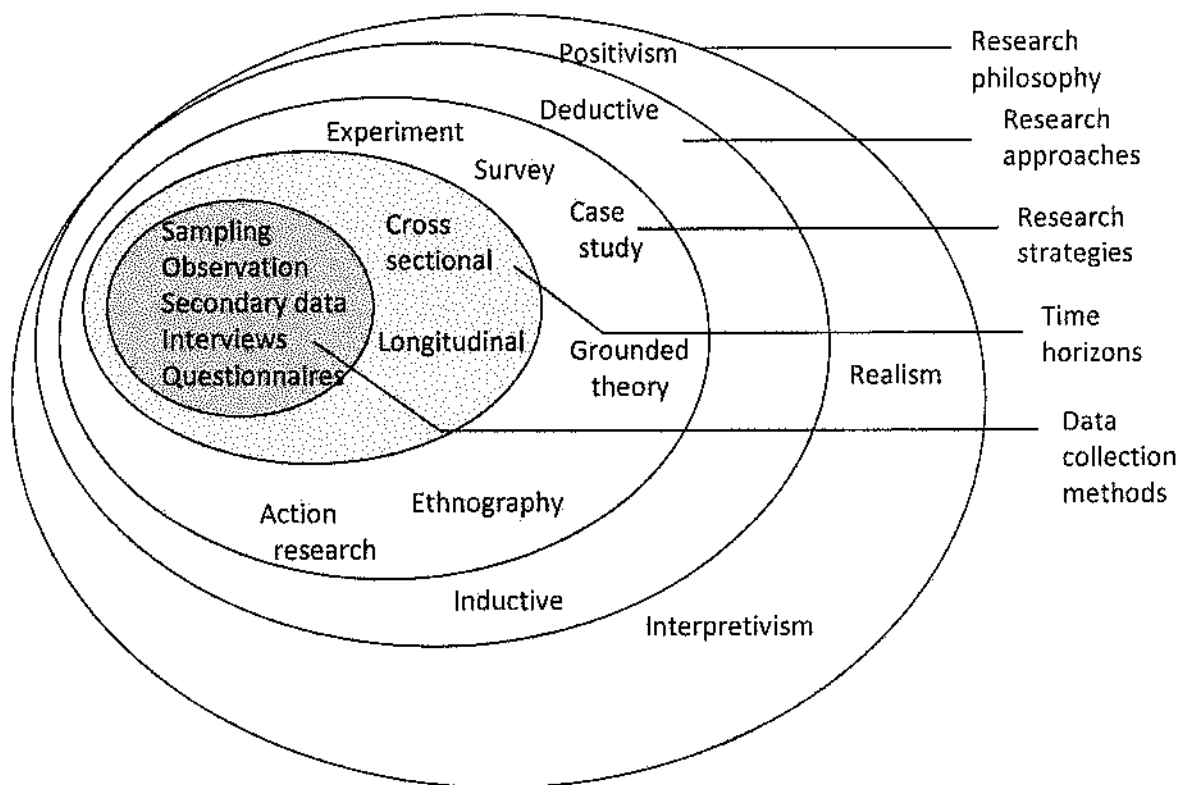
economic differences between countries, even within the same region, and to discrepancy between declared values and actual practices. Few of these studies were conducted in Saudi Arabia. Despite extensive prior research, therefore, much contradiction and ambiguity still exist regarding leadership in the region and in Saudi Arabia in particular, highlighting the need for this study. Nevertheless, the extant literature has provided some insights into ways of looking at leadership and culture, and potentially salient factors to investigate. In the next chapter, the methods used to investigate these issues in Saudi utility companies will be explained.

## CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Introduction

Research methodology is defined by Creswell (2003) as a plan of action that links the methods being used in the study to its outcomes. According to Collis and Hussey (2009:73) it is “an approach to the process of the research, encompassing a body of methods”. More specific guidance on what such a “plan of action” or “approach” contains is provided by Saunders, et al. (2009) who depict the research model in a diagrammatic form, which they call the research “onion” (see figure 3.1 below).

Figure 3.1: The Research Process 'Onion'



Source: Adapted from Saunders, et al. (2009:108)

The diagram depicts a series of research elements on which the researcher must decide, and the “onion” metaphor refers to a layered structure, whereby the researcher begins with the outer layer, research philosophy, and gradually works towards the centre,

addressing each layer in turn, that is moving from a general worldview and progressively narrowing the focus, to arrive eventually at the detailed level of specific data analysis techniques. In view of the clarity of the “onion” model and its usefulness as a guide to research planning, it is used as a framework to structure the first part of this chapter. Accordingly, the research philosophy, approach, strategy, time horizon and data collection methods are discussed in turn in order to explain and provide a rationale for the conduct of the research. The chapter ends with a discussion of research quality criteria and ethical considerations.

### **3.2 Research Philosophy**

The research philosophy, often called a paradigm, has been viewed by some scholars as a “basic set of beliefs that guide action” (Guba, 1990:7). A research paradigm can be defined as “a way of examining social phenomena from which particular understandings of these phenomena can be gained and explanations attempted” (Saunders, et al. 2009:118). Collis & Hussey (2009:73) simply defined the research paradigm as “a philosophical framework that guides how research should be conducted”. The paradigm that a researcher adopts is influenced mainly by the researcher’s particular view of the relationship between knowledge and the process by which it is developed (Saunders, et al. 2009). It is important to begin discussion of research methodology with a discussion of the research philosophy or paradigm, because research philosophies, representing different views about the nature of the social world and of knowledge, have an influence on the way research questions are formulated (Bryman & Bell, 2003), they inform the practice of research (Creswell, 2007) and they have implications for the way research claims can legitimately be evaluated (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). In this section, therefore, the philosophical

assumptions underpinning the main research paradigms are discussed, and the choice of paradigm for this study is then explained.

Research philosophies or paradigms are distinguished by their stance on a number of research issues, notably ontology and epistemology. According to Bryman and Bell (2003: 19) ontology is concerned with “the nature of social entities”. Blaikie (2007:8) summarises the definition of ontology as “the science or study of being”. He has developed this definition for the social sciences to cover “claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with each other” Blaikie (2007:8). Based on this, ontology describes our perceptions and viewpoints, whether claims or assumptions, on the nature of reality. There is a basic distinction to be made between two ontological standpoints: objectivism and subjectivism. Objectivism views social phenomena as external “facts” that have a stable existence independent of the observer. To illustrate this point, Bryman and Bell (2003) suggest that an objectivist would view culture as a “given” into which people are socialized, so that it constrains their actions. In contrast to the objectivist view is the subjectivist view (sometimes called constructivist), which sees social “reality” (or “realities”) as constructed in the mind through people’s perceptions and experiences (Saunders, et al. 2009), and influenced by context (Remenyi, et al, 1998). Since people’s experiences differ, thus means that there may be multiple valid “realities”, although shared understandings may be negotiated with others. An example is the case of daylight saving practices in many Western countries, which depend on a general societal agreement to set clocks forward or back in March and October, irrespective of individuals’ personal experience of clock time (Saunders, et al. 2009). The difference between subjectivism and objectivism can be illustrated by returning to Bryman and Bell’s (2003) example of viewpoints on culture. They note that from a subjectivist (or as they term it, constructivist) viewpoint, culture would be seen, not as an inert,



objective social reality, but as an emergent reality that is constantly being reconstructed. Hatch and Cunliffe (2006) point out the difficulties that are encountered when studying phenomena such as culture, and the debate as to whether they really exist or are just an illusion.

This study adopts a subjectivist ontology, because it views both culture and leadership style as subjective constructs, made up of people's norms and values, their experiences, and the meanings they attach to various behaviours and practices.

The ontological position a researcher adopts also has implications for epistemology. In order for the researcher to select the appropriate approach that will be adopted in the research study, he or she should be fully aware of the knowledge tradition (epistemology) (Grbich, 2007).

Epistemology is viewed by Creswell (2003) as the "theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective". It can be summarised as "knowing how you can know" (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006:13). It entails asking how knowledge can be generated, what criteria should be satisfied in order to distinguish good knowledge from bad knowledge and how reality can be represented and described. Those who take an objectivist ontological view of social phenomena tend to adopt the stance of the natural sciences, assuming that knowledge can be confirmed by the senses; they seek observable, measurable 'facts', from which law-like generalizations can be made to explain social phenomena (Bryman & Bell, 2003). In contrast, those who believe social phenomena are created by "social actors" who play their roles according to the interpretations or meanings they give to their experiences (Saunders, et al. 2009) will argue that human beings and their institutions differ from the objects of the natural sciences and cannot be understood in the same way. Human behaviour can only be understood by seeing the world from the participants' point of view, in order to access the meanings they

give to their experiences (Bryman & Bell, 2003). Thus the researcher takes an “empathetic stance” (Saunders, et al. 2009:116) entering into the participants’ world in order to see it through their eyes. This study was conducted within an interpretivist epistemology, which assumes that there can be no access to the external world beyond our observation and then interpretation is possible (Paeivi & Anne, 2008). This is consistent with the ontology stated above; since the social phenomena investigated are seen as subjective, it follows that they cannot be observed and measured by the methods of natural sciences. Understanding will require the researcher to get close to the participants, in order to gain access to their perceptions.

A number of typologies of research paradigms have been proposed; authors differ in the number of paradigms they identify and the terminology used to describe them. However, there is a general agreement on a broad distinction between positivism, and an array of anti-positivist philosophies often referred to loosely as ‘interpretivism’. The positivist approach is associated with an objectivist ontology and a reductionist epistemology that seeks to reduce phenomena to simple, observable and measurable elements and to establish generalizable explanations of cause and effect. The interpretive paradigm, in contrast, drawing on Husserl’s (1931) and Gadamer’s (1975) concept of ‘lifeworld’, takes lived experience as the primary research object. It is based on the idea that “person and world are intricately related through lived experience of the world” (Sandberg, 2005:63). Interpretivists therefore take a subjectivist ontological view and seek in research to explore the meanings social actors give to their experiences (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Collis & Hussey, 2009; Saunders, et al. 2009). Research paradigms can be used to bring up and develop new clear insights into real-life problems and issues (Saunders, et al. 2009).

In the interpretive paradigm the researcher involves him or herself with the research setting and participants in order to interpret their accounts of their experience. In doing so, he or she must acknowledge that he/she, too, has perceptions and experiences which he/she inevitably brings to the research and which will influence the study (Bryman & Bell, Business research methods, 2003). This differs, however, from the positivist paradigm in which the researcher neither affects nor is affected by the subject of the research, but is normally independent of it.

The two paradigms thus take a different stance on axiology, that is, the role of values in the research. Positivists view the research process as “value-free”. Consequently, positivists believe that they are independent and separated from what they are studying and consider the investigated phenomena as objects. This assumption might be valid in the natural sciences but is criticized with regard to the social sciences, which look at people’s behaviour and activities (Collis & Hussey, 2009).

Interpretivists, since they view social reality as subjective, argue that people’s beliefs, values, customs and norms cannot be excluded from the research and must be explored in their own terms (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Creswell, 2007; Saunders, et al. 2009). Moreover, unlike positivists, interpretivists argue that the researcher also has values, which play a vital role in designing and conducting research. The researcher’s values are demonstrated in all stages of the research process. In other words, the researcher will reflect his/her personal values in making judgments in his or her own words about what should be studied, and how, as well as interpreting the research findings (Saunders, et al. 2009).

The following table summarizes the distinctions between the two main research philosophies in management research.

Table 3.1: Comparison of two research philosophies in management research

	<b>Positivism</b>	<b>Interpretivism</b>
<b>Ontology:</b> the researcher's view of the nature of reality or being.	External, objective and independent of social actors.	Socially constructed, subjective, may change, multiple.
<b>Epistemology:</b> the researcher's view regarding what constitutes acceptable knowledge.	Only observable phenomena can provide credible data, facts. Focus on causality and law like generalisation, reducing phenomena to simplest elements.	Subjective meanings and social phenomena. Focus upon the details of situation, a reality behind these details, subjective meanings motivating actions.
<b>Axiology:</b> the researcher's view of the role of values in research.	Research is undertaken in a value-free way; the researcher is independent of the data and maintains an objective stance.	Research is value bound, the researcher is part of what is being researched, cannot be separated and so will be subjective.
Data collection techniques most often used.	Highly structured, large samples, measurement, quantitative, but can use qualitative.	Small samples, in-depth investigations, qualitative.

Source: Adopted from Saunders et al. (2009:119)

Both paradigms have their advantages and limitations. For example Collis and Hussey (2009) note that positivist research tends to produce precise and highly reliable data based on representative samples that allow the results to be generalized from the sample to the relevant population. However, there may be a loss of ecological validity, in that the use of critical settings (such as a laboratory or specially manipulated context)

and the constraints on respondents' freedom of expression limit the ability to capture real-world experience. In contrast, interpretive research, which tends to capture 'rich', deep, qualitative data from a small, often purposively selected sample, may have greater validity or relevance to the context and issues being explored, but findings may not be generalizable (although they may be transferable to similar settings; this point will be discussed in more detail in a later section on quality criteria). Although the choice of either paradigm may involve some degree of trade-off between reliability and validity, and between global and local relevance, as Salomon (1991) argues, neither is inherently superior to the other; the choice will be governed by the characteristics of the matter to be investigated.

Based upon the above discussion and according to the nature of the research, this research adopted the interpretive philosophical paradigm, since it seeks deep insights into two essentially subjective phenomena, as perceived and experienced by participants. Culture is concerned with attitudes, norms and values, and with the meanings that various behaviours have for the people in the community studied. Moreover, I, as a member of Saudi society, inevitably bring to the research my own experience of that culture, so the research cannot be value free. Leadership, too, is a subjective phenomenon. Whilst certain policies and practices may be observable and even documented, the rationale for them and their significance to leaders and employees are subjective.

### **3.3 The Research Approach**

Following the choice of research philosophy in the 'onion' framework comes the decision as to the approach to be adopted in carrying out the research. "Approach" in the 'onion' framework refers to the logic of the research, or as Bryman and Bell (2003) describe it, the approach to the relationship between theory and research. The two main

approaches are deductive and inductive (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Collis & Hussey, 2009; Saunders, et al. 2006), typically associated with different research paradigms. In this section, the characteristics of deductive versus inductive research will be discussed, before the choice of approach for this study is explained and justified.

### **3.3.1 Deductive and Inductive Research**

As noted above, business and management research generally employs either deductive logic or inductive logic (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Collis & Hussey, 2009; Saunders, et al. 2009). Deductive logic is related to studies under the positivist paradigm. Its origins lie in “scientific research” and it is the dominant approach followed in the natural sciences (Saunders, et al. 2009). Deductive research, according to Collis and Hussey (2009:8), “describes a study in which a conceptual and theoretical structure is developed which is then tested by empirical observation; thus particular instances are deduced from general inferences”. It represents a relationship between research and theory, whereby the researcher deduces a hypothesis and subjects it to empirical scrutiny (Bryman & Bell, 2003). Hypotheses are proposed on the basis of what is already known about a particular domain, together with relevant theoretical considerations. They identify concepts that need to be translated into researchable and measurable entities (that is, operationalized) and assumed relationships between them (Robson, 2002). Observations of data are collected and analysed statistically, in order to determine whether the outcomes support the original theory, or indicate a need for modification. If necessary, the theory may be modified, and the sequential steps outlined above can be repeated to verify the modified theory. The deductive approach is mostly a linear process, where each step follows the other in a logical sequence (Bryman & Bell, 2003).

A deductive approach tends to be adopted when the research aim is to explain causal relationships. It follows a highly structured methodology, in order to facilitate replication. The research tends to apply a principle of reductionism, whereby problems are reduced to their simplest elements. Because one of the aims of deductive research is generalization, it is necessary to select a sufficiently large and representative sample for this purpose (Saunders, et al. 2009).

In contrast, inductive logic is related to interpretivist paradigm research. Inductive research “describes a study in which theory is developed from the observation of empirical reality; thus general inferences are induced from particular instances” (Collis & Hussey, 2009:8). It reflects social scientists’ wariness of a deductive logic that seeks to make cause-effect links without an understanding of how humans interpret the social world, and of rigid methodology. The inductive process represents another strategy for connecting theory and research. It differs from the deductive, as it involves drawing inferences from observations; hence, these inferences may then be generalized (Bryman & Bell, Business research methods, 2003) although this is not necessarily the aim of inductive research.

The goal of inductive research is understanding ‘why’ things happen, rather than simply describing ‘what’ occurs. It therefore tends to be strongly concerned with context, to work with qualitative data, and to involve relatively small samples, focusing on depth more than breadth of data (Saunders, et al. 2009).

The main differences between the deductive and inductive research approaches are summarized in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2: Major differences between deductive and inductive approaches to research

<b>Deduction emphasises</b>	<b>Induction emphasises</b>
Scientific principles.	Gaining an understanding of the meanings humans attach to events.
Moving from theory to data.	A close understanding of research context.
The need to explain causal relationships between variables.	The collection of qualitative data.
The collection of quantitative data.	A more flexible structure to permit changes of research emphasis as the research progresses.
The application of controls to ensure validity of data.	A realisation that the researcher is part of the research process.
The operationalisation of concepts to ensure clarity of definition.	Less concern with the need to generalise.
A highly structured approach.	
Researcher independence of what is being researched.	
The necessity to select samples of sufficient size in order to generalise conclusions.	

Source: Adapted from Saunders et al. (2009:127)

It is worth noting, however, that the above distinction is an extreme or 'ideal-type' categorization for the sake of clarity. In practice it is possible for research to contain elements of both approaches (Saunders et al. 2009) and Bryman and Bell (2003) suggest that they should be viewed as tendencies rather than a rigid distinction.

### **3.3.2 The Approach Selected in this Study**

Before selecting the research approach, it would be appropriate to reflect on the purpose of the research, as different approaches suit different types of research. Collis and Hussey (2009) divide research into three types, as follows:

- Descriptive Research: this type of study describes the nature of variables. It aims to depict an accurate profile of a situation (Saunders, et al. 2009). It is useful in



identifying a particular problem and in obtaining data about the characteristics of that problem (Collis & Hussey, 2009).

- Explanatory Research: the purpose of this type of study is to analyse statistically the characteristics of the pertinent issues and then explain why or how they occur. In other words, it explains the relationship between variables (Saunders, et al. 2009). It aims to understand a phenomenon by measuring cause/effect relationships (Collis & Hussey, 2009). It is related to the deductive research approach.

- Exploratory Research: This type of research is a vital way to find out what is happening, to ask questions, to look for new patterns or ideas, to seek for new insights, and to probe new phenomena (Saunders, et al. 2009), so it tends to use an inductive approach. It is useful to clarify the understanding of a problem and to gain familiarity with the subject area (Collis & Hussey, 2009). Its main advantage is that it is flexible and changeable, whereby the researcher is able or rather should be willing to change his or her direction when new data are found or new insight emerges (Saunders, et al. 2009).

Although this study is to some extent descriptive, in that it provides information about the context of the Saudi Arabian utilities companies and leadership practices in those companies, it is predominantly exploratory, because it seeks to understand how culture affects leadership style in those organisations. This is an issue on which too little is known, as previous studies in the Arab world have shown conflicting results and, moreover, little research has been conducted in Saudi Arabia, and specifically its utilities sector. The aim, therefore, was not to test an existing theory, but to conduct an in-depth investigation of behaviours, characteristics and social situations, with the possibility that inferences can be derived, explaining the impact of cultural values and

their impact on leadership style in that setting. This implies that an inductive approach would be more appropriate. Accordingly, this was the approach adopted in this study.

### **3.4 Research Methods**

As noted above, different research paradigms, purposes and approaches have implications for the choice of research methods. Positivist research following a deductive approach is associated with quantitative research, as data in the form of numbers are needed for the measurement of variables and the use of statistical techniques of analysis. Meanwhile, interpretive research adopting an inductive approach is more associated with the use of qualitative data, in order to provide an understanding of the meaning that people attach to their experiences.

Quantitative research tends to be framed from the perspective of the researcher, who typically remains distant from the research. It is structured, often conducted in artificial settings subject to some level of control or manipulation by the researcher, and aims to collect 'hard', reliable data from which generalizations may be drawn (Bryman & Bell, 2003).

As a result of perceived limitations of quantitative research for providing a contextualized understanding of how research participants interpret their experiences, however, qualitative research "has become an increasingly popular approach to business research" (Bryman & Bell, 2003:280). However, defining qualitative research is not always easy. In a study investigating understandings of qualitative research in a management context, Johnson et al. (2007) found eight distinct explanations, reflecting the variety of forms and philosophical stances qualitative research can take (Prasad & Prasad, 2002). Creswell (2012) notes an evolution in definitions of qualitative research, from a social constructionist to an interpretive and

more recently to a social justice perspective. A common understanding, and the first identified by Johnson et al. (2007) is of qualitative methods as *verstehen*, meaning a way of accessing social actors' subjective, culturally derived meanings and understanding how they experience their everyday social context. The qualitative research approach is consistent with the interpretive paradigm as it considers that the researcher is the key data collection instrument, whose perspective and value judgements are central; which means the researcher's subjectivity widely affects the research outcomes. Hara (1995) emphasises that the researcher's values, interpretations and the research outcomes are intertwined with each other. Qualitative researchers seek out natural settings and immerse themselves deeply in the settings under study in order to understand the context of behaviour, and to observe processes rather than simply outcomes. The researcher's judgements should not simply be expressions of his or her attitudes and biases, as the aim is to reflect the perspective of the participants. This demands continuous reflexivity, whereby the researcher confronts his or her own opinions with the data. Researchers should critically scrutinize the impact of their field roles and interrogate how they make sense of their own experience during the fieldwork, seeking to reduce sources of contamination (Hammersley, 1992 ; Johnson et al. 2007), while also recognizing the impossibility of scientific objectivity (Charmaz, 2000 ; Johnson & Duberley, 2000).

The main function of qualitative research is to provide observations and results from which the researcher can induce theory, or at least wider inferences. That is, the researcher tries to develop an explanation of the behaviours observed, and of participants' perceptions and experiences. This is usually referred to as grounded theory (Flick, 1998). Furthermore, Bryman and Bell (2003) have mentioned the following characteristics of qualitative research:

- An inductive view of the nature of the connection between the research and theory that the theory, eventually, is generated out of the research. Analysis proceeds from the bottom-up, in an attempt to establish patterns or themes (Creswell, 2012).
- An interpretivist epistemological stance, which means that the emphasis is on comprehending the social world by examining the interpretations of the participants in that world.
- A constructionist ontological stance, which means that social phenomena are effects of individuals' interactions.

An important characteristic of qualitative research is its emergent design, meaning that research questions, samples and sites may change in response to situations encountered and understandings developed during the course of the research. Moreover, the approach is holistic, the aim being to develop a complex account of the research domain that captures multiple perspectives (Creswell, 2012).

However, some writers have criticised qualitative research. Some of the common criticisms are (Bryman & Bell, 2003):

- Qualitative research is impressionistic and subjective. Researchers often start in an open-ended way then narrow-down their questions.
- It is difficult to be replicated, because there are no standard procedures for the qualitative researcher to follow.
- It lacks generalization, so findings are restricted to the research context.
- There may be a lack of transparency; it can be difficult sometimes to know what the researcher did, and how the conclusion was attained.

These criticisms may, however, reflect a misunderstanding of the research purpose, the application of inappropriate evaluation criteria, or a lack of rigour in some research

projects, rather than inherent problems of qualitative research per se. They can be addressed through the application of appropriate quality criteria, which are discussed in a later section.

Although the qualitative approach has been criticised, it is appropriate when the researcher would like to explore the “reality” of a specific issue, understand phenomena and answer questions (Hara, 1995), to obtain a complete, detailed understanding, to empower people and hear their voices, and to understand contexts and settings (Creswell, 2012). It has been identified as particularly suitable for researching phenomena that have dynamic and symbolic aspects, such as leadership (Vohra, 2014). Moreover, Johnson et al. (2007) found that qualitative methods were valuable for accessing organisational “backstage” and cultural aspects of organisational life. These criteria resonate with the aims of the present research. The research purpose necessitated the gathering of rich data about perceptions and experiences of culture and leadership style in a specific context, and it was essential to understand that context, by being involved in the setting. In order to attain such understanding, the collection of qualitative data was appropriate.

### **3.5 Research Strategy**

Creswell (2012) stated that in business and management research, there are five main qualitative strategies used, namely, narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. In this study, as it is concerned with a social phenomenon in its natural setting, specifically, to investigate the relationship between national culture and leadership in Saudi utility companies, a case study strategy was adopted. Stake (1995) sees case study as a choice of what is to be studied. Others, for example Creswell (2012), Denzin and Lincoln (2005) and Yin (2009) view it as a strategy of inquiry. Case study research is defined by Creswell (2007:73) as “a qualitative

approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed , in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g. observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes”.

The “case” may be defined in a variety of ways, depending on the research discipline: a person, group, community or event. The common point of definition is that the case is “the phenomenon, located in space/time about which data are collected” (Hammersley, 1992:184). It is a system in the sense that it is composed of several elements (for example, in the case of a company, managers, employees, buildings, rules, policies) and the interactions among them. It is “bounded” because the case, as constructed in a given research study, is a separately identifiable identity with its own specific location. These boundaries are not inherent, but constructed by the researcher, that is, he or she decides what is included in or excluded from the case, which in turn determines what data will be collected, and from where.

Vohra (2014) asserts the importance of studying leadership behaviours in the context in which they appear, which makes case study an appropriate strategy. It enables leadership to be studied as a social process in its organisational environment, thereby enabling understanding of leaders’ behaviour in the context of wider forces inside and outside the organisation (Vohra, 2014).

In this study the aim was to take a situated and contextualized approach to leadership style, by taking as “cases” a number of Saudi utilities companies, while recognizing the possibility that leadership style in those companies might be influenced by factors in the wider social context in which those companies operated. A benefit of adopting a case-study strategy is that the detailed understanding of natural settings grounded in

direct experience gives the outcomes ecological validity (authenticity, trueness to life) (Stake, 1978, Kemmis, 1980), so that it addresses recognizable concerns relevant to the “audience”, for example, managers, employees and policy-makers.

Case study is also useful for showing the influence of social context; for example exploring how leadership style is influenced by education, technology, or community attitudes.

Yin (2009) identifies four case study designs, based on whether a single or multiple cases are investigated, and on whether the case is viewed holistically, or in terms of more than one unit of analysis (embedded design). A single case is said to be appropriate if the case examined is a critical case for theory-testing, represents an extreme or unique case, is a representative or typical case, or is revelatory, that is, offers a chance to observe and analyse something previously inaccessible. There is, however, a risk that a single case may prove not be what it was originally thought to be; moreover, while the level of detail of data is likely to be higher than with multiple cases, the possibility of generalisation is less.

This in itself is not necessarily a drawback, as the main concern is understanding the case itself, not necessarily generalization. Nevertheless, theoretical inference may be possible, or “provision of vicarious experience” as a basis for “naturalistic generalization” or transferability (Gomm, et al. 2000:4). Multiple cases are more costly and time consuming to study, and by nature are unlikely to satisfy the criteria applicable to single cases (e.g. being critical or revelatory) but Yin (2009) considers them to be more robust and produce more compelling evidence. They may, moreover, enable patterns to be found, through a replication logic. With regard to this research, it was assumed that a wider reflection of culture would be achievable by looking at several companies, rather just one. This is because some companies in Saudi Arabia

might not be typical, or might have been subjected to change as a result, for instance, of foreign influence (as an example, Aramco, in the oil sector, began as an American company and continues to reflect an Americanized culture). By focusing on a single company, it might be that factors would be ignored, which might be more evident in another company, or would be perceived differently.

For these reasons, this research employed multiple case studies, each utility organisation being viewed as a bounded case. A holistic design was used, that is, each organisation was viewed as a whole, rather than breaking the analysis down to the level of separate units, such as teams or departments. The three companies selected were Saudi Telecommunications Company (STC), the leading, largest, and for many years the only telecommunications company; Saudi Electricity Company (SEC) and National Water Company (NWC). They were selected because they are the only companies in the utilities sectors serving customers directly. Since deregulation of telecommunications, two additional companies have appeared, but they are much smaller and concentrate on mobile telephone services; moreover, one is foreign-owned. There is a gas company, but it has no direct customer interface, since Saudi Arabia has no mains (piped) gas supply; customers use bottled gas, obtained from a variety of distribution outlets. These other utility companies were excluded, to reduce the possibility that differences in organisation culture would affect the study, since the concern in this study is with national culture. STC, SEC and NWC (all former government monopolies, now either privatized or scheduled for privatization, and all providing direct customer services) were thus selected as the cases for this study.

A further point worth noting regarding the selection of companies is that STC is the company for which I work. Creswell (2014) addresses the question whether it is acceptable for a researcher to study his or her own company, noting that to do so may



raise issues of power and risk to both participants and researcher, which may compromise data quality. Set against these risks are the advantages of accessibility and an “insider” perspective. The solution, he advises, is to have multiple sources of validation. This was the approach taken in this study, as will be shown in the discussion of quality issues in section 3.9.

A case study involves a thorough and detailed exploration of one or more particular cases (Bryman & Bell, *Business research methods*, 2003) and provides an in-depth investigation of a particular phenomenon in its real-life context (Yin, 2009). It is a strategy for learning about culture and people’s behaviour (ethnography) (Creswell, 2012). The research sought common patterns of meaning, clear definitions and deep understanding of the situation from the perspective of research participants. I interacted with a range of people at different levels in the organisation (managers and employees) and with a variety of perceptions, with the aim of constructing an authentic, trustworthy interpretation of their views and experiences and, hence, of the “reality” of leadership in a specific Saudi context. In order to achieve this, it was important that the voice of the concerned social actors should be given due emphasis, and my interpretations should not dominate. The focus was substantially on in-depth understanding of the situation and seeking predominant patterns of meaning from participants’ perspective (Grbich, 2007).

### **3.6 Time Horizon**

In terms of time horizon, research is basically classified into two designs: cross-sectional and longitudinal.

Cross-sectional research is the study of a particular phenomenon at a particular time, in other words, a “snapshot” (Saunders et al. 2006). It often uses a survey strategy

(Easterby – Smith et al. 2002). Indeed, Bryman and Bell (2003) define it largely in terms of survey strategy, quantitative methods, and the search for patterns of association between variables. However, they acknowledge that cross-sectional designs do sometimes use qualitative methods, and Saunders et al. (2006) note that case studies are often based on interviews conducted over a short period.

In contrast, longitudinal research is the study of a phenomenon over an extended period of time (Saunders et al. 2006). Drawing on Pettigrew (1990), Bryman and Bell (2003) argue that it entails vertical and horizontal levels of analysis and interconnections between them through time. This is often achieved by conducting an initial survey then following up with one or more further surveys of the same participants at intervals. Such a design facilitates following processes, or studying change and development. However, longitudinal designs are time-consuming and costly. There may be problems of participant attrition over the research period, and there is a risk of panel conditioning effects, where participants' behaviour is affected by prolonged involvement in a research project (Bryman & Bell, 2003).

In the present study, I was not concerned to follow processes over time, but to explore the current state of thinking and behaviour on leadership and culture in the target organisations. There were also ethical considerations with regard to avoiding undue disruption to the work of the organisations, time constraints imposed by the PhD programme, and restrictions imposed by Saudi regulations on the number and duration of visits to Saudi Arabia for fieldwork. For all these reasons, a cross-sectional design was adopted. Indeed, as Saunders et al. (2006) point out, most research conducted in connection with academic programmes are cross-sectional, due to time constraints.

### **3.7 Data Collection**

Methods in business research are not neutral tools, neither rigorous with intellectual inclinations (Bryman & Bell, 2003). A research method is viewed by Bryman and Bell (2003) as a sort of technique to collect data. The most commonly used data collection tools in qualitative research are interviews, field notes, observation, thick contextualized description and textual perusal using discourse analysis or deconstruction (Grbich, 2007), documents and reports, and audiovisual material (Creswell, 2007). The researcher should be purposeful in selecting the participants in order to ensure that they can be helpful in understanding the problem and answering the research questions (Creswell, 2003). In the following section, choice and implementation of the data collection methods that best suited the research project will be discussed.

#### **3.7.1 Interviews**

An interview is defined as “a method for collecting primary data in which a sample of interviewees are asked questions to find out what they think, do or feel” (Collis & Hussey, 2009:144). Interviews may take three forms, formalised or as they are sometimes called structured interviews, using standardised predetermined questions, semi-structured interviews, and informal and unstructured or so called in-depth interviews based on open conversations. The type of interview that is predominantly used is related to the level of formality and structure (Saunders, et al. 2009). Semi-structured and unstructured interviews are the types most associated with qualitative research (Johnson et al. 2007).

As qualitative interview normally is a kind of conversation; it is usually conducted in such a way that the researcher asks questions and listens to the answer from the respondents. The researcher could start with wide questions and then narrow down

them during the course of the interview as many themes and issues start to emerge (Flick, 1998). The epistemology of the qualitative interview seems to be more constructionist than positivist (Warren & Karner, 2010). The purpose of qualitative interviews is mostly to derive interpretations, not facts, from respondents' answers, which reflect the meaning of their experiences and life world (Warren & Karner, 2010). In other words, the qualitative interview in its reality interprets how the interviewees view the surrounding world and its phenomena (Saunders et al. 2009).

In exploratory research, semi-structured interview may, more frequently, be adopted to understand the nature of the relationships between variables (Saunders, et al. 2009) such as culture and leadership. Therefore, data were collected through conducting semi-structured interviews. The advantage of using semi-structured interview is that it provides a framework for ensuring key issues are covered, yet allows flexibility to probe and follow up emergent issues. It is particularly suitable for multiple case studies, as some degree of structure is required to facilitate cross-case analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2012).

An interview schedule was developed based on the research questions and the literature review.

With regard to leadership, participants were asked how they conceptualized leadership, what they considered to be the roles of a leader, and what traits, skills and behaviours they thought characterized an effective leader. Other questions concerned perceptions of, and satisfaction with the leadership style practised in the organisation, the respondent's view of and opportunity to participate in decision-making, and the nature of the relationship between leaders and subordinates. The other major theme addressed in the schedule was culture. Questions were designed to elicit the participants' understanding of the concept of national culture, and their beliefs as to the extent to

which it was involved in and affected the exercise of leadership. Further questions, and the provision for prompts and probes, targeted the extent and nature of the influence of specific dimensions of culture identified from the literature (see Chapter Two). A final open question afforded an opportunity for participants to identify any other issues they perceived as relevant, but which had not been addressed thus far (For a copy of the final version of the interview guide, see Appendix 1).

It should be noted that only one interview guide was developed, to be used with both employees and managers in the organisations. The rationale for this was that the research questions and issues were relevant to both target groups, but each respondent would answer from his own perspective. Thus, lower level employees might have in mind their line manager and leader(s) higher in the organisation, according to their experience, while managers would be in a position to comment on their experience of relations with subordinates, practices and attitudes prevalent at their own level, and their experience of leaders higher in the organisation. Having a common interview guide avoided the risk of biasing or limiting the findings by making prior assumptions as to what would be salient to participants at each level, and also afforded the possibility of comparison, to see whether perspectives on the issues raised differed systematically with the participants' position.

#### **3.7.1.1 Pilot Study**

A pilot study was conducted in STC in September and October, 2012. A purposive sample of three managers and three employees was selected. Interviews were conducted in managers' own offices, or in the case of employees, an office made available for the purpose. All participants refused to allow the use of a digital recorder. This was not unexpected; previous researchers have reported that in Saudi culture, the prospect of audio recording often induces anxiety and is rejected. It was therefore

necessary to take notes during the interviews and write up detailed transcripts immediately after each interview. The interviews varied in duration from 50 – 90 minutes. On the basis of the pilot interviews, minor amendments were made to the interview questions to improve the clarity of the wording.

### **3.7.1.2 Main Study**

The main fieldwork was conducted between 15/11/2012 and 14/03/2013. Access to the companies was negotiated by writing to the relevant gatekeepers, enclosing a supporting letter from the Saudi Cultural Bureau, confirming my authorization to conduct research and requesting their cooperation.

The sample of the study to be interviewed was purposively selected to help in understanding the problem in depth and clearly, and to offer a better opportunity to answer the research questions. The two criteria for the sample were that the education level should be not less than a bachelor degree, to ensure that respondents had similar ability to comprehend the questions and discuss the issues, and the interviewee should have not less than three years experience within the company, to ensure that he was familiar with the leadership process.

Information on the three companies' organisational structure was obtained, either from the company websites, or during the preliminary conversations held as part of the process of negotiating access. The three companies have similarly hierarchical, bureaucratic structures. A decision was therefore made to attempt to recruit participants from similar levels in each organisation, to increase the likelihood that they would reflect similar potential to be involved in or aware of leadership processes, and so facilitate cross-case comparison.

Participants were recruited from three levels in the organisations, the Vice-President, two general managers, and three section heads in each organisation.

In STC, sampling was facilitated by my familiarity with the company. In SEC and NWC I adopted a snowball sampling strategy for recruiting general managers and section heads, beginning with a small number of personal contacts (as is common practice in Saudi Arabia) and asking them to suggest others who met the inclusion criteria. In terms of classification of participants in the thesis, the Vice-President and general managers are all referred to as ‘managers’. The Vice-Presidents are not distinguished separately from other managers, as these people are identifiable by virtue of their unique position in the organisation; by subsuming them into the ‘managers’ category, it was possible at least to provide a degree of anonymity when quoting their opinions.

The three section heads from each organisation are, in the thesis, referred to as ‘employees’ even though, technically, they are lower-level managers. The reason for this is to distinguish these individuals, who ranked low in the hierarchy, had little decision-making power and were closer to daily operations, from the more senior participants from the decision-making ranks. Consideration was given to selecting participants still lower in the hierarchy (employees in the strict sense), but it was difficult to find lower-level employees who met the selection criteria. The table below shows the distribution of the study sample.

Table 3.3: Sample Distribution

	<b>Telecommunications Company</b>	<b>Water Company</b>	<b>Electricity Company</b>	<b>Total</b>
Managers	3	3	3	9
Employees	6	6	6	18
Total	9	9	9	27

In recruitment of participants, consideration was given to power relations, both between the respondents at different levels of the organisation, and between myself as researcher and participants. As for power relations within the organisations, a number of steps were taken to ensure that participants were not influenced by the possibility of being overheard or identified by others in the organisation, especially their superiors, and so protect them from any coercive influence. All interviews were conducted in a closed, private room, with no danger of interruption. Participants were assured of confidentiality, and that no information they disclosed would be revealed to their superiors. The identity of individual participants is concealed when reference is made to them in the thesis. The fact that the research was being conducted for a degree in a foreign university also seemed to reassure participants that the information provided would not be used in ways that could harm their careers or relationships within and outside the organisation.

As for power relations between the participants and myself as researcher, the possibility existed that the interview process might be influenced by participants' perception of me as socially or professionally superior or inferior. In particular, in the Saudi culture, there is a danger that a researcher will be perceived as a government agent, who has the power either to harm participants' careers or solve their problems. In STC, I introduced myself as a colleague, but one who was acting in the capacity of researcher; in SEC and NWC I introduced myself as a researcher. I took care to make clear that I had no connection with the government and had no power to influence the organisations or the treatment of any individual. An advantage of interviewing members of the management hierarchy was that participants and myself shared similarities of background, such as education and experience, that helped to reduce differences of status and power, and facilitated building rapport.



Before beginning each interview, I introduced myself and the purpose of the study. I made it clear that I was visiting in a research capacity only, that no participant would be named or otherwise identified in the thesis, and that anything they said would remain confidential and used for academic purposes only. I also asked for permission to record the interviews, but as with the pilot study, this was refused. I therefore once again took notes as fully as possible during each interview, and expanded them immediately afterwards while my memory of the meeting was fresh.

### **3.8 Data Analysis**

The process of data analysis took place in three main stages: translation and preparation of transcripts, within-case analysis, and cross-case analysis, as explained below.

#### **3.8.1 Translation**

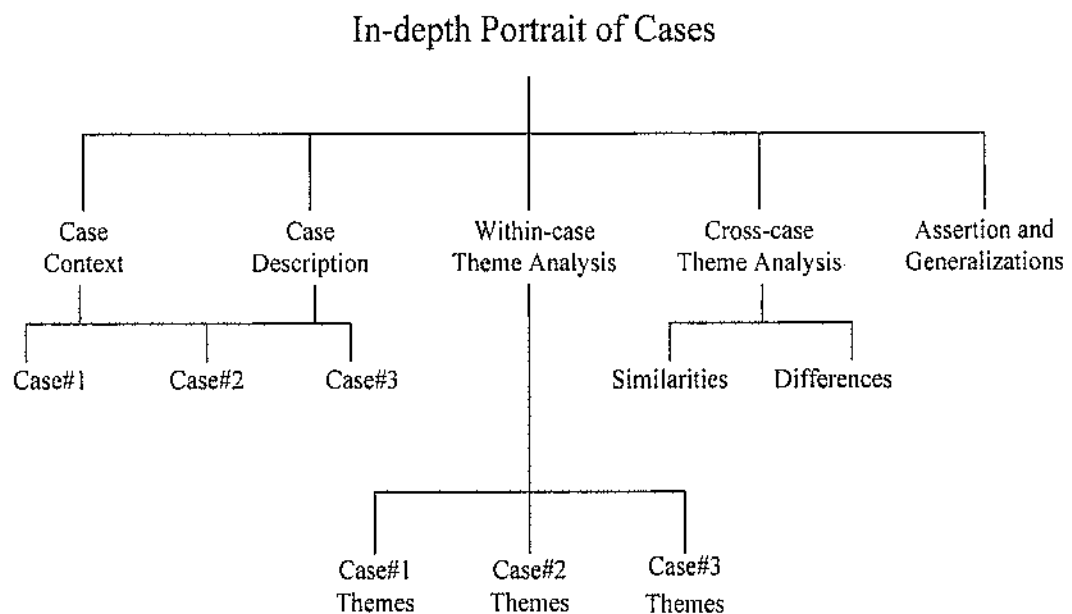
As noted in the previous section, since digital recording was refused by all participants, the interviews were initially recorded by means of written notes, which were expanded immediately after each interview. These initial transcripts were in Arabic, the native language of the participants, and so had to be translated into English in order to provide a set of transcripts for analysis, from which excerpts could be quoted in the thesis. I performed the translation myself, partly because my recall of the interview contexts and discussions facilitated understanding and translation, and also because it provided an opportunity for me to get close to the data and become thoroughly familiar with it before embarking on the analysis itself. However, in order to ensure the accuracy of the translation, I employed a process of back-translation, with the aid of Arabic colleagues within the university. In this process, a colleague translated my English transcripts back into Arabic, and this new Arabic version was compared with the

original. Any differences were discussed and reconciled. Moreover, a copy of the English translation was given to a native English speaker, who checked the correctness and clarity of the language, and pointed out any expressions that might be difficult for an English reader to understand. Such difficulties can arise because of differences between languages in structure and idiom, which sometimes reader literal translation meaningless, or to cultural content embedded in participants' comments (Xian, 2008), which may be unfamiliar and require explanation for readers.

### 3.8.2 Analysing Multiple Cases

The process of analysing, linking and interpreting the three cases followed the general pattern suggested by Creswell (2014), depicted in Figure 3.2 below

Figure 3.2: Pattern for Case Analysis



Source: Creswell (2014)

Since the essence of case study is to explore a phenomenon in its natural context, the first requirement was to understand the context in which the case is embedded, which in this study involved an understanding of the history of infrastructure development, geography and social structure of Saudi Arabia. Then came the description of each

case, for example, the nature of the organisation's business, its location, size and structure. Once this information had been compiled, I turned my attention to the within-case analysis, that is, the analysis of the data for each case individually; an account of the procedure follows in section 3.8.3. The outcome of this stage constituted the input for the subsequent stage of cross-case analysis, in which data for all three organisations was compared, in order to identify any similarities and differences. Such analysis serves the replication logic of multiple (as opposed to single) case study (Yin, 2009), as it enables identifications of whether attitudes and practices observed in one organisation are also observed elsewhere. Given the small number of cases and respondents, this does not mean the findings are generalizable, but may provide at least preliminary indications that a particular case is not unique and that certain insights may be applicable more widely. The outcome of this stage, therefore, is a set of assertions (Stake, 1995) or what Yin (2009) and Creswell (2014) somewhat misleadingly call generalizations, that is, the statement of any patterns observed and of the overall lessons learned from studying the cases.

### **3.8.3 Within-case Analysis**

In analysing the individual cases, thematic analysis combining a data-driven inductive approach with the deductive *a priori* template approach outlined by Crabtree and Miller (1999), was employed. Such a combined approach has the advantages of complementing the research questions and facilitating linkage to relevant theory and previous studies, while also allowing themes to emerge directly from the data. A similar combined approach was used by Vohra (2014) in a multiple case study of leadership in Indian organisations, while the template approach was used by Hicks et al. (2014) when analysing interview data in a single – organisation case study of

organisational commitment, and by Chiva et al. (2014) in a multiple case study of organisation learning.

The analysis began with the template approach. According to King (1998), template analysis begins with the production of a list of codes representing themes identified in the textual data. Some of these are usually defined *a priori*, but modified and added to as the researcher reads and interprets texts. In this respect, template analysis falls somewhere between content analysis, in which all codes are determined *a priori* and analysed quantitatively, and grounded theory, in which no *a priori* assumptions are made. The codes generated are usually hierarchical, that is, similar codes are clustered into higher-order codes. Broad, higher order codes give an overview of a general direction in the data, while detailed lower-order codes give fine distinctions.

As King (1998) advises, the number of pre-determined codes should be large enough to give direction to the analysis, but he also warns that setting too many may be overly prescriptive and blinker the analysis. Following his suggestion that the interview topic guide (developed based on literature and the researcher's experience) offers a good starting point, I initially developed two layers of codes, which, to avoid confusion, I have termed themes and categories. These were based on the main questions from the interview guide, which also corresponded with the main research questions, and drew on leadership and culture literature. These initial codes corresponded to what Chiva et al. (2014) drawing on Miles and Huberman (1994) refer to as master codes representing broad conceptual categories such as decision-making, social norms and so on.

The next step was to work systematically through each transcript, to identify segments of text relevant to the research aims and code them as appropriate (that is, sort them into categories) from the initial template. To facilitate this step, the NVivo computer

program was used to manage the data (NVivo Workbook, 2012), with each category of data represented by a node in the analysis, under which the relevant segments of text were stored. Whilst it is sometimes suggested that use of such programs may constitute a barrier between the researcher and the data, they offer the advantages of organised storage, ease of location and retrieval, and security (Creswell, 2014).

During the coding process, revisions to the initial template are made as appropriate. In this research, the modifications made to the initial template were of two types:

- a) Insertion of new codes: Whereas, as indicated previously, the two initial, higher-order layers of coding, termed themes and categories, were pre-determined, a third hierarchical layer of coding (for which I have retained the term, 'code') was added, to convey detailed distinctions within each category, and these were derived inductively entirely from the data, each code being reflected in the words of at least one (and often several) participants. These codes denoted sub-divisions within the master codes, for example, 'participation' as a sub-division within 'decision-making' and 'pressure' as a sub-division within 'social norms'.
- b) Changing classification, that is, reassigning a code or category to a higher or lower-order classification. In this study, the concept of 'wasta' which initially was placed as a code within the category "effects and involvement of culture" emerged so frequently in the transcripts, and was accorded so much importance by participants, that it was reassigned to become a higher-order category.

Taking as an example the category "Effects and Involvement of Culture", Table 3.4 illustrates how these lower-level codes were generated and mapped to their sources.

Table 3.4: Example of lower-level coding for the category: Effects and Involvement of Culture

Code	NWC	SEC	STC
Upbringing	E1, E3, E5	M1	E1
Community membership	E4, E6, M2	E3, M3	M3
Relationships	E4, E5, M3		
Leadership style	E2, E6, M2		
Decision-making	M1, M3	E5, E6, M1	E6
Wasta	E4, E6, M1, M2	E1, E2, E3, E4, M2	E1, E2, E3, E4, E5, E6, M1, M3
Change		M3	
Transfer		E1, E5	E4, E6, M2
Attributes	E2, E3, M2		
Principles		E3, E4	
attitudes			E1, E2

Notes: a) E: Employee, M: Manager.

b) Numbers 1 – 6 are serial numbers within the relevant organisation.

### 3.8.3.1 Labelling Themes, Categories and Codes

Since, as noted previously, initial themes and categories were determined *a priori*, and retained so long as they were supported by the data, their labels were taken from the relevant literature; for example, the culture dimensions social norms, tribalism, regional affiliation and so on were identified in previous theoretical and empirical work and labelled using the same terminology as in the source material. In the case of the data-driven lower-level codes, the aim was to give each a label consisting of a

single word or short phrase that accurately conveyed its meaning and sufficiently distinguished it from other codes, and from higher-order categories and themes. In most cases, these labels were taken directly from the actual words of one or more of the participants who raised the idea in question; for example, the idea that regional affiliation could have both positive and negative effects was labelled “double-edged sword”, quoting the words used by a manager when discussing this idea. In a few cases, however, the wording of an extract did not contain a single word or sufficiently concise phrase that could accurately capture the idea. A case in point is my choice of the word ‘impunity’ to encapsulate the idea, expressed by one employee, that leaders can continue to practise *wasta* without incurring censure. Although the participant himself did not use the word *impunity*, this seemed to me to be the essence of what he was trying to convey, and preferable to a long, clumsy phrase. It should also be noted that, although each case was analysed individually, where the same idea was repeated in different organisations, albeit in different words, I chose to use the same label in each case, in order to facilitate subsequent cross-case analysis.

#### **3.8.4 Cross-case Analysis**

As noted previously, analysis of data was conducted in two steps, following Creswell (2014). Therefore, the within-case analysis was followed by a stage of cross-case analysis. The purpose of this stage was to compare and contrast the three cases, identifying areas of similarity and differences in the perceptions and experiences expressed. This process involved comparing the codes appearing under each category for the three organisations, and the frequency with which they appeared (as an indication of the strength or generality of the perception in question within each organisation). This process was facilitated by coding tables such as the one illustrated in Table 3.4, in which the codes are mapped to their sources; such a table was prepared

for each data category. The preliminary indications derived from these tables were then checked and expanded with reference to the original transcripts. As noted above, this cross-case analysis supported the replication logic (Yin, 2009) of multiple case study by demonstrating to what extent particular perceptions and experiences prevailed across the organisations. In fact, a high level of correspondence was found in the views expressed in the three cases, and while any differences observed are noted, it is these areas of correspondence that form the basis of “assertions” (Creswell, 2014) in relation to each research question, which are expounded and discussed in the light of the literature, in Chapter Five.

### **3.9 Reliability and Validity**

The most prominent criteria to evaluate research in the business and management field are reliability and validity. Reliability is defined by Collis and Hussey (2009:65) as “absence of differences in the results if the research were repeated”. It is, indeed, related to the questions of whether the results of any study in business and management are repeatable and whether the measures that are used are consistent (Bryman & Bell, 2003). Validity, however, is defined as “the extent to which the research findings accurately reflect the phenomena under study” (Collis & Hussey, 2009:65). In short, it is looking into the integrity of the conclusions generated from any research (Bryman & Bell, 2003).

Some writers have argued that the concepts of reliability and validity should be applied in qualitative research; other writers, however, contend that these ideas are quantitative in origin, which makes them inappropriate to be applicable in qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2003). Sandberg (2005), for example, argues that the criteria of validity and reliability applied within the positivist tradition are inconsistent with an ontology that rejects the existence of a single, objective reality beyond the human mind,



and an epistemology that holds knowledge to be constituted through lived experience. Moreover, in Hedy and Perry's (2000) view, the quality of research should be judged in terms relevant to the paradigm adopted. Such authors either reconceptualise the traditional criteria in ways that are more applicable to interpretive research, or apply new criteria.

In the present research, the traditional conceptualization of reliability as stability, consistency and replicability is inappropriate, because the study is concerned with subjective phenomena that might be perceived differently with changing circumstances. Moreover, it is inconsistent with the research paradigm, since change is central to the development and refinement of interpretations or constructions between researcher and participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Instead, a more appropriate criterion is dependability, which can be established by ensuring the research process is clearly documented and trackable. This involves so-called "inquiry audit" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), in which the process and outcome of the research are examined for consistency and appropriateness. This necessitates retention in retrievable form of all research materials (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

A second measure for demonstrating dependability is a reflexive stance to the research procedures, interpretations and outcomes, exposed in "regular, ongoing, self-conscious documentation" (Miles & Huberman, 1994:439). The latter procedure can be related to Sandberg's (2005) reconceptualization of reliability as "interpretive awareness", meaning that, in order to convince readers of the "truth" of their interpretations, researchers must demonstrate their efforts to refrain from routinely applying their preconceived theories, be open to the experience of participants, and constantly check their interpretations. Researchers may not be able to avoid a degree of "perspectival subjectivity" (Kvale, 1996), that is, the influence on their

interpretations of particular stances taken in the study, but they need to acknowledge and address them. Taking all of the above into account, reliability in this research is conceived in terms of integrity in carrying out the research procedures, and openness regarding my own positionality and values, and the way they affected both the conduct of the research and the interpretations I offer.

Similarly, the traditional approach to validity is problematic as it supposes some approximation to “truth” or “reality”, implying an objectivist ontology and positivist epistemology not appropriate in interpretive research (Sandberg, 2005). Excessive preoccupation with “accuracy” and matching “reality” can pose the danger of ignoring context, values, and the essentially social nature of interpretation. The alternative criterion of credibility may better capture an appropriate kind of validation. The concern here will be with how accurately I represent the perceptions, experiences and beliefs of the research participants. This can be achieved by triangulation of findings. Triangulation is a method of validation based on the degree of convergence among information from different sources. In this study, I applied this notion mainly through collection of data from three different companies, and from the perspectives of people in different positions within the organisations – management and employees. Triangulation of information sources, it should be noted, is not necessarily looking for consensus; a “reality” constructed through individuals’ perceptions and experiences is likely to include differences. What it means, however, is that any claims or interpretations I offer should be based on a range of evidence, and reflect the multiple perspectives of social actors in the case study settings.

Other approaches to validity included by building rapport and trust with participants, so they would feel able to be open and honest in sharing their views and experiences, and by offering participants an opportunity to see and comment on the interpretations

they have helped to construct (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Creswell, 2003). The latter strategy, called ‘member-checking’ is a safeguard against the introduction of bias by the researcher by giving participants an opportunity to rectify errors and offer additional information, for example, to comment on emerging interpretations. At the same time, as Hammersley (1990) warns, participants do not -any more than researchers- have exclusive access to “truth”. They may not always be aware of everything that is happening in their setting, or they may have reasons to present certain constructions, or hide others. This does not mean that member checks are of no value, but that they should be balanced with other forms of validation, as in the case of this study.

So far, the discussion of validity in this section has been confined to internal validity, that is, the degree of correspondence between the findings and interpretations presented in the thesis and the “realities” perceived by the participants. However, there is another dimension of validity which is also problematic in qualitative, interpretive research, namely, external validity, the extent to which the research conclusions can be generalized to people and settings outside the research context. If the “realities” uncovered in research are the product of a particular set of perceptions, experiences and values in a particular context, it may be argued that external validity can have little meaning. This is a criticism particularly directed to case study, which by definition deals with a very small number of cases, and is context-bound. What is more relevant here is transferability, which is relative and depends on the degree of similarity between salient conditions in the research context and the context to which transfer is considered. Whereas with generalizability, the onus of proof is on the researcher (for example, through demonstrating the representativeness of samples), the determination of transferability is made by the reader. The task of the researcher is to provide sufficient information for an informed decision to be made. This is done by careful

and detailed description of the research context, extensive discussion of the concepts employed and their basis in the literature, and a detailed account of how data were gathered and analysed. In this study I have discussed at length the concepts of leadership and culture as presented in a variety of literature. I have provided background information on the three case organisations, and on the Saudi social and organisational context more generally, and have explained the research procedures on which my conclusions and interpretations are based. How far these can be transferred will depend on the extent to which future readers recognize and identify with the situations and themes explored.

### **3.10 Ethical Considerations**

Ethics are rules that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Ethical issues are present in all kinds of research, and scholars agree that key ethical principles should underpin the research. There are many reasons for this. First, ethical standards promote the research goals, such as knowledge, truth, and error avoidance. Second, ethical norms promote the values that are important to collaborative work, such as trust, accountability, and fairness. Third, ethical values in research help to elicit public support. People will cooperate with the researcher if they trust the integrity and quality of the research. Lastly, many of the ethical norms of research promote many other important moral and social values, such as social responsibility, human rights, and health and safety. Ethical lapses in research may harm the researcher, participants, organisations and public (Resnik, 2011). Weis and Fine (2000) note that ethical considerations in research arise with regard to

- The researcher's role as insider or outsider.
- Assessing issues that the researcher or participants may fear disclosing.

- Supportive, respectful relationships with participants, for example, avoidance of stereotyping.
- Acknowledging whose voices are represented in the study.
- Reflexivity.

Hatch (2002) adds the need to be sensitive to imbalance in power relations. There are four general concerns that need to be considered according to Gibson and Brown (2009). These are:

- Informed consent.
- Confidentiality.
- Avoiding harm.
- Integrity and professionalism.

The primary ethical value in research is that the participants must be protected from any kind of harm, both physical and psychological, although it is not possible to predict all potential harm. The researcher also has responsibilities to his or her discipline and to the research community, in terms of the fair and honest reporting of the research.

In order to show these issues were addressed in this research, it is useful to bear in mind Creswell's (2014) reminder that ethical issues arise at all stages of the research, and to consider the requirements of each stage in turn.

Ethical considerations begin before the research commence, with the issues of ethical approval and local permission for the study to be carried out. In this case, the research was approved by the university's Ethics Committee, and access to the research sites gained with the permission of the relevant gatekeepers in each organisation. On beginning the study, the principle of informed consent was observed. Participants were informed of the extent and implications of their involvement. Creswell (2014) warns

also of the need at this stage to anticipate potential issues arising from differences of culture, gender, religion and the like. As a Saudi conducting research in my own country, I was aware of and prepared for such issues.

When it came to data collection, I took care to respect the sites and minimize disruption by arranging the time and location of interviews at participants' convenience. Although it would have been desirable to audio record the interviews, participants were uncomfortable about this and I respected their wishes. Participants were debriefed after their participation, including reviewing the purpose and the procedure used in the study and they were offered a copy of the results when they become available (Flick, 1998).

The present research posed particular issues because it was to be conducted in the participants' own environments. Moreover, describing the research experience in an authentic manner may be contrary to the organisation's aims. Therefore, any study that involves people requires special attention to the ethical issues that may be derived from interaction (Orb, et al. 2001). In relation to the analysis and reporting of data, two issues arose; the danger of siding with the participants or "going native", and issues of privacy. With regard to the former, the main concern was with regard to my conducting research in my own organisation. In this situation, difficulties could potentially arise due to the influence of my existing relationships within the organisation, status differentials within the organisation between myself and participants, and possible tension between my duty, as a researcher, to report findings honestly and pressures to maintain the image of the organisation, for example, to suppress disclosure of unethical practices, or negative employee attitudes. My response to such dilemmas was to be continually reflexive about my position and, following Hammersley (1994) to try to "bracket" (i.e. set aside) any prior assumptions I brought to the research.

With regard to the privacy issue, a potential conflict arises between full and authentic reporting and protection of respondents. It may be necessary to avoid some areas of data that deal with sensitive issues or reveal an identity. This is, in essence, a form of data manipulation. Others include hiding biographical features and use of aliases (Gibson & Brown, 2009). In this research, the case study organisations are identifiable, as they are unique in their respective sectors. This increased the danger that individual participants might be identifiable. I have therefore avoided giving detailed information about their positions, and used code designations when quoting them. Issues may also arise of whether it is necessary or justified to do some minor manipulations of talk by changing words in order to preserve and clarify the intended meaning. In this study, since the interviews were carried out in Arabic, responses had to be translated into English, raising the difficulty that literal translation may not capture the intended meaning, due to differences between the two languages in syntax, rhetorical conventions, idioms and cultural allusions. I have discussed this more fully in the section on Data Analysis. Suffice to say here that I have made every effort to retain the sense of participants' remarks and to explain any implied meanings or distinctive cultural references that may cause confusion for readers.

There is an obligation on the researcher to consider the life of the data. It is, therefore, important to think about what will happen to the data after the research has been completed. A common practice is to destroy data within a specific period of time after the research is finished. However, the data for this study are kept in a safe place –in case I need to refer to them- waiting for the final decision of completion, then they will be destroyed.

Finally, in reporting the research, I have made every effort to duly acknowledge references, bibliography and all sources of data and information used in the research.

### 3.11 Summary

This chapter has provided an explanation of the research methodology and a justification for the methods adopted. An interpretive, inductive approach was employed via a multiple holistic case study strategy. Qualitative data was collected by means of semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of three managers and six employees in each of three large utility organisations. Data were analysed by means of thematic analysis, employing an initial template of literature – derived *a priori* codes, modified and supplemented with inductive coding derived directly from participants' responses. The findings are presented in two chapters, beginning in the next chapter with a within-case analysis of responses related to perceptions of leadership.



## **CHAPTER 4 LEADERSHIP FINDINGS**

### **4.1 Introduction**

Following Creswell (2012) and as explained in the methodology chapter, the qualitative data collected through the research interviews were analysed in two stages: first, analysis of each case individually, then, a cross-case analysis. This chapter presents the findings of within-case analysis on leadership for the three case organisations, NWC, SEC and STC, in turn.

In the analysis process, as explained in Chapter Three, section 3.8.3, data were coded, and the codes grouped into categories or nodes and major themes, based on my interpretation of participants' accounts of their subjective opinions, perceptions and experiences. The major theme, Leadership, contains six categories (nodes), namely, Conceptualization and understanding of leadership, Leadership roles, Personality traits and behaviours, Leadership Style, Decision-making and Supervisor-Subordinate Relationship. The first three are related to leadership conceptualization, and the other three to leadership as practised in the organisation concerned. These categories were planned a priori, corresponding to Research Questions 1 and 2, and the related topics of the interview guide. However, the codes composing each category were derived from participants' responses in the interviews. In this chapter, each section (i.e. the analysis for each individual case) follows the same pattern, whereby the six categories are discussed in turn, highlighting the individual codes that make up the categories, with illustrative quotations from the interview data. Whilst some contextualizing information is included, it should be noted that the purpose of this chapter is mainly descriptive; discussion and interpretation are reserved for Chapter Six.

In order to preserve participants' anonymity, they are given coded designations as follows:

- a) Position: E means employee, M means manager.
- b) Number (within the case): employees: 1 – 6, managers: 1 – 3.

## **4.2 Case 1: National Water Company (NWC)**

As noted in earlier explanation of the research context and selection of cases (Chapter 1, section 1.7.1.3) NWC is a wholly government-owned company, with a public service mandate derived from the vital necessity of an adequate water supply for all the Kingdom's inhabitants, for personal use, agriculture, and industry. The company has no competitors, but it faces technical constraints related to the challenges of accessing underground water and treating saline water, given that in a country with little rainfall, surface fresh water is scarce. The challenge of maintaining a sufficient supply is compounded by the pressure on resources generated by a rapidly increasing population. Fulfilling the company's social obligation in the face of such constraints might be expected to pose challenges to leadership and influence conceptualization of what leadership is, the roles and behaviours expected of leaders, and the way leadership is exercised in practice.

### **4.2.1 Conceptualization and Understanding of Leadership**

This category concerns the way leadership was conceptualized in NWC, and the extent to which the concept was thought to be understood and practised. The category composes eight codes, as follows: *objectives and vision*, *activities*, *working through others*, *teamwork*, *resource use*, *efficiency*, *leadership versus management*, and *perceptions*. The first two of these reflect ideas about the nature of leadership, which to some extent reflected the particular constraints and priorities of the organisation as a bureaucracy providing a public good. The others, addressing the leader's relationships with others and particular ways in which leaders were seen to exert their

leadership, are of interest because, as will be seen in later sections (and, indeed, in Chapter Five), they contribute to a thread of ideas found across categories, that reflect culturally significant ideas and tensions around leadership. These will be drawn out in more detail in Chapter Six.

The first code, *objectives* and *vision*, reflects the idea that leadership drives towards the attainment of some pre-determined vision, goal or objective. Five participants expressed this view, as in the following excerpts:

“Leadership ... is instructing others to deploy a system according to the organisation’s strategy and objectives ...” (E1).

Whilst E1 and a number of other participants focused on the leader’s role in ensuring objectives are met, another employee, suggested that leadership involves actually setting the goals and objectives:

“... Leadership entails setting clear goals and drawing roadmaps to achieve these goals ...” (E5).

A few participants described leadership in terms of the *activities* involved in achieving these objectives, specifically directing and monitoring / follow up. For example, one referred to the activities of giving instructions and “monitoring their implementation” (E1) while another criticized the incomplete leadership of a boss who focused on “giving directions to the followers, without following up whether they were implemented or not” (E2), reflecting a perception that both activities are part of leadership. Such views may be seen as reflecting the bureaucratic nature of the organisation, and especially the fact that NWC has a responsibility to ensure fulfilment of the government targets related to providing a public good.

The next two codes reflect ideas about the leader’s position in relation to other members of the section or department they lead. Several participants highlighted the

notion of leadership as *working through others*, whether through allocation of tasks to appropriate personnel, providing motivation or influencing others' behaviour, as the following examples illustrate:

"Leadership entails ... appointing the right personnel to manage and implement all steps towards the realization of all targets" (E5).

"... The ability to influence the working groups, which is characterized by humanitarian qualities to deal with the facility's personnel" (M1).

"The leadership concept is achievement through others" (M3).

In a related category, but one I interpreted as distinct because of its reference to a particular mode or structure of work arrangement, a few participants emphasized that leaders get things done through *teamwork*; they referred to "[making] people work ... by teamwork" (E1), "participation in the work as a team ..." (E2) and "the ability to manage a team" (M2). While the three extracts quoted imply different perceptions of the leader's relationship to the team (as participant or manager) they agree in perceiving the leader as orchestrating the activities of team members, so the pursuit of organisation objectives is a joint and shared endeavour. In a large, bureaucratic organisation such as NWC, leadership can thus be seen as creating coherence and unity.

Other dimensions of leadership were expressed only in isolated instances. Just one participant, for example, suggested that it entailed *resource use* – "the appropriate exploitation of physical and human resources to enable and facilitate the carrying out of the allocated tasks and responsibilities in the best possible manner" (E4). The comment also implies a concern for *efficiency* (although the word itself is not used) which was echoed by another employee who talked of "[achieving] the aspirations of the client and the regulatory authorities in less time and for less cost and with higher quality" (E6). Such concerns may be particularly salient for NWC, given the

previously noted pressure on an organisation responsible for providing, at government expense, a public good to an expanding population.

The extracts quoted so far in this section evoke a multi-dimensional view of leadership, which is seen as both forward-looking, concerned with the goals and strategy of the organisation, and also concerned with the minutiae of day-to-day implementation. Such views evoke the long-standing debate as to the relationship and/or distinction between *leadership vs management*, which was raised by several respondents. While some saw the two as indistinguishable, reflected in such expressions as “leadership refers to the management of enterprises and organisations” (E4), others were careful to make a distinction between them. For example, one of the employees interviewed, referring to his superior, commented, “The boss does not understand the concept and meaning of the leadership, but he is a successful manager” (E6).

This conceptual confusion (for example, the claim that “[the boss and subordinates] are not aware of the concept of leadership, but they understand management as leadership” (M2)) raises the broader issue of whether leadership is seen to be understood by employees and managers in the organisation. Responses under the *perception* code were mixed regarding whether bosses understood leadership. Several participants were satisfied that their bosses had a good understanding of leadership, for example:

“Leadership is well perceived and practised by the boss” (E1).

“Through his practice and achievements, the boss has a clear understanding of the meaning of leadership” (M3).

Others, however, thought bosses did not understand leadership correctly, as reflected in comments that the boss could not distinguish between leadership and management, or thought leadership simply meant “giving directions” (E2). One suggested reason for

this was that the boss “has to carry out tasks and duties required by senior management” (E5). This suggests that understanding of leadership may to some extent depend on an individual’s position within the organisation, and hence their access to information, involvement in decision-making and degree of autonomy to practise leadership. As for subordinates, it was generally agreed that they do not understand leadership at all, because they “have nothing to do with it” (M3) and see it is “not their role” (E3). They are simply “looking for clear guidance to follow” (E6) and if they do have any ideas about leadership, perceive it simply as “authority and controlling to impose decisions” (E2).

To summarize, participants in NWC viewed leadership as being concerned with achieving goals by directing, monitoring and influencing others in a teamwork context, deploying resources and personnel efficiently. However, there were suggestions of some confusion as to the relationship between leadership and management, disagreement as to whether bosses have an appropriate understanding of leadership, and a general perception that leadership was not understood or practised by subordinates, or even of interest to them.

#### **4.2.2 Leadership Roles**

Whereas section 4.2.1 concerned ideas about when leadership is, this category is more about what leaders actually do. This category concerns the roles that participants expected to be performed by a leader, and generated six codes. They were: *set vision / objective / strategy*, *non-interference*, *customer satisfaction*, *satisfy workforce*, *evaluation* and *liaison / representation*.

The role most frequently ascribed to leaders was to set and according to one participant, achieve the organisation’s *vision, objectives and /or strategy*. Although participants

used different terminology, I decided to combine the relevant responses into one code, on the rationale that participants often mentioned two or more of these terms together and did not clearly distinguish between them, the terms being used to describe a focus on a desired future, irrespective of time horizon). Some illustrative comments in this regard were the following:

“The leader’s roles should include ... setting up the organisation’s vision, objectives and strategies ...” (E2).

“The leader’s role ... is mainly to determine the objectives and link them with KPI’s” (E3).

Moreover, a leader was expected to set a plan for how the visions / objective would be achieved. One participant expressed this as “identifying a formula to achieve the targets” (E5). Other participants talked of “setting of strategic plans” (E6), “strategic planning” (M1) and “[developing] strategies to achieve the goals” (M2).

An interesting point raised by three participants in NWC was the importance of the leader’s *non-interference*. They thought that the leader should not intervene in matters of day-to-day implementation of work, but allow employees to fulfil their duties. As participant E1 argued, having set objectives, the leader should “[give] the subordinates the chance and time to achieve them”. Similarly, one of the managers stated categorically that “the leader should not take part in implementation” (M1).

The next two codes concern the leader’s role in relation to other stakeholders. Specifically, ensuring the satisfaction of internal and external customers of the organisation. In this respect, two participants focused on *customer satisfaction*, in terms of the satisfaction of external customers or clients of the organisation, by ensuring a high quality of service, or as participant E2 commented, “attaining the customers’ requirements and needs”. The infrequency of this code may be related to

NWC's role as a government organisation. As the only organisation providing water services, as a public good, NWC did not have to compete for custom, market its services or generate profit, and in this sense was not "customer-focused". Nevertheless, the rare mention of customers by two participants might be seen as reflecting a public service orientation, or at least a recognition that the company's mandate from the government could not be satisfactorily achieved without thought for those whose needs the government aimed to satisfy. Of more concern to participants, in terms of the number of responses, however, was the leader's role in looking after the internal customers, the employees. They conceptualized this in several ways. While one participant spoke generally of "*satisfying* the needs of the *workforce* within the enterprise" (E4), others identified specific needs that the leader should meet. In the view of one participant, for example, a leader does not impose burdens on subordinates (a behaviour he ascribed to managers) but "participates with his subordinates in carrying the load of the work" (E3). Another way in which it was suggested a leader could meet the needs of the workforce was by inspiring and motivating them. From this perspective, a leader should be

"someone who can create the desire in the team to work willingly ... he instils passion and desire ... motivating them to reach the desired outcomes, and not just to accomplish the tasks at hand" (E5).

The same employee was one of two participants (the other being manager M1) who thought the role of a leader included *evaluation* of the organisation's performance and success in achieving its objectives:

"It is important for leaders to pay attention to criteria through which they can assess the service provided and develop the performance level of the enterprise" (E5).

"... setting the objectives and goals ... and then evaluating the implementation" (M1).



The last code in this category reflected the view of a single participant who ascribed to the leader the role of *liaison / representation*; he “communicates with stakeholders” (E3) on behalf of the organisation.

To summarize, six roles were ascribed to leaders by participants in NWC, although three of them were mentioned by only one or two individuals. The main areas of relative consensus were on the views that a leader should set a vision and/or objectives, and a strategy for achieving them, satisfy the workforce, and avoid interference in their daily activities.

#### **4.2.3 Personality Traits and Behaviours**

This category, the subject of Research Question 2, reflected evidence from the literature that leadership has often been conceptualized in terms of specific personal attributes and behaviours thought to be characteristic of leaders or necessary for their success. Discussion of the personality traits and behaviours expected of an effective leader was classified into two sub-categories, *Personality* and *Behaviour/Skills*, containing four codes each. The codes under *Personality* were *humility*, *self-confidence*, *ability to influence*, and *integrity*. Those under *Behaviour/Skills* were *decision-making*, *knowledge*, *interpersonal skills* and *problem-solving*. Often, traits were simply listed, without elaboration. For this reason, the discussion focuses on the most important codes in terms of prevalence, and availability of supporting detail.

To begin with *personality*, the first two codes, humility and self-confidence, were mentioned by only one participant each, with no further detail, and will not be discussed further here. Of more importance was the view that a leader should have “*the ability to influence others*” (E2), whether by “charisma” (E4) or understanding of “how to incentivize the workforce to get the best out of them” (E4). Another way of

influencing others, subordinates in particular, was by being a good *role model*, who inspired others by his example. As one employee commented, “he should be inspiring and a role model to be a good example for his subordinates” (E3), while a manager similarly talked of the ability to “lead by example” (M2).

The other characteristic ascribed to effective leaders, mentioned by two participants, was *integrity*. One expressed this idea in terms of “the ability to earn trust” (E4), while the other argued that a leader should “consider the public interest, not personal interest” (E6). The latter point seems particularly to reflect NWC’s public service mission.

With regard to *Behaviour/skills*, the most frequently mentioned and undly expressed were *decision-making, and interpersonal skills*. Regarding the former, participants highlighted a variety of components of this behaviour. For example, one participant expected a leader to demonstrate “assertiveness in the decision” (E5), while another suggested, “I think that an effective leader must be able to protect decisions from resistance” (E2). One of the managers suggested that, in order to make appropriate decisions in the interest of the organisation, the leader should “be able to evaluate the possible alternatives” (M1).

The other major code in this category was *interpersonal skills*. A variety of skills were expected of a leader. One participant mentioned being “a good listener” (E4), while three referred to teamwork skills. An example in this respect was one of the managers, who commented on the importance of the leader’s “working as part of the rest of the team, as well as building strong relationships among team members” (M2). The leader’s interpersonal skills were also expected to include consideration for others, reflected for example in “understanding the conditions and circumstances of employees” (M3), which the participant in question felt would help them to realize their potential in accomplishing their duties effectively. An example, meanwhile,

thought consideration would be shown by the leader's willingness to "safeguard the rights of employees and claim what they deserve [on their behalf]" (E4).

To summarize, participants in NWC expected a leader to possess a wide range of personality traits and behavioural skills. The most frequently mentioned personality traits was the *ability to influence* others, including acting as a *role model*. As regards behaviour and skills, the main attributes agreed on were effective and confident *decision-making*, and *interpersonal skills*.

#### **4.2.4 Leadership Style**

Comments related to leadership style fell into two sub-categories, *ideal*, reflecting participants' normative thinking about how leadership "should" be performed, and *actual*, containing descriptive comments related to the leadership style perceived to be enacted in the organisation. This distinction reflects a tension or inconsistency, the significance of which will emerge more fully in Chapter Six. The first sub-category contained four codes: *Harmony*, *Flexibility*, *Management by Objectives*, and *Employees as Assets*. The second sub-category contained six codes: *Autocratic*, *Unsupportive*, *Rigid*, *Bureaucratic*, *Unfair*, and *Customer-focused*.

##### **4.2.4.1 The ideal leadership style**

This sub-category contains codes implying a mainly transformative approach. The code, *harmony*, was used to capture a range of responses conveying a feeling that the ideal leadership style would be characterized by positive feelings, emotional attachment and good relations among members of the organisation. The word harmony itself came from an employee who suggested,

"I wish to create a work environment full of mutual respect and where all are getting on together in harmony" (E4).

A similar notion was captured by two other employees, using the word “friendship”, for example,

“I think that the most suitable leadership style for our organisation is a pattern based on friendship and sentiment, to build up a relationship among the staff ...” (E6).

The most distinctive response encompassed within the “harmony” code was that of one of the managers, who advocated what he called:

“Leadership by love, to make the employees love both the leader and the organisation by stimulation and encouragement” (M1).

Two employees argued the need for a leadership style characterized by *flexibility*, focused on the organisation’s objectives, yet willing and able to adapt to the circumstances of the organisation and the market. Such a view, however, might be difficult to reconcile with NWC’s large bureaucratic structure and public service (not market-driven) mandate, which might be why only two people mentioned it. Another minority view was that of a participant who thought that a focus on objectives was important, because in his view, *management by objectives* “involves participation in setting goals and then seeking to fulfil them by innovative thinking and creativity” (E5).

The last code in this sub-category, expressed by a single employee, reflected the notion of *employees as assets*. The employee argued that “The subordinates should be considered as a valuable commodity and a major asset for the organisation” (E3) because in his view, consideration for employees would ultimately be to the benefit of the organisation as a whole.

#### 4.2.4.2 Actual leadership style

In contrast to these aspirations, when they came to describe the *actual* leadership style in the organisation, all but one of the participants expressed dissatisfaction. The most common complaint, voiced by four of the six employees and two of the three managers, was that leadership was exercised in an *autocratic* manner, with power concentrated in the boss's hands and exercised with little consideration for subordinates. One employee, for instance, commented that "Decisions are taken by an individual person, the president, who has absolute power" (E2), while one of his colleagues called attention to the "big gap between the leadership at the top and the subordinates at the bottom" (E4). Another employee complained of a lack of "concern for human beings" and emphasized the conflict that arose "when the employee's opinion does not comply with the opinion of the leader" (E6).

A consequence of such a stance, expressed by two employees, was that leadership was perceived to be *unsupportive* to lower grades. One employee complained that "the existing leadership process does not serve and help the lower graded employees" (E3), while another elaborated on the kinds of support he felt were needed, but lacking:

"There are a lot of things employees desperately need in their everyday life and are of the utmost importance to them, including personal development, such as training programmes ..." (E5).

Another complaint was that the leadership style was excessively *rigid*, not only in being inflexible to situational demands in the organisation, but also in failing to respond to changes in the country as a whole. This latter aspect was captured by one of the managers interviewed, when he expressed his regret that

"The leadership style ... does not seem to be affected by variables that have touched the country and society, such as [the ideas brought by] the return of students on scholarships and studying in developed countries" (M2).

Two managers, moreover, used the term “*bureaucratic*” to reflect their perception that rigid adherence to established ways imposed constraints on their ability to act as they considered necessary in pursuit of organisational objectives.

Meanwhile three of the six employees asserted that the leadership was *unfair*, swayed by personal considerations and shared tribal or regional affiliation (E1) and lacking in transparency, leading to injustice in performance appraisal (E3).

Amidst this plethora of negative opinions, only one participant, a manager, expressed a positive aspect of leadership style in the organisation. The participant in question, M1, had acknowledged and criticized tendencies to rigidity and autocracy; nevertheless, he was satisfied that the leadership was *customer-focused*, and this kept the organisation on track:

“Yes, I am quite satisfied with the leadership process at the organisation, because it uses the feedback from the customer, subscribers and contractors, which in turn is reflected in their satisfaction”

To summarize, perceptions of leadership style in NWC showed a marked contrast between what was considered the “ideal” style and reality. The former was characterized by harmonious, friendly relations, teamwork and flexibility, and the employees were seen as assets. However, the actual situation described was one of rigid bureaucracy, autocratic exercise of power, lack of support for subordinates, and unfairness. Only the concern for customers mitigated the general picture of dissatisfaction.

#### **4.2.5 Decision-making**

The decision-making category reflects participants’ perceptions of the way decision-making was carried out in their organisation, in terms of the criteria applied and the people involved. This is of interest as a reflection of the way leadership was seen to be

exercised in practice, particularly the level of participation, which, as will be seen, reflected cultural attitudes. Five codes were grouped within this category: *bias*, *objectivity*, *participation*, *autocracy* and *pseudo-participation*.

A number of participants, at both employee and manager level, expressed the view that the decisions of their supervisors were often characterized by *bias* and subjectivity. There was a common perception that superiors, rather than considering only the best interest of the organisation, were swayed in their decision-making by their personal agendas, or the interests of those inside or outside the organisation whom they sought to please. One employee, for example, commented:

“No, I do not feel that the decisions of the supervisor are made objectively and free of personal bias. It is common, unfortunately, to see some decisions in the organisation being taken to serve a specific person or to attain a particular objective or service.” (E2)

M2 expressed a similar view, asserting that:

“Decisions are often biased and not taken for specific practical objectives ... They are either biased for personal interests, or to favour close friends and relatives or to serve other parties’ interests.”

M2’s comment regarding decisions taken to favour close friends and relatives contrary to the notion of public service which NWC might be expected to uphold, connotes the practice of *wasta*, which appears as a separate category in Chapter Five, within the broad theme of ‘Culture’, although M2 does not name this practice explicitly. Moreover, his criticism implies an awareness or belief that decisions should be made according to objective criteria, to meet some specific purpose of the organisation.

A slightly different perspective was adopted by one of the employee group, who considered that decisions were generally made in the interest of the organisation, but nevertheless perceived such decisions as biased, because in his view, they did not benefit the employees or take account of their interests: “What is most important for

the supervisor is the organisation's interests and achieving its objectives, regardless of the employee's benefits" (E3). His comment suggests a lack of alignment between the organisation's and employees' interests. This employee seemingly did not identify with the *goals* of the organisation, or feel that employees were contributing to achievement of a shared vision and mission; his remarks imply a perceived separation between 'them' and 'us'. This may relate to the fact that NWC, as an organisation supplying a public good, faced pressure to meet the needs of an expanding population without unduly increasing the burden on the government as the financial sponsor of the service. Such pressures might be transferred to employees in the form of tight deadlines and heavy work schedules, contrary to the relatively easy work conditions that were for many years prevalent in the public sector and made the government the employer of choice.

None of the participants interviewed in NWC saw decision-making as purely objective. While four participants, three employees and one manager, saw some decisions, perhaps even the majority, as characterized by *objectivity*, their responses were equivocal. Their assertions of objectivity were immediately countered by contradictory claims of bias affecting certain types of decisions. The following are examples:

"Yes, I feel that most of the decisions of the supervisor are made objectively and free of personal bias. But still there is personal *corruption* or a kind of nepotism. For example, sometimes there are some personal prejudiced decisions, especially in recruiting or hiring." (E1).

"I would say that decisions taken for practical job-related purposes account for 70 per cent, while the decisions taken for personal reasons represent 30 per cent." (E5).

"The decisions of the supervisor are often made to improve the organisation and the way of work and then to serve the society, but those decisions related to the employees are, unfortunately, quite often biased." (M1).



Thus, the overall view was that, while some decisions, for example, on technical matters, were governed by objective considerations, in other areas, personal interests often intervened in decision-making in NWC, particularly in human resources-related matters.

Another aspect of decision-making that concerned the participants was *participation*, and specifically whether employees were involved in the decision-making process. Interviewees expressed a variety of views on this point. On the one hand, there were several who had positive views towards the opportunity for employee participation in decision-making:

“Yes ... I participate in making decisions. Also, the subordinates participate as well, and they really are in the kitchen where the decisions are cooked.” (M1).

“Yes, subordinates participate in decision-making, subordinates have a chance in decision-making by encouraging personal initiatives, and motivating them to offer more.” (M3).

On the other hand, a number of interviewees reported *autocracy* in decision-making, with subordinates completely excluded from the process.

“No, the employees do not participate in making decisions, because they are not given the chance to participate in the leadership process. Subordinates are far away from their leaders, there is no close communication between the higher management and subordinates” (E2).

“Subordinates are not allowed to participate in making decisions. It is a top-down approach because the decisions are made in one direction only” (M2).

The reason for this approach was attributed by one employee to “the belief that knowledge, know-how and wisdom are restricted to the senior leadership” (E6).

These contrasting perceptions of participative versus autocratic decision-making may reflect different personal experiences due to the differing management styles of

individuals, or may reflect different understandings of what constitutes 'participation'. Further light on this issue may be shed by the last code in the decision-making category, which I call "*pseudo-participation*". This denotes participation that is limited, or even illusory, conducted through 'consultation' carried out as a matter of form, but with little or no real impact on decision-making. As one employee remarked, "Their (subordinates') opinions are welcomed in respect to any issues, but not necessarily taken on board" (E5). A manager cynically acknowledged the illusory nature of employee participation:

"Even when subordinates are listened to, this is only to lead them into believing they are part of the decision-making process, but in fact, their opinions are not taken into account" (M2).

To summarise, decision-making in NWC was the subject of mixed perceptions, with regard to both the degree of objectivity applied and the extent to which subordinates had an opportunity to participate. The general view was that, although some decisions were made objectively, in the interest of the organisation, there was nevertheless considerable intervention of personal bias, especially in employee-related decisions. Moreover, decisions were perceived as generally made autocratically by top management and imposed on employees, notwithstanding limited "consultation".

#### **4.2.6 Superior-Subordinate Relationship**

This category reflects the nature of the personal relations prevailing between the superior and the employees working under him, and ways in which this might affect the practice of leadership. Discussions on this subject in NWC yielded eight codes, referring variously to perceptions of actual relationships and opinions about how superiors should behave towards subordinates. However, some of these codes were represented by only one or two participants. The codes were: *dignity (positive)*, *dignity*

(negative), *trust, role model, team spirit, productivity, laxity and distance*. Trust and team spirit are not discussed here, as they were both isolated responses with no supporting detail.

The majority of responses in this category were concerned with whether the superior treats subordinates with dignity, courtesy and respect, and were divided into two codes, reflecting positive and negative perceptions. *Dignity (positive)* was the code with most responses, occurring in discussion with all but one of the participants in NWC. Thus, the prevailing perception was that relations between superior and subordinate were generally courteous and respectful of the latter's dignity, an attitude that was attributed to norms of Saudi culture. The following are typical examples of the views expressed:

“Yes, subordinates are treated in all politeness, respect, and dignity. The Saudi society is an inherently affectionate community. Also, the culture of the community which is derived from the teachings of the Islamic religion requires Muslims to treat each other and others respectfully” (E5).

“Yes, we deal with the staff politely, and offer them appreciation and respect. This is part of the society's culture which is dominated by the Islamic character” (M3).

One manager, moreover, suggested that expectations of polite and respectful relations were formalized in the organisation's policy and regulations, ensuring that certain standards are maintained:

“Yes, adhering to the rules in place determines and regulates the relationship between the supervisor and subordinate. As such, there are basics that need to be followed in our firm to ensure that interpersonal relationships are built on appreciation and respect between the leader and subordinates.” (M2).

A note of cynicism, however, was interjected by one employee who, while agreeing that relationships were polite and respectful, also suggested that sometimes the courtesy might be only superficial, employed to facilitate the attainment of objectives:

“Sometimes it goes to courtesy or goes further to become social hypocrisy. This is because the leader needs to gain his subordinates' good feelings in order to ensure that the work will be done very well” (E1).

The same participant, moreover, suggested that the true nature of superior-subordinate relations was autocratic, characterized by the former's exercise of power and the latter's subservience – a view captured by the code, *dignity (negative)*. He was supported in this view by a colleague, who claimed,

“Supervisors, normally, do not treat staff with appreciation, dignity and respect ... employees sometimes get a lot of blame and deliberate criticism .... Relations between the leader and the subordinates are not characterized by friendliness and brotherhood but tend to be based on a ‘master-slave’ rule” (E6).

Several respondents suggested that the nature of the superior-subordinate relationship influenced leadership effectiveness and, in turn, organisational outcomes. The idea that interpersonal relations could positively or negatively, influence performance is captured in three codes: role model, productivity and laxity. For example, one employee argued that the leader should be “a *role model* and one who leads by example”, and went on to suggest the importance of this for organisational performance.

“[The leader] should be respected by the rest of the employees, who try to emulate him and are inspired by his attitude ... Once the relationship between the two parties starts to go downhill, this will have an impact on the final product, which is the service provided by the organisation” (E4).

The above view that the nature of superior-subordinate relations can have positive or negative effects on organisation outcomes, was shared by a manager, who explicitly highlighted the implications of such relationships for *productivity*,

“This relationship can either be a source of motivation to work harder and give more at work, and thus improve productivity or completely the opposite” (M2).

He went on to raise an issue, also mentioned by participant E6, of *laxity*, meaning that in some cases a close personal relationship between superior and subordinate could be exploited by the latter, as it would be difficult for the superior to criticize or discipline him for poor performance.

“The relationship may be used as an excuse by the members of staff or the subordinates to abandon some or all of their duties since the boss will not punish them for their low job performance and lack of turnover ... As they say: ‘security from punishment breeds misbehaviour’” (M2)

While the general view was that the exercise of leadership could potentially be influenced by the nature of superior-subordinate relations, there was one employee who completely disagreed, viewing such relationships as irrelevant because of the “*distance* between the higher management and subordinates” such that “the relationship ... does not impact the leadership process” (E2).

Such a view, however, was rare. As can be seen from the above extracts, there was a prevailing view in NWC that the relationship between superior and subordinates is influential. However, there were differences of opinion as to whether the impact was positive or negative, despite a general agreement that, on the surface at least relationships are polite and respectful.

#### **4.3 Case 2: Saudi Electricity Company (SEC)**

It was explained earlier that SEC was formed through the consolidation of a number of separate regional companies, meaning that it inherited infrastructure of variable quantity and quality. The government holds a majority share in the company, but does not derive profit from it, since it heavily subsidizes the provision of electricity to citizens. This suggests that, like NWC, SEC faces pressure to provide a reliable service to a growing population, without unduly increasing the financial burden on the government. Unlike NWC, however, SEC also has private shareholders who receive a

dividend from the company, suggesting that there are also pressures towards profit-seeking. SEC also faces significant technical challenges associated with the extension of services over a vast area, with varied topography and, in places, inhospitable conditions. However, it faces no competition.

#### **4.3.1 Conceptualization and Understanding of Leadership**

In SEC, conceptualizations of leadership and perceptions of the extent of understanding of the concept were gathered under seven codes: *objectives and vision*, *activities*, *working through others*, *teamwork*, *efficiency*, *leadership vs. management*, and *perception*. These codes correspond to a great extent with those found in NWC, contributing to the cross-case comparison in Chapter Six, although, as that chapter will show, there were some differences of emphasis.

As in NWC, there was a widespread perception that leadership was concerned with setting and achieving a vision, goal or objective. In the view of participant E3, for example, leadership is “the ability to achieve the established goals”. Participant E4 placed more emphasis on the leader’s role in creating the vision and sharing it with employees so that they become committed to its fulfilment. He suggested:

“Leadership is creating a vision, then trying to attract people to achieve the goals of this vision” (E4).

Whilst several participants, both employees and managers, talked of setting goals and achieving objectives, one manager expressed a distinctive, idealistic view in which he highlighted the aspirational nature of the leader’s vision. A leader, in his view, was not satisfied with the status quo. Rather,

“The concept of leadership entails the ability to aim higher and to achieve beyond what is expected ... It means constantly changing for the better” (M2).

Although there was widespread agreement that leadership is about setting and communicating vision, participants did not elaborate on what the vision for the company was. As indicated above, the company seems to be expected to serve two possibly conflicting interests, those of the government as a distributor of resources, and those of shareholders expecting profit. This might in practice make it difficult for leaders in this organisation to present a clear, consistent vision and unite the workforce around it.

As regards the *activities* involved in achieving goals, participants' views implied an authoritarian and bureaucratic stance, one participant pointed to "directing" workers to achieve the established objectives, while two commented on monitoring and follow-up. Participant E6 referred to "following up their [goals'] implementation and supervising implementation of the entrusted tasks", while participant M3 similarly talked of "monitoring [policy] implementation".

Just two participants expressed something akin to transformational view, when they highlighted that leadership entails *working through others*, focusing specifically on the leader's exercise of influence. Participant E2, for example, suggested that a leader influences employees' thinking, in order to align them towards the intended goal:

"The concept of leadership is the ability to influence the psyche of the employee to be directed towards a particular goal"

One of his colleagues, however, went further to expand on the inspiration provided by the leader through his own behaviour;

"Leadership as I understand it is the ability to influence others by [one's] actions so that the leader becomes a role model or an example for the subordinates and inspires them" (E1).

Three participants perceived the leader's work with and through others in terms of *teamwork*, although they differed in their view of the leader's involvement with the

team. Participant E3 saw the leader more as a facilitator “providing a suitable environment for teamwork”, whereas one of his colleagues saw the role as more directive, “directing the team” (E5). In contrast, another employee saw the leader, not as above or outside the team, but as a member of it, working alongside the others. He argued,

“The leader should be humble and work well along with the team” (E1).

It is interesting that all three participants who raised the notion of teamwork were in the “employees” category (which as noted in Chapter 3 in practice meant lower-level managers such as section heads). None of the higher-level managers expressed such a perception, suggesting a possible divide in SEC between the lower-level managers closer to daily operations, which might require teamwork to solve technical problems, and higher, decision-making managers, who were outside and above such teams.

The concern for *efficiency*, as a characteristic of leadership, was highlighted by one participant in SEC, one of the managers, who suggested that leadership meant “taking the organisation on the right track to attain the objectives with minimum cost” (M1).

This more prosaic view of leadership is understandable, given the pressures, noted above, both to minimize cost to the government and to maximize profit for shareholders. It also calls to mind earlier debates about *leadership vs. management*, an issue raised by several participants in SEC – interestingly, all of them employees. All of these employees referred to a common tendency at all levels to confuse the concepts of leadership and management, or to blur the roles, as expressed in the following excerpts:

“Superior and subordinate ... can distinguish between the leader and the manager; however the manager does not just exercise leadership but administration” (E2).



“Leadership is the ability to achieve the established goals by administering the business and people ...” (E3).

“Both superior and subordinates ... often have a mix of leadership and management” (E5).

“In practice there is a blending of work between leadership and management” (E6).

Such views reflect something of the variety and confusion of perceptions of leadership within the organisation, captured more fully in the *perception* code, in which participants commented on whether or to what extent they thought leadership was properly understood and practised in the organisation. In this respect, four of the six employees interviewed, and two of the three managers, thought that leadership was clearly understood and exercised by bosses. For example:

“The boss perceives the concept and meaning of the leadership because of his experience and training during his career period” (E1).

“Given his prominent position, the boss already has the marks of a good leader and understands what leadership is about ...” (M2).

There were, however, some dissenting voices, from those who thought leadership was not well understood: “The boss believes that he perceives the meaning of leadership, but he really does not” (M1), or not exercised appropriately: “The boss perceives and understands the concept of leadership, but does not practise it well” (E4). As for subordinates, there was disagreement on whether they understood the concept of leadership (around half the participants, including both employees and managers, thought they did) but it was agreed that in any case they had no opportunity to exercise leadership themselves, and so no interest in it, beyond carrying out their managers’ instructions, as the following quotations indicate:

“A few perceive its meaning, but all subordinates do not practise it in reality” (E1).

“Subordinates are subject to the directives and orders of the boss, without the initiative to exercise leadership, even if they have some leadership characteristics” (E2)

“... they [subordinates] are not assigned to it [leadership] and it is not their function ...” (E6).

“Subordinates ... do what they have been asked to do ... they do not have the chance to show whether they perceive the meaning of leadership or not” (M1).

“The concept of leadership means nothing to them [subordinates] ... In fact, they see it as only belonging to the boss, hence their lack of concern. They just act on the boss’s guidance and instructions” (M2).

Thus, the overall picture in SEC is of leadership concentrated in the hands of bosses and seen as synonymous with management, and exercised through directing and monitoring others, to achieve objectives. However, there were indications that a leader might sometimes provide visionary inspiration, and might work alongside his team, rather than simply directing it.

#### **4.3.2 Leadership Roles**

Discussion of leadership roles generated seven codes, as follows: *set vision / objectives / strategy, achieving objectives, make profits, non-interference, customer satisfaction, satisfying workforce* and *liaison / representation*.

As in NWC, the first code reflected the largest clusters of responses. Several employees perceived it as a role of the leader to set vision / objectives for the organisation, a view in which they were joined by one manager. The following are representative comments:

“The leader’s roles ... are setting up clear vision and mission, and sharing them with other employees” (E1).

“The leader’s role ... should be limited to clarifying the vision and objectives of the organisation for all” (E5).

“To think forward and to have a future vision ... also to set clear targets for the business” (M3).

A related role was thought to be to *set-strategy* in term of a plan for achieving the objectives set.

“The role of leader ... is to develop a strategy to achieve the objectives established” (E2).

“... to draw the main line of the organisation’s strategy to achieve the objectives” (M1).

“He also needs to draw a roadmap for implementing these targets” (M3).

Several participants also saw the leader as taking responsibility for *achieving objectives*, although they simply listed this role without elaboration. Two participants, however, identified a very specific objective for which the leader was responsible: to *make profits*. This is a new role, not mentioned in NWC, and although mentioned in only two instances, it can be seen as significant, since it reflects an imperative in SEC, as a shareholder company, that did not exist in NWC. Both of the respondents (E3 and M2) who mentioned making a satisfactory level of profit for the organisation as the ultimate goal, linked this achievement with the role of securing *customer satisfaction*, by ensuring that the organisation provided a high quality service which met clients’ needs and wishes. In this way they would achieve “a balance between ... shareholders and customers” (E3), a view that reflects the competing imperatives in SEC, noted earlier. Similarly, participant M2 suggested that in SEC, as a utilities organisation, one of the roles of a leader was to reconcile the organisation’s profit motive with the expectations of customers by “providing high quality and up-to-scratch services for the clients”.

In pursuing these roles, however, the leader was expected to adopt a strategy of non-interference in employees' day-to-day work. Only two participants voiced this view explicitly, one saying, "The leader should not handle the daily business directly, which is the duty of employees" (E6). Another participant expressed a similar point of view, by implication when he expected the leader to "delegate to subordinates and give them authority" (E1). Still more obliquely, participant E5, when setting out his understanding of the leader's roles, suggested that they "should be limited to ...". Since involvement in daily operations was not among the roles he identified, his use of this exclusionary phrase suggests he did not wish or expect leaders to involve themselves in such matters. In a bureaucratic structure, it might be expected that there would be clearly demarcated areas of responsibility, but these respondents suggest by implication that perhaps these lines were blurred, perhaps reflecting the rather directive, controlling role of leaders noted earlier.

Indeed, it could be argued that in the eyes of some participants at least, such a stance of non-interference could contribute towards the achievement of the next role mentioned, that of "*satisfying workforce*", which participant E6 expressed in terms of "achieving internal customer satisfaction". For an organisation that has demanding external customers (whether government, service users or shareholders) with complex and competing needs, there was, perhaps a risk in SEC that internal customers would be overlooked. This may explain why one participant identified a role of the leader in *liaison / representation*, which he interpreted specifically in terms of a mediating role between those below him in the organisation hierarchy and those above. As he explained,

"[The leader] should transmit the requirements of the work team and the staff to the supreme leadership and decision-makers such as the Board of Directors" (E5).

Thus, in this bureaucratic organisation, the leader was seen by this employee as a vital link in the chain of communication, with a role of advocating for his subordinates and serving their interests.

To summarize, the leader's roles in SEC were perceived primarily in terms of setting a vision and objectives, and planning strategies for their achievement. Some saw him as responsible for actually achieving objectives, including making profit, ensuring satisfactory customer service, and promoting the needs of employees, but without interfering in subordinates' daily duties.

#### **4.3.3 Personality Traits and Behaviours**

In SEC, the same two sub-categories as in NWC were interpreted, i.e. *Personality* and *Behaviour/Skills*. The former generated four codes: *humility*, *self-confidence*, *ability to influence*, and *integrity*. In the Behaviour/skills sub-category, five codes were assigned, namely, *decision-making*, *knowledge*, *interpersonal skills*, *vision* and *problem-solving*.

In terms of *personality*, two employees expected a leader to possess *humility*, but one of these suggested this should be combined with *self-confidence* (E3), an attribute also mentioned by participant M1, although neither participant elaborated. As regards the *ability to influence*, participant E1 listed "the ability to influence and inspire others" while one of his colleagues summarized this trait in the single word, "persuasiveness" (E2). It was also suggested that an effective leader would be a role model, influencing others by example.

"He also has to set the example for other subordinates" (M2).

The most frequently mentioned personality trait, however, was *integrity*, which was interpreted in terms of two characteristics, honesty and fairness. Regarding honesty,

participant E4 argued that “an effective leader should be trustworthy”, while his colleague E5 expected a leader should be “honest and transparent”. Integrity was interpreted in terms of fairness and justice by three participants, who considered that this quality would be demonstrated in “strict neutrality” (E3) and being “impartial with everybody” (M1) so “everyone feels treated justly” (E2).

As in NWC, one of the main attributes expected of a leader, in the *Behaviour/skills* sub-category, was competence in *decision-making*, which was highlighted by four participants, including both employees and managers. While the two employees who referred to this characteristic simply mentioned (in identical terms), “ability to make decisions” (E5, E6), and one of the managers highlighted that the leader “should be a clear decision maker” (M1), the other manager associated this ability with the leader’s “courage” (M2). In an organisation balancing competing demands, some decisions are likely to be unpopular with one or other stakeholder group, requiring courage on the leader’s part to uphold what he felt to be the correct course of action.

Three qualities, “*knowledge* in the field of work” (E4), “a clear *vision*” (E1) and *problem-solving* ability, were each mentioned by only one respondent and were isolated, briefly expressed perceptions, which will not be discussed here.

Of more importance, however, are the most frequent responses under *Behaviour/skills*, in SEC, clustered under the general heading of *interpersonal skills*, interpreted primarily as communication skills (including “the ability to communicate socially”, E2) and being “a good listener” (E4, M1). One of the managers in SEC associated the latter attribute with open-mindedness, suggesting that “He [the leader] needs to be a good listener to be able to accommodate all points of view” (M2).

To summarize, similarly to NWC, participants in SEC noted a number of personality attributes associated with effective leaders, including *humility*, *self-confidence*, *ability*

*to influence others*, and being a *role model*, but above all, *integrity*, interpreted as honesty and fairness. The most frequently mentioned leadership behaviours and skills were *decision-making*, and *interpersonal skills*.

#### **4.3.4 Leadership Style**

In SEC, as in NWC, participants talked about the *ideal* leadership style for utilities companies, and their perceptions of the *actual* leadership style employed in the organisation. The former yielded five codes: *harmony*, *teamwork*, *flexibility*, *developing people*, and *reward and punishment*. The actual leadership style was expressed in five codes: *autocratic*, *directive*, *inconsistent*, *unfair*, and *consistent with norms*.

The notion of *harmony* in the workplace was expressed by an employee as a need for “a pattern based on friendship” (E6), while one of the managers expressed it in terms of “mutual respect” (M2) which he thought would enable subordinates to be encouraged and to accept guidance and orders from superiors. It was also suggested by one employee that the organisation needed *teamwork*, as opposed to centralized decision-making. He noted,

“The right and good style for the business is supposed to be a pattern that admits participating opinions and works on the development of procedures as a team” (E5).

It was suggested by one participant that the ideal leadership style should have *flexibility*; “The organisation still needs better leaders to be more flexible with the employees” (E3), which he thought would be more conducive to meeting customer requirements.

There were, moreover, suggestions regarding the approach used to ensure employees worked in accordance with organisation requirements. Rather than a directive or

autocratic approach (addressed below), two employees thought the approach should be based on “coaching” (E1) and *developing people*. In this respect, participant E2 argued that

“The pattern should be directed to building and equipping people and developing their abilities to accomplish more tasks or to carry out the same tasks [better]”.

The last code under the “ideal” view of leadership style was the suggestion by two employees, participants E4 and E6, that the organisation would benefit from a leadership style “based on the principle of *reward and punishment*”. What they meant by this is best appreciated with reference to certain perceptions of inconsistency in the actual leadership style (see below). They meant a clear set of rules and principles applicable to all and consistently applied, so that everyone would know the consequences, favourable or otherwise, linked to work standards and behaviours, and that rewards or sanctions would be meted out fairly, rather than being at the discretion or whim of an individual leader, who might use them arbitrarily, swayed by personal considerations.

In practice, however, when it came to describing the *actual* leadership style prevailing in the organisation, all but one described it as inappropriate because of the arbitrary exercise of absolute power by *autocratic* leaders. The following are examples of the frequent responses reflecting this perception:

“There is still a practice of domination from the leaders to impose their opinions ...” (E4).

“It is a central pattern, that depends on one person who is the leader that commands and forbids, who also believes that he is the only one responsible for achieving goals” (E5).



Several other participants, including one of the managers, similarly commented on the use of “absolute power ... unilateral decisions” (E3). Not only did this cause “grumbling and dissatisfaction” (E2), but according to two employees it had actually caused some skilled and experienced workers to leave the organisation. The current leadership style, moreover, was characterized as *directive*, based on “giving guidance, instructions and indoctrination” (E1), rather than “inspiring and coaching the subordinates” to perform their duties.

A complaint by several participants concerned *inconsistency* and bias in the application of rules and policies, and in the distribution of outcomes. These concerns are reflected in the following excerpts:

“It [leadership style] does not follow a specific manual of policies and procedures and stick to it ... each leader has his own policy according to his vision, experience and culture” (E4).

“I’m not satisfied ... because of the ambiguity in the deployment of policies and procedures, and individual judgments and favouritism towards some people” (E6).

Such comments might at first appear surprising in a bureaucratic, hierarchical organisation which is ostensibly governed by a set of procedural rules. The apparent propensity of leaders to disregard such rules and rely on their own, possibly biased, discretion might be explained by another participant’s perception on this matter.

“No, I’m not satisfied ... because of interests in some decisions and ineffectiveness in some other sections. Also, using Wasta and nepotism in most of the decisions such as hiring, annual evaluation, and promotions” (M1).

In this comment, the manager refers to specific unfair practices related to culture, which will be discussed in the next chapter. The same manager, however, elaborated on the involvement of “*personal considerations*” as a reason for perceived

inconsistencies, and argued that when leaders allow their judgement to be influenced by such matters, “it can be exploited by some people who are close to the leader” (M1).

Despite the above criticisms, one manager thought the prevailing leadership style was appropriate in cultural terms because it was “appropriate to the social composition of our society and of course the *norms*”, although even he described it as satisfactory only “to some extent” because he considered that “we come across some obstacles that prevent the implementation of all improvements” (M2).

To summarize, participants thought an ideal leadership style would promote friendly and harmonious relations in the organisation, encourage teamwork, be flexible, pay attention to developing employees’ capabilities, and apply reward and punishment fairly and consistently. In practice, however, they saw the current leadership style as autocratic, directive, inconsistent and influenced by personal considerations, although one participant suggested it was in conformity with social norms.

#### **4.3.5 Decision-making**

Responses from participants in SEC related to the decision-making category encompassed the same five codes generated by the responses in case 1, NWC, presented earlier, namely, *bias*, *objectivity*, *participation*, *autocracy* and *pseudo-participation*.

Two of the employees in SEC expressed wholly negative perceptions about the prevalence of *bias* in decision-making. Both attributed this tendency to the impact of external pressure. For example, E2 commented:

“Decisions are often based on biased influential force .... Most of the decisions made are not neutral, but are influenced by external pressures or *corruption* within the organisation”.

His colleague made a similar point, elaborating slightly to indicate the nature or target of the biased decisions, and to assert his view of the harm this posed to the organisation:

“The decisions of the supervisor in fact are not free of external pressures. They are often biased to a person or a specific location, and this undoubtedly does not serve the organisation, either in the short or long term” (E5).

By bias towards a location, the employee meant decisions on which locations would be the target of projects or receive new services, given that in some rural areas, the electricity infrastructure is still undeveloped, as a legacy of the past history of separate regional companies and different levels of investment. Such regional bias in decision-making is discussed further in Chapter Five (sections 5.1.5, 5.2.5 and 5.3.5) on the influence of regional affiliation as a cultural factor affecting the exercise of leadership.

In contrast to these two employees, other participants perceived at least some degree of *objectivity* in decision-making, but only one stated that most decisions are made “for the organisation’s interest and seeking to achieve its goals” (E4).

Other participants, including all three of the managers interviewed, were more ambivalent. Although they thought most decisions were made objectively, “directed towards the organisation’s interests” (E1), “often made fairly and objectively” (E6) and “for specific practical purposes in keeping with the professional agenda of the organisation” (M2), they all perceived areas where subjectivity and bias impaired decision-making. In this respect, one manager distinguished between technical matters that were decided on purely objective criteria, and those where personal interests intervened:

“Yes, technical decisions are made for specific practical objectives that are free from bias and aim to serve the best interest of the workplace. As for administrative decisions, they are largely dependent on personal interests and favouritism towards close people...” (M3).

This comment is in keeping with the assumption that, in production companies, leaders' decisions are to some degree constrained by technical considerations. Outside the technical sphere, however, it seemed that other considerations prevailed.

It was generally agreed among the participants that biased decisions were made to serve "vested interests" (E3), or "as a compliment to someone" (E6). Participants did not specify who these "someones" were, but as indicated earlier, a variety of groups and individuals had interests in the activities and outcomes of SEC. The government needed to preserve its visibility as a distributor of resources, shareholders wanted high dividends, and ordinary citizens wanted improved availability and reliability of service. Leaders, caught between these competing pressures, might be swayed by those who had power over them, personally or professionally. Chapter 5 explores in more detail the cultural forces that created and perpetuated the scope and incentive for such behaviour.

As for the nature (locus) of decision-making in the organisation, three interviewees (two of them managers) attested to an element of bottom-up decision-making, with employee *participation* specifically in technical decisions or those specifically related to their interest:

"Decisions are usually cooked at the lower levels and then raised to the higher leadership to be officially announced" (E4).

M3 described consultations taking place at group or individual levels in order to gain insight into subordinates' perceptions, while M2 asserted that "these contributions are then studied and assessed before finally being included in the decision-making process".

The majority of the employees interviewed, however, had the opposite perception, that *autocracy* prevailed in decision-making; they were convinced that subordinates were

not allowed to participate, and that decision-making was centralized at top level, and the outcome imposed on subordinates. E1 in particular offered an interesting rationale for what he saw as the prevalence of decision-making “behind closed doors”; he believed it was so leaders could not be held accountable for their decisions in the event of adverse outcomes:

“These decisions normally are centralized and trying to get rid of the risk and attribute the failure of these decisions to the others or even to the environment, nature or the circumstances” (E1).

As in the case of NWC, discussed earlier, there were also some suggestions of *pseudo-participation*. Whilst E2 claimed that mechanisms were in place to solicit the views of subordinates (consistent with M2 and M3, quoted above), M1 cast doubt on the value of these exercises, claiming that “they [subordinates] are being deluded that they are participating”.

Thus, the scenario in SEC was of conflicting perceptions regarding decision-making. The general consensus was that, while technical decisions were made objectively, bias resulting from external pressure affected many administrative decisions. Moreover, while a few participants claimed to be aware of or benefit from opportunities for participation in decision making, the more widely held perception was that subordinates are excluded from most decisions, and simply expected to implement what was decided at senior level.

#### **4.3.6 Superior-Subordinate Relationship**

Discussion of superior-subordinate relationships in SEC yielded six codes: *dignity (positive)*, *dignity (negative)*, *trust*, *loyalty*, *favouritism* and *laxity*, although only the first two of these covered substantial clusters of responses.

The most frequently occurring code was *dignity (positive)*, with five participants claiming a general prevalence of polite, respectful relations in the workplace and associating this behaviour with cultural and religious values. The following extracts are representative of these views.

“Yes, staff are treated politely and with respect. This is a reflection of the society's culture which is derived from the teachings of Islam .... Kindness here is a kind of respect, and this is the nature of relations between superior and subordinate” (E5).

“Yes, all subordinates are appreciated and dealt with politely and respectfully according to the teachings of Islam and in keeping with the social norms. Even when the boss decides to discipline someone, this is done while taking into account the staff member's dignity ...” (M2).

“Yes, in order for the leader to gain respect and appreciation, he needs to show the same for his subordinates. It is important to establish mutual respect and ensure the dignity of both parties is preserved. This is heavily stressed in Islamic values and social norms” (M3).

However, two participants referred to the possibility of hypocrisy in such relations, one of them referring to “courtesy and compliment” (M1) which in Saudi usage tends to refer to the use of social courtesies for ulterior motives, as in the case of *wasta*, discussed in the next chapter (sections 5.1.9, 5.2.9 and 5.3.9). The participants concerned held the view that in reality, superior-subordinate relations are not appreciative and respectful. This view, reflected in the code, *dignity (negative)* was expressed in comments by four participants, as in the following examples:

“No, the supervisor does not do the minimum to gain employees' satisfaction and loyalty by respecting them. He wants the subordinates to work like robots or machines, without any sense of their feelings” (E3).

“No, staff are not treated with esteem, politeness, dignity and respect. In addition, it is difficult to deal with administrative leadership because they have a sense of superiority and condescension towards subordinates” (E6).

“No, the supervisor treats all subordinates without dignity, respect and politeness. The supervisor sees himself as always right; and he thinks he

knows it all, and he considers himself the judge and jury. In this situation, employees are expected to show their loyalty and express their love towards the leaders as a part of their duties in workplace” (M1).

The general view was that superior-subordinate relations had the potential to affect the exercise of leadership and the achievement of organisation objectives for good or ill. Positive impact, for example, was said to be associated with *trust* or “transparency” (E4) between the parties, and it was suggested that courteous, respectful relationships can be “an inspiration factor and one of the reasons for *loyalty* to the organisation” (E5). In contrast, however, concerns were expressed regarding the harm that could potentially accrue as a result of unhealthy relationships. One concern in this respect was with *favouritism*, given that “the leader as a human being has a natural inclination towards some employees” (E2), leading to the risk that “the personal relationship overrides the business interest” (E1).

A harmful outcome of such a situation, raised by two participants, was *laxity*, when the superior allows a favoured subordinate to shirk his duties or offer poor-quality performance:

“The negative impact comes, for example, when there may be errors and negatives that may be overlooked by virtue of the relationship between superior and subordinate” (E4).

“To a great extent, the relationship has a negative impact ... because mistakes are overlooked and not addressed ... There is no professional etiquette governing how the superior deals with subordinate because of the close relationship between them” (M2).

To summarize, superior-subordinate relations in SEC were perceived by some participants as polite and respectful, maintaining the dignity of the individuals concerned; however, others had a very different view, perceiving superiors as autocratic and lacking in feeling for subordinates. The perception was that lack of

dignity and appreciation bred discontent, but even cordial relations, if governed by favouritism or personal interest, could have negative impacts.

#### **4.4 Case 3: Saudi Telecommunications Company (STC)**

STC is an example of a “hybrid” type of company prevalent in Saudi Arabia, where, despite ostensible “privatization”, the government retains a substantial ownership share – 80%, in the case of STC. This company is a mainstay of the Saudi economy, and a major source of revenue to the government. Until relatively recently, STC had a monopoly of all telecommunications services in the Kingdom. Now, however, certain services, particularly mobile telephony, have been opened up to competition. There are currently two competitors, Mobily and Zain, both foreign owned, and others may be expected to follow, subject to government approval. This means that, like SEC, STC faces twin pressures from the government and the market. There are also strong technical pressures, due to the rapid pace of technological developments in the telecommunications sector, driving companies such as STC to strive to keep pace with demand for the latest devices and features.

##### **4.4.1 Conceptualization and Understanding of Leadership**

Opinions expressed in STC regarding the conceptualization and perception of leadership yielded six codes: *objectives and vision*, *working through others*, *teamwork*, *resource use*, *leadership vs. management*, and *perception*. As in NWC and SEC, the codes reflect ideas about the nature of leadership, and insights about practices, which will be interpreted in Chapter Six.

Participants in STC, like their counterparts in the other organisations, saw leadership in terms of setting and achieving *objectives* and *vision*. This view was expressed by participant E6, for example, when he said,

“The concept of leadership is guiding the team to draw strategies and achieve the objectives of the organisation”



One of the managers, however, provided a more elaborate explanation, in which he expanded on the nature or purpose of the objectives or vision set in a way that reflected the organisation's particular concerns and emphasized the leader's future-oriented thinking:

“The leadership concept is a clear vision and strategy for the organisation that serves the employees and customers, and improves the organisation, as well as knowing about future plans and realizing the competition in business” (M1).

This comment is interesting, both for its attention to employees and customers, and for its reference to competition, which as noted above, is one of the main pressures now facing STC. Indeed, the reference to “future plans” could also be related to competitive pressure, since, if the government decides to allow further entries into the mobile segment, or to deregulate other segments, this could have significant implications for STC's profits and position within the industry.

Three participants emphasized that leaders achieved their objectives by *working through others*. While two of these, E2 and E4, simply referred to the ability to “manage others”, one manager expressed a unique, personal, perspective when he emphasized the emotional relationship that, in his view, underpinned the ability to influence others:

“Leadership is a kind of loving management that involves ... attaining the objectives through others with love and content” (M2).

Two participants characterized the leader's relationship with others in terms of *teamwork*, although they did not elaborate; participant E6 simply spoke of “guiding the team”, while M3 referred to “skills to achieve specific goals through teamwork”.

Whilst none of the participants in STC drew attention to specific activities associated with leadership, one expressed the view that it entailed responsibility for *resource use*, that is,

“The use of all available human resources and technical tools and then employing them properly” (E3).

As in the other two organisations, the dualism, *leadership vs. management* was raised, but only by two participants. One of these, participant E6, simply noted a tendency among subordinates to “confuse the concept of leadership with management”. However, one of his colleagues, uniquely in all the comments on this issue, went beyond noting the existence of confusion, or asserting that there was (or should be) a distinction between the concepts, but actually tried to distinguish between them. In his view,

“The leadership concept is doing the right things - not doing things right, without being bound by the instructions. Leadership is broader and more comprehensive than management” (E1).

Such a perception of leadership as somewhat bold and creative did not, however, appear to be widely held or practised in the organisation, judging by the comments made in discussion of the *perception* and understanding of leadership held by bosses and subordinates. In this respect, a widely held view among participants in STC (including, interestingly, two of the managers) was that bosses lacked a clear understanding of leadership, and did not practise it properly,

“In general, few bosses, in this organisation, perceive and practise leadership” (M2).

“They all take leadership as an absolute power to control the business” (E2).

The latter view touches on what is becoming a familiar theme: the exercise of an autocratic leadership style. This theme, which is traceable in all three organisations, with echoes in several strands of the analysis, is discussed further in Chapter Six.

There were, however, exceptions to such criticisms. One employee, for example, asserted that

“The boss perceives well the concept and the meaning of leadership. This is reflected in his actions with others, illustrated by good communication and listening skills and decision-making” (E5).

Here, the participant touches on the roles and characteristics of a good leader, addressed in more detail in the next two sub-sections. Other participants, however, simply confined themselves to a careful statement that “I think that the boss understands well the concept of leadership and acceptably exercises it” (E6).

Whilst there were differences of opinion on whether bosses understand leadership, there was almost complete consensus that subordinates do not, the exception being M1, who thought that subordinates do understand it because “they are the new generation and well-educated”. The prevailing view, however, was that subordinates had no understanding of or interest in leadership, because “it is not their remit” (E1) or they “do not want to be committed” (E3) as they would rather be free of responsibility in order to “attain personal goals” (E3). Even if, in rare cases, employees showed leadership qualities, they were “limited by the policies and procedures in place at the organisation and performing the tasks and responsibilities entrusted to them” (E5); thus, they “do not have the chance” (M2) to show their understanding or ability of leadership.

In summary, the conceptualization of leadership in STC focused on achieving objectives through others, which might involve directing a team, and deploying human

and material resources. There was a perception, however, that leadership was conflated with management, and sometimes confused with autocratic control, and it was generally agreed that subordinates had little concern with notions of leadership, attributed in part to the limited opportunities afforded to them.

#### **4.4.2 Leadership Roles**

Eight codes emerged from analysis of participants' views of leadership roles. They were: *set objectives*, *set strategy*, *achieve objectives*, *make profits*, *non-interference*, *customer satisfaction*, *satisfy workforce*, and *problem-solving*.

Perhaps surprisingly, only one participant, a manager, saw a role for the leader in *setting the organisation's objectives*, and beyond the words "setting clear objectives" (M1) he did not elaborate. However, he also thought that a leader should *set a strategy* for achieving the objectives. In this view, he was joined by participant E6, and by a fellow manager, M3, who commented

"[The leader's role is] directing the facility on the right track, and the development of its strategy both short-term and long-term"

More participants, however, perceived the leader as responsible for *achieving objectives*. As participant E1 commented,

"In my opinion, the leader's role in Saudi utilities organisations is achieving the goals of the organisation"

Participant E4 used almost exactly the same words. Two other participants expressed the same idea, albeit with differences in detail. E2 highlighted the leader's role of achieving goals through others when he referred to managing employees properly in such a way as to achieve objectives. In the view of participant E3, the leader had to "determine what is needed to achieve the objectives".

A specific objective for which the leader was responsible, in the view of two managers, was to *make profit*. Participant M1 argued, “His roles should include, as well, increasing revenue”, while participant M2 suggested the leader’s role should include “considering the organisation's profits”. Although this role was mentioned by only two participants, it reflects an important characteristic of STC which, as noted previously, is highly profit-oriented, charges high prices for its services and is a major contributor to the Saudi economy. This profit orientation, however, may be increasingly challenged as STC faces more competition in the market.

Just one participant expressed the idea of *non-interference*. He first did so indirectly, in the same way as one of his counterparts in SEC, by indicating his view of what the leader’s role “should be limited to”, although he went on to clarify his meaning, arguing that “the leader should not interfere with the daily business” (E5).

However, the most frequently occurring code in STC, raised by four of the six employees interviewed, as well as one of the managers, was *customer satisfaction*, through ensuring the provision of an appropriate level of service. Examples of comments in this regard were the following:

“The leader’s role ... is attaining customer satisfaction by providing a good quality of service” (E1).

“[One of] the leader’s roles [is] taking decisions that satisfy ... the customers” (E3).

Participant E4 expressed himself in exactly the same terms as E1. Further emphasis on this point was placed by participant M2, who noted that the service quality assurance should be “continuous”. However, only one participant, E5, specified a particular activity constituting part of the leader’s customer satisfaction role, namely, ensuring and expediting after-sales services. This emphasis on customers and their satisfaction

can be seen as a response to the pressures, noted earlier, of competition in the sector, and technological developments that drive customer demand for new products, as a distinctive feature of the telecommunications industry.

While five participants drew attention to the leader's role in attaining customer satisfaction, only one raised the issue of "*satisfying workforce*"; this was participant E3, who merely mentioned "satisfy employees" in passing, when also talking about customer satisfaction. The inference might be drawn that in STC, as a competitive, profits-oriented company, the satisfaction of employees was subordinate to the imperative to meet customer demand.

The last role suggested for a leader in this organisation was *problem-solving*, mentioned by just one employee, who argued that a leader should "resolve obstacles and overcome difficulties" (E6).

Overall, the most distinctive feature of comments about leadership roles made by participants in STC was the emphasis on attaining customer satisfaction, although leaders were also expected to set strategy and achieve objectives, including making profits. Other roles, including setting objectives, non-interference, satisfying the workforce and problem-solving were mentioned by only one person each. In other words, although eight leadership roles were suggested in STC, there was only substantial consensus on three of them, three that seem to reflect the particular pressures facing STC as a profit-oriented company in a rapidly – developing and increasingly competitive sector.

#### **4.4.3 Personality Traits and Behaviours**

Participants' views on the attributes expected of an effective leader were, as in the other two case organisations, grouped under the two sub-category headings,

*Personality*, and *Behaviours / skills*. The former yielded three codes: *ability to influence*, *role model* and *integrity*, while the latter attributes were grouped into five codes: *decision-making*, *knowledge*, *interpersonal skills*, *vision* and *problem-solving*.

With regard to *personality* traits, two traits, the *ability to influence others* and being a *role model*, were each mentioned by a single respondent. Participant E2 mentioned the ability to influence, which he interpreted in terms of persuasiveness, as the “ability to include and convince others”, while participant E5 credited an effective leader with “being a role model for others”.

However, in this organisation, the most frequently mentioned personality trait associated with effective leaders was *integrity*. One employee expressed this in terms of honesty, which he argued came “on top of all” (E1), while others viewed integrity in terms of fairness; it was said a leader should be “fair with team members” (E3) and “fair to everybody” (M1).

In the sub-category of *Behaviour/skills*, the largest concentration of responses was in relation to *decision-making*, mentioned by six out of the nine participants: four of the six employees and two of the three managers. These responses made decision-making the largest cluster in the behaviour/skills category not only for STC, but across all three case organisations. The majority of these responses were expressed briefly and in simple terms, such as “take right decisions” (E2), “be a decision-maker” (E4) and “ability to make decisions” (E5). Participant M1, however, highlighted the importance of speed in decision-making. Participant M3 saw “the ability to make the right decision” as the only characteristic he associated with an effective leader, standing out in this respect from other participants who listed several attributes, and suggesting a single-minded focus on this one behaviour.

An effective leader was also expected to have a good level of *knowledge*. While one participant simply spoke in general terms of “knowledge and erudition” (E6), his colleague, participant E3, referred more specifically to “knowledge of the nature of the work”. The same participant suggested that *problem-solving* ability would also characterize an effective leader. Perhaps surprisingly, only three participants in this organisation highlighted the leader’s *interpersonal skills*. In this respect, one employee focused on the ability “to create and work with the team” (E4), while another mentioned “being a good listener to others” (E5), while one of the managers, distinctively, talked of “providing love in the workplace, for the work itself, colleagues and customers” (M2). A further attribute, mentioned by only one participant, was skill in problem-solving.

Interestingly, the largest cluster of responses, after decision-making, was for *vision* – which was mentioned only once in NWC and not at all in SEC. In STC, however, possibly reflecting the level of change and innovation in the telecommunications sector, several employees and managers called attention to the ability to create a vision as a key attribute of effective leaders. This vision should be “clear” (E2) and “insightful” (E6) while participant M1 linked it with “the organisation’s strategy”.

Thus, overall, participants in STC associated effective leadership with qualities of *influence* or persuasiveness, being a *role model* and, above all, *integrity*, manifested in honesty and fairness. They expected a good leader to be skilled in *decision-making*, to have *knowledge*, *interpersonal skills* and *problem-solving ability*, and to have a clear *vision* for the organisation.



#### 4.4.4 Leadership Style

As in NWC and SEC, discussions in STC revealed tensions between perceived “ideal” and “actual” leadership styles. Both categories contained diverse responses, with each code reflected by only one or two participants. With regard to the “*ideal*” leadership style, which appeared to contain transformative element, six codes were identified: *harmony*, *democratic participation*, *developing people*, *reward and punishment*, *result-oriented* and *bravery*. Comments on the *actual* leadership style prevailing, reflecting a more traditional view of authority, where the leader held considerable reward power, exercised in a somewhat arbitrary way, generated five codes: *autocratic*, *lack of motivation*, *lack of transparency*, *negative impacts*, and *participation*.

With regard to the *ideal* leadership style, one participant voiced his expectation that it should be based on *harmony* and considerate relationships: “one that includes and embraces the subordinates, and respects their dignity” (E2). In the eyes of one of the managers, moreover, the leadership style should encompass *democratic participation* in decision-making, although he did not think this was appropriate in every situation:

“Sometimes there is a decision that should be taken without referring to the employees, while other times, the use of democracy is needed, especially when there is a need for majority consent, for the purpose of loyalty and satisfaction” (M2).

Both the above codes could be interpreted as implying a recognition of employees as internal customers of the organisation, whose satisfaction should be considered and pursued. This idea was expressed explicitly by another manager, who argued that this perspective should be reflected in a concern for *developing people*.

“[The organisation] should not overlook the internal customers (employees) and should pay more attention to them by conducting training and developing their skills” (M3).

A suggestion made by one of the employees was that the appropriate leadership style would be one based on *reward and punishment* – a suggestion also made by employees in SEC, and as in the previous case, the context of the discussion indicated that the employee referred to a consistent system in which everyone knew their rights and responsibilities and were treated accordingly: a “transparent style” (E3).

In the view of two participants, the important concern was that the leadership style adopted should be *results-oriented*, that is, tailored to ensure the fulfilment of organisation objectives and the satisfaction of clients. The following excerpts reflect their views:

“We need a style that concentrates on achieving the organisation’s objectives using all available resources in a proper way” (E4).

“I think the right and good style of leadership for the business in the organisation is an aggressive, result-oriented style, because we are a commercial firm that is looking for higher revenue” (M1).

The last code identified in discussions of the ideal leadership style was *bravery*, a code reflecting one employee’s attempt to describe an approach that was confident, outward-looking and prepared to take risks in order to promote the ultimate success of the organisation. He advocated “bravery in decision-making, taking the lead, and adventure sometimes” (E5).

In general, however, the above aspirations were perceived not to be met in the *actual* leadership style in the organisation, with which the majority of participants expressed dissatisfaction. One manager, for example, criticized the prevailing leadership style as *autocratic*, although he was the only member of STC who raised this concern, noting a tendency towards the wielding of “absolute power” (M2).

A complaint made by one employee concerned a *lack of motivation*, due to acceptance of slackness, which in the view of the respondent was “killing talents and skills” (E6).

The main concern raised in STC, however, was of *lack of transparency*, such that there appeared to be no clear, agreed and generally known criteria for making decisions on the outcomes awarded to employees. The following quotations capture this view:

“The style used by the supervisor ... is cloudy, it really is filled with vagueness and ambiguity” (E3).

“There are no clear objectives ... no clear career path or job description, no declared upgrading system that is known for everyone” (E4).

Such ambiguity was thought to leave the door open for the influence of favouritism based on “personal whims” (E5) and “personal relationships” (M1).

In the eyes of one employee, these weaknesses of leadership style had “*negative impacts*” on work performance and hence, in turn, on “subscribers’ and shareholders’ interests” (E1).

In contrast to such criticisms, however, there was one employee who (despite his earlier complaints of lack of transparency) declared himself satisfied “to some extent” with leadership in the organisation, because of a degree of employee *participation*. As he explained,

“We, as subordinates, have some delegation and authority, and we participate in setting our department’s objectives” (E3).

If this was the case, it may help to explain why the code, *autocratic*, appeared only once in STC, in sharp contrast to the other two organisations.

To summarize, participants in STC expressed varied perceptions of the ideal leadership style for the organisation, including harmony, democratic participation, developing people, consistent and transparent use of reward and punishment, a results-oriented focus, and bravery in taking decisions, and ever risks. The actual leadership style attracted diverse perceptions, with one participant viewing it as autocratic, whereas

another commended the level of employee participation. The one concern on which there was a substantial concentration of opinion, however, was a lack of transparency, leading to bias in the exercise of personal considerations.

#### **4.4.5 Decision-making**

As with the other two cases, perceptions of decision-making in STC clustered around the five codes: *bias*, *objectivity*, *participation*, *autocracy* and *pseudo-participation*.

As regards bias versus objectivity in decision-making, perceptions in STC were overwhelmingly negative; of the nine participants (six employees and three managers), seven (five employees and two managers) emphasized the prevalence of *bias* in decision-making. Superiors were said to make decisions “for personal objectives” (E1), “to serve a particular person, or the inclination by the leader to serve a particular point of view impacted by external pressure” (E6). While there was “something out of alignment” (E5), contrasting explanations were offered for the source of the problem. One manager was unequivocal in his assertion that “*corruption* is eating away at the body of the organisation, due to either the absence of conscience or external intervention” (M3).

In the view of two other participants, however, the explanation was not so simple; they identified problems internal to the organisation that allowed and perpetuated bias in decision-making; a lack of transparency and, at deeper level, a lack of clarity in the organisation’s objectives:

“The decisions in this organisation are not taken based on clear criteria that are known to all employees” (E3).

“Since the organisation's objectives are not clear, and are set in a nonprofessional way, as well as related to certain people, all decisions are not objectively taken ...” (E4).

Such perceived lack of clarity and objectivity may reflect the unusual hybrid position of STC, noted earlier, as a “privatized”, supposedly market-oriented company, yet with 80% government ownership, suggesting the possibility of pressure from different interest groups.

Indeed, only one participant, M1, made an explicit and unqualified assertion of objectivity in his superior’s decisions, claiming that “external pressure has no influence on the superior because he prioritizes achieving the goals” (M1).

Perceptions regarding the opportunity for subordinates’ *participation* in decision-making were similarly predominantly negative. Only three interviewees thought a participatory approach was adopted in the organisation. One, E1, described how his superior commonly discussed the scope of the work to be done, including advantages and potential problems related to the proposed course of action, then listened to the employees’ views. M1 also had a positive view of the opportunity for involvement, suggesting that his superior “considers the subordinates as a team and involves them to participate in decision-making”.

The majority view, however, was that decision-making was autocratic, with subordinates excluded. Both M2 and M3 described this top-down process, whereby decisions are taken at senior level and imposed on subordinates. As M3 explained:

“It is not allowed for subordinates to participate in decision-making, because developing the objectives and decision-making are put from top to bottom, so the decision-making stems from the top, not the base” (M3).

It is noticeable that M3 describes the decision-making process, but does not offer a rationale for it. In this respect, an interesting insight is afforded by one of the employees interviewed, who perceived the prevalent approach to decision-making as the outcome of a certain organisational culture or leadership mind-set:

“It is the culture of managers and leaders that they are the decision-makers, and listening to the opinions of subordinates is taken as a courtesy, so failure to let subordinates participate in making decisions is a result [of the thinking of their leaders], not a cause [of it].” (E5).

This interviewee’s reference to listening to employees being treated as a “courtesy”, meaning a token exercise for the appearance of politeness, again points to the existence of *pseudo-participation*, which goes no deeper than a formal exercise and has no real effect on the decisions made. The significance of this, in cultural terms, will be highlighted in Chapter Six.

To summarize, employees and managers in STC, with few exceptions, expressed negative perceptions of both the objectivity of decision-making and the opportunity for participation. Whereas, in the case of bias, external influences were cited as the main cause, organisational factors were also said to contribute. Moreover, in the view of one respondent, the culture surrounding leadership thinking in the organisation explained the tendency to exclude subordinates or give little weight to their views.

#### **4.4.6 Superior-Subordinate Relationship**

In STC, five codes were generated from discussion of superior-subordinate relationships and their impact on the practice of leadership: *dignity (positive)*, *dignity (negative)*, *productivity*, *favouritism*, and *work ethics*.

As in the other two organisations, the most frequently occurring codes – indeed, the only ones represented by more than two participants, were *dignity (positive)* and *dignity (negative)* reflecting between them conflicting perceptions about the nature of day-to-day relationships between bosses and employees in the workplace. On the positive side, three employees and two managers expressed the view that relations in the organisation were generally harmonious, respectful, and mindful of the dignity of

all parties, and this was said to be a reflection of social norms and religious influence.

For example,

“Yes, subordinates are treated with politeness, appreciation and respect for their dignity, and that is an advantage of the national culture, and derived from the Islamic religion and customs and traditions of the society. This ... builds a comfortable working environment” (E6).

“Yes, due to the religious upbringing of the Saudi community, as well as being a tribal society, there is a mutual respect between superior and subordinate” (M3).

Another manager, similarly attesting to the courtesy and consideration shown to subordinates by his superior, elaborated on behaviours that reflected the superior’s humanitarian concern for the employees:

“He is very sensitive to our feelings. For example, he always asks about our families and visits or calls anyone in hospital. Also it is common to see the superior with the subordinates at social events” (M1).

Nevertheless, one employee suggested that with some superiors, everyday courtesies might be merely superficial, intended to avoid overt conflict, and did not necessarily reflect genuine concern and respect:

“This bilateral dealing does not mean that subordinates will get all their rights; it is sometimes used as a sort of ‘anger absorption’” (E3).

Moreover, there were four respondents who completely rejected the idea that subordinates are appreciated and treated with respect, depicted instead a culture of blame and autocratic, high-handed behaviour of superiors towards subordinates (*dignity – negative*):

“The blame is the everyday dealing” (E1).

“No ... He always does not care about my feelings because he is rigid and tough by nature and takes leadership as dominance.” (E2).

“It really depends on the supervisor, but there is a prevalent situation that humanitarian feeling towards the subordinates is weak. They are not treated with dignity ...” (M2).

As an example, one participant referred to a superior’s practice of rebuking employees in public, which the employee in question considered to be contrary to Islamic standards of respectful behaviour.

There was general agreement in the organisation that differences in the nature of superior-subordinate relations would generate different impacts, positive or negative, on the practice of leadership. Two employees, for example, viewed good relationships between superiors and subordinates as conducive to leaders’ ability to secure employees’ *productivity*. For example, one commented,

“Productivity increases as a result of complete harmony and satisfaction between superior and subordinates” (E5).

However, one manager acknowledged the risk that close personal relationships between superior and subordinate could lead to biased, unfair decisions, due to *favouritism*.

“Leaders are humans who have a passion and a bias towards certain persons ... and so their decisions will not be free of favouritism ... Leaders should not employ personal relationships in the workplace” (M3).

In the view of one participant, however, personal relationships between superior and subordinate should not influence the practice of leadership, because such relationships should be outweighed by professional standards and *work ethics*:

“There are also work ethics that leaders are bound by, to strip them of their passions and prevent them from exploiting their personal relationships with subordinates” (E1).

To summarize, superior-subordinate relationships in STC were seen as varying according to the individual supervisor, some being considerate and respectful, others



autocratic and lacking in humanitarian concern. The former were thought to be conducive to increased productivity. A note of caution was also raised, regarding the potential for exploiting personal relations unfairly, or being swayed by favouritism, although one employee thought work ethics should prevent such behaviour.

#### **4.5 Summary**

This chapter has presented the outcomes of interviews in the three case organisations regarding the major theme, leadership. In each case, conceptualizations of leadership were explored, including perceptions of whether leadership was understood and practised by managers and employees. Leadership roles were explored, and the personality traits and behaviours expected of an effective leadership were discussed. Attention then turned to leadership style, with a distinction being made in all three organisations to the contrast between their perceived ideal style and the actual leadership style as experienced in the organisation. The last two sub-sections in each case analysis concerned specific areas of behaviour: decision making, specifically the level of objectivity and the extent of employee participation, and relationships between superiors and subordinates. The chapter has provided initial indications of both different emphases within the organisations reflecting their different ownership structure, services and profit orientation, and similarities reflecting culturally – conditioned understandings of leadership. The findings from the three cases will be compared (cross-case analysis) and discussed in the light of the literature in Chapter Six. First, however, the findings related to the second major theme. Culture, will be presented in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 5 NATIONAL CULTURE FINDINGS

### 5.1 Introduction

Following from the presentation of findings on the theme of Leadership in Chapter Four, this chapter provides an analysis of the second major theme in the data, National Culture. As before, within-case analysis is conducted for the three case organisations, NWC, SEC and STC, in turn.

With regard to culture, it is important to recall that a significant pressure on Saudi organisations has been the government's policy of localization in employment, called Saudization. In fact, as companies that began as government ministries (like STC) and wholly-owned companies (like NWC) the three case organisations were always employers of choice for Saudi nationals; providing employment under favourable conditions was one of the ways the Saudi government distributed the benefits of oil wealth. With privatization, the preferential treatment in employment given to Saudis might have been expected to change. However, the government's concern to reduce Saudi unemployment and to avoid financial losses caused by repatriation of funds by foreign employees, led to the initiation of policies to encourage and even compel large companies to employ Saudis in preference to expatriates. This is done through a system of incentives for companies that meet Saudization targets, and sanctions for those that do not. The impact of these policies has been felt in the three case-study companies, which employ predominantly Saudis, especially in managerial positions. All the participants interviewed were Saudis, brought up and socialized in Saudi culture, although some had experienced other influences through education and travel. These influences were found to be reflected in their responses to the questions about national culture and its influence on leadership.

The culture theme consists of ten categories, reflecting the general understanding of national culture, an overall assessment of its impact on leadership, and more detailed accounts of the specific cultural factors perceived as influential: Islam, social norms, tribalism, regional affiliation, *wasta*, education, technology and “other” influences. Most of these (with the exception of *wasta*, an emergent theme) had been anticipated, based on the literature, and were the subject of specific interview questions. However, the last sub-section in each case analysis contains participants’ suggestions on other factors, not included in the original research framework, which they perceived as also having an impact on leadership.

In analysing the data, a broad pattern became apparent in each organisation, which has guided the decision as to the order in which the individual cultural factors are presented in this chapter. There is an overall picture of transition, reflected in tensions and contradictions between, on the one hand, traditional cultural factors, deeply-rooted in Saudi history, and on the other, “modern” factors – education and technology – bringing influences for change. In what follows, therefore, after the sections on the conceptualization and general influence of culture, the traditional forces of Islam, social norms, tribalism, regional affiliation, and *wasta*, will be presented, followed by the more recent influences of education and technology. Like Chapter Four, this chapter is generally descriptive, the main purpose being to present and illustrate the codes and categories used in interpreting the data. Detailed discussion of patterns in the data and their relationship to the literature on the Saudi Arabia and Middle Eastern culture is deferred to Chapter Six.

## **5.2 Case 1: National Water Company (NWC)**

NWC, as a government owned, public service company, with a less commercial orientation than the other two companies, is perhaps the most traditional of the three,

and the one where culture might be expected to have a firmer hold, since it is not outweighed by profitability concerns.

### 5.2.1 Conceptualization

Conceptualizations of national culture in NWC clustered into three subcategories: *concept and components*, *sources*, and *effects*. Whilst one interviewee explained his idea of national culture figuratively, as the “fabric” of society, in general, participants defined culture in terms of the components of which they considered it to be constituted, in particular referring to *habits*, *traditions*, *customs* and *values*. For example:

“The concept of national culture is the habits acquired throughout the life, such as openness, honesty and generosity.....” (M1).

Another approach was to describe national culture in terms of taken – for granted *beliefs and attitudes* – a “number of visions, opinions, and assumptions towards specific patterns and behaviours” (E5).

A small number of participants explained what they perceived to be the *source* of this “fabric”, citing three main sources: inheritance from *predecessors / ancestors*, *religion*, and the surrounding *environment*. These ideas are illustrated in the following examples:

“[National culture is] the habits and traditions that have been acquired from the environment and from one's predecessors” (E2).

“The concept of national culture is a fabric, a large part of which is derived from religion, and based on the principle of what is “allowed and prohibited” (*halal* or *haram*), and the other part of it is derived from customs and traditions and the principle of ‘socially accepted or rejected’” (E6).

In addition, five participants commented on the impact of national culture on the individual. While one simply spoke vaguely in terms of a generalized “influence” (E1)

two employees saw culture as a controlling force that directs individuals towards specific behaviour, in particular, that which is approved in the community:

“The concept of national culture is a set of customs and values that control individuals and are reflected in societal behaviour” (E3).

“The concept of national culture relates to the outcome of the customs and traditions that should motivate individuals to engage in behaviours or actions within the community in accordance with the rules and regulations governing that community” (E4).

Two of the managers, however, noted that culture not only influences outward behaviour, but also “inform[s] individuals’ beliefs” (M2) and “makes up the thought of a person” (M3). An interesting point made by M2, moreover, is that such influence may be beneficial or harmful. The potential of national culture to affect thinking and behaviour in either positive or negative ways will emerge more clearly in the consideration of the role played by specific aspects of culture on leadership, in subsequent sections.

### **5.2.2 Effects and Involvement of Culture**

In response to a question, whether or how they thought national culture might influence the way leadership is carried out, all participants (six employees and three managers) expressed their conviction that national culture is a strong, determining influence. Their comments generated six codes: *upbringing*, *community membership*, *relationships*, *leadership style*, *decision-making* and *wasta*. However, the latter code, arising from four participants’ invocation of *wasta* to illustrate their claims regarding the pervasiveness of national cultural influences, emerged as such a strong concern in these and other responses, that it was decided to treat it as a separate category (see section 5.2.7). Here, therefore, only the first five codes will be presented.

The first code reflects the notion that a leader is inevitably influenced and shaped by his origins and *upbringing*. Two participants expressed this idea by quoting a well-known local proverb: “A man is a child of his environment” (E1, E5).

In a related but slightly different explanation, three participants focused on the leader’s *community membership*, by which they meant that an organisation leader, by virtue of his membership of a community, is tied into a web of relationships, concerns and interests that he cannot afford to ignore, so that his personal and professional roles become blurred. For example,

“The leader actually is made outside the workplace, he is part of the community and then affected by what is around him ... A leader cannot be isolated from the community because of his work. He is, therefore, subjected to the norms of the community ...” (E6).

Participant M2 made the same point, that “the leader cannot be isolated or singled out from the community because of his professional status”.

A number of participants elaborated on specific ways in which cultural influence might be manifested. Some, for example, highlighted the impact on the leader’s interactions and *relationships* with others, as expressed in the following quotations;

“... A collection of culture and knowledge-based approaches is reflected in the interaction between members of the wider community and the organisation and thus affects the leadership process” (E4).

“Indeed, culture has an effect ... in terms of the interaction between members of the community, as well as the relationship between boss and subordinates” (E5).

“There are ... social relations a leader takes into consideration in the exercise of leadership” (M3).

Three participants, additionally, noted the influence of culture on *leadership style*. Two of these indicated in identical terms that “cultural factors shape the leadership style” (E6, M2), while a third supported a similar claim by commenting;

“To prove this, it is noticeable that the style of leadership changes when a leader is replaced by another leader who has a different culture” (E2).

The other area of leadership singled out for mention as under cultural influence was *decision-making*. One manager noted that a leader’s decisions can be influenced by “the opinions of religious scholars and dignitaries, key figures in the community” (M3), while another, M1, specifically referred to decisions being taken on the bases of *wasta*, although as noted above, this factor is addressed separately in a later section.

Thus, overall, participants in NWC agreed that culture influences leadership through the impact of the leader’s upbringing and involvement in the community of which he is a member, and that this influence is reflected in a leader’s relationships with others, leadership style and decisions. The potential for such influences to be either positive or negative will emerge through the detailed consideration of individual cultural factors in later sections.

### **5.2.3 Islamic Values**

In Saudi Arabia, as the cradle of Islam, it is widely acknowledged that Islamic values pervade all aspects of life. Among all the “culture” categories, this was the one that was universally acknowledged as prevalent in Saudi life and influential on leadership. Nevertheless, this does not mean participants agreed as to the extent of its impact. The responses reveal a tension between the ideal or expected impact of Islam, and perceptions of an organisational reality in which this ideal was not always achieved. These tensions are reflected in four codes: *the right form, commitment, principles, and separation*.

Whilst the majority view inside NWC was that Islamic values have a positive effect on leadership, two participants suggested that whether such a beneficial effect was realized depended on these values being understood and implemented in *the “right”* way. The implication was that some people might misinterpret Islamic values or be lax in their observance, and in such cases, the benefits that these values were expected to bring would not be manifested. One participant commented,

“Yes, Islamic values have a positive effect on leadership roles and practices, if these values are recognized in the right form” (E6).

Taking a similar line, another employee suggested that the expected positive effects were limited in practice by “weakness in holding the right values” (E3).

As for what constitutes the “right” values or their correct form, some insights are provided by the next two codes. In the view of one participant, a proper application of Islamic values meant “a *commitment* to Shari’ah instructions, to be taken into account when exercising leadership” (M3).

Several participants listed a number of specific principles, which they considered to be enjoined by Islam, and which they thought should have a positive impact on the exercise of leadership. They included “good treatment” of others, trustworthiness / honesty, justice / fairness, sincerity, loyalty, faithfulness, integrity and impartiality. Such values, according to one participant, “are the main constituents of the leader’s culture in the Saudi society in general and not only in our organisation” (M2).

Such a view, however, was challenged by three participants, who criticized the practice among some leaders of *separation* of Islamic values from their work practices. The following quotations express their views;

“Some leaders take Islam as just religious worship” (E1).



“Although we are in an Islamic society, people can separate their Islamic values from work values” (E2).

“Islam is taken as religious practices and worship, while business is business” (E3).

Thus, responses in NWC suggest that, whilst Islam teaches many positive values that should have a beneficial impact on leaders’ decisions and actions, much depended on the leader’s own understanding of Islam. Some leaders might observe religious practices, yet fail to apply religions teachings in their work, which could result in unfairness, partiality, and inappropriate treatment of others.

#### **5.2.4 Social Norms**

All but one participant in NWC believed that social norms influence the way leadership is practised and expressed a variety of views as to why and how this occurred, and each code was represented by only one or two responses. This section comprises five codes: *pressure*, *shame*, *reputation or “face”*, *avoiding opposition*, and *professionalism*.

Two participants suggested that such behaviour occurred because social norms exerted *pressure* on the leader, so that he felt obliged to behave in a particular way. One argued, “I think there is no single leader in Saudi Arabia who can abandon the social norms. Most leaders surrender to the social pressure ...” (E1). His colleague invoked the same idea of social pressure when he cited the example of interference in a leader’s decision whether or not to terminate a subordinate’s employment:

“For example, ... the catchphrase ‘destruction of livelihoods’ is considered as a social norm as it makes it hard for the leader to fire an employee who has been identified as a liability for the company. Thus, the leader has no choice but to succumb to social customs and retain an employee of no use to the company” (E5).

One way in which such pressure is exercised in Saudi society, two participants pointed out, is through the notion of '*shame*', which proscribes certain behaviour, even though there may be no specific religious objection to the behaviour in question. One of these participants cited the example of the ban on women's driving to illustrate the point:

"‘It is shameful to do this’ is a common saying here in Saudi society because of social codes or standards. An example is women driving. There is nothing in the religion to prevent this, but the social standard imposes pressure to stop it happening" (E2).

A manager cited the same example, noting that "the society views it as a demerit or even a shame or disgrace" (M1).

Such norms impose standards of behaviour through the notion of '*face*' – the individual's dignity, image and social standing in the eyes of the community, which will be injured if he infringes accepted codes of conduct. One participant explained this as follows:

"The leader has to yield to these customs and norms in order to avoid the criticism and anger of the community and to preserve his reputation and face in front of others, especially as in the Saudi society it is quite common to judge leaders according to their compliance with social norms" (E4).

Failure to conform to social norms not only damaged the leader's image but, in the view of one manager, could have direct practical consequences, in terms of lack of support which could undermine his ability to implement decisions. Thus, a major imperative behind such compliance was *avoiding opposition*. As he explained,

"Yes, social norms and standards negatively influence leadership roles and practices; a leader's success in Saudi society requires taking into account social norms and standards when issuing decisions, to ensure that they go through and will not be opposed by those people who have weight in the community" (M3).

In contrast to such views, only one participant perceived social norms as having little or no influence, because, he claimed, they were countered by the *professionalism* of

managers. He argued that “most leaders are able to split the social heritage from their job functions” (E3). It is interesting that this view came from an employee, rather than a manager; all three of the managers interviewed in NWC, like the majority of employees, believed that social norms exerted a pressure that no leader could afford to ignore, and to varying degrees swayed their decisions.

### 5.2.5 Tribal Customs and Traditions

With two exceptions, the interviewed personnel in NWC saw tribal customs and traditions as influential on leadership, and perceived this influence to be negative. Analysis of their comments on this subject is presented under six codes: *power*, *injustice*, *prejudice*, *pride*, *organisation characteristics* and *little influence*. The first four reflect a belief in the enduring power of the traditional force of tribalism, while the last two challenge this picture. Reflecting the idea that tribalism could expose leaders to influences that might be contrary to good business practice or the organisation’s interests, several participants attested to the *power* of tribal elders, and especially the sheikh, whose authority within the tribal structure enabled them to make “requests” or even orders, with which an organisation leader felt obliged to comply. As a member of a tribe, the leader would be socialized into the habit of obedience to senior figures in the tribe and, moreover, would be expected to further the tribe’s interests, such as by helping to secure employment for a fellow tribesman. The following extracts are examples of the views expressed:

“Clearly speaking, the leaders comply with most of the tribal sheikh's commands, often for the interest of his tribe, in matters such as hiring” (E1).

“...the leader comes from a tribe and he may be put under pressure by the senior people in the tribe” (M2).

“A leader, of course, may be subject to requests and orders and the pressures of senior people and elders of the tribe” (M3).

Several negative influences of tribal pressure on leaders' decisions and behaviours, and their consequences for the organisation, were highlighted, including perceived *injustice* resulting from the privileging of people who shared a tribal ethnicity with the leader in question. For example, it was claimed that "any service for a son of the tribe or its members should be done before others, and they have priority in everything" (E6) and this could apply "even if they are less qualified or with no or little experience" (E5). Another participant explicitly evoked the open practice of "Vitamin W", that is, *wasta*, in this respect, since the tribe is not only a source of pressure towards *wasta* but also provides a network of relations that enable its employment. Further discussion of *wasta*, however, is as noted previously, reserved to another section.

Two employees commented on how tribalism influenced the attitudes of tribal members, whether the leader himself, or employees, causing lack of cohesion which would influence the ability of the leader to achieve organisational objectives through the workforce, expressed this in terms of *prejudice* or "tribal intolerance" (E6) of tribal members towards individuals from a different tribe or – worse still – those who did not belong to a tribe, while another commented on the difficulty this posed for the leader in "team-building and maintaining team spirit in the workplace" (E5).

Tribalism also caused some members to develop pride, or "exaggerated self-esteem" (E5), believing that their membership of the tribe gave them superior status and that certain work was beneath them. This could lead to a situation where "they may refuse to be given orders or told to carry out a certain task" (E5). In this way, tribal traditions and thinking could undermine the authority of the leader within the organisation and weaken his ability to implement decisions and organise work effectively.

There was, however, some disagreement among participants as to the pervasiveness of tribal influence. Whilst the majority perceived the influence as strong challenged this

view. One employee suggested that the degree of influence exerted by tribalism varied, depending on *organisation characteristics*. He suggested that “bigger organisations in the major cities are less influenced by tribal customs and traditions than small organisations in small cities” (E2). In this respect, he suggested that recent trends of modernization, urbanization and industrialization had weakened tribal authority. The idea of change was also invoked by two participants who claimed that tribalism today has little influence compared to the past. One of those employees attributed the perceived decline of tribalism to the individual’s professionalism and education.

“Most leaders are able to split the tribal heritage from their job functions. In addition, most leaders have rebelled against the tribal customs and traditions by virtue of their education” (E3).

His co-worker, in contrast, saw such decline as a reflection of wider processes of change in society that challenged traditional thinking.

“It is less influential ... this is due to the community’s awareness and it is also the result of the process of correcting those traditions and customs that are contrary to the values of society” (E4).

To summarize, the majority view in NWC was that the traditional force of tribalism had a negative influence on leadership, whether through the pressure on the leader to make decisions in accordance with the wishes of tribal leaders, or by giving rise to prejudice and uncooperative behaviour among the workforce. There was, however, a suggestion that such influences were more pervasive in small provincial organisations, and a minority view that the impact of tribalism was dwindling under the challenges of education and social change.

### 5.2.6 Regional Affiliation

As noted previously, it is only relatively recently that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia came into being as a united country; previously, the region had been inhabited by often warring tribes

The question whether regional affiliation influences leadership met with mixed responses; while five participants thought such affiliation was still influential and negative, four participants thought regional affiliation now had little or no influence. Participants' comments are grouped under five codes, as follows: *perceived ability*, *priority*, *privilege*, *disparity* and *no influence*.

Among responses indicating the continued salience of regionalism, one participant suggested that regional affiliation influences leadership by virtue of what he called an "adopted concept", whereby a leader's *perceived abilities* depend on his regional origin. He illustrated his remark by claiming that there is a relationship between "regional development" and the "broadmindedness of the leader" (E1). In other words, he thought people from certain regions of the Kingdom are more liberal and open to outside influences than others.

A similar view was held by an employee who highlighted the *disparity* between regions, which he felt had an influence on leaders' personality, and also made co-operation between the leader and subordinates more or less difficult, depending on the degree of similarity in their background. He suggested:

"This type of affiliation is a way of life that impacts on the leader's personality ... individual cooperation between the leader and subordinates is largely influenced by regional affiliation, given the vast distance between the regions of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as well as their diversification and differences in terms of how open to the outside world they are" (E5).

Whilst regionalism could create tensions between members from different regions, for these sharing a regional affiliation, it brought advantages; two commonly perceived impacts of the influence of regional affiliation, which tended to be mentioned together by participants, were “*priority*” and “*privilege*”. The first refers to the idea that leaders will prioritize their own region of origin in decision-making on such matters as provision of infrastructure and extension of services, whereas an unbiased appraisal of actual need and urgency might suggest that projects should be located elsewhere. The second, privilege, refers to a leader’s tendency to privilege job applicants or employees from their own region in selection and reward, rather than making decisions based solely on merit. The following quotations capture these views:

“The region where the leader comes from has the priority to be served first. Also the people from that region are more privileged by the leader than others” (E2).

“Regional belonging keeps the leader always bound to his territory and then pushes the leader to serve his area and its children before others, without regard to need or priority” (E6).

In contrast to such views, however, four participants asserted that regional affiliation had little or *no influence* on the way leadership was exercised. Two of these attributed the perceived lack of influence to the leader’s integrity, in the sense of the ability and willingness to set aside regional bias in the interest of the organisation’s objectives:

“Most leaders are able to split their regional affiliation from their job functions” (E3)

“... the leader is mainly concerned about his success in his job and the improvement of the organisation, so he will do the right things and select qualified people to work with, regardless of where they are from” (M1).

The other two participants who denied any influence of regional affiliation on the exercise of leadership invoked the discourse of national unity, claiming that “the nation

is one and indivisible” (M2) and that “members of the community have a sense of belonging to one nation” (M3).

Such views on the part of managers, however, contradict the predominant view among employees that regional affiliation has a negative influence on leadership practice by inclining leaders to make biased and unfair decisions on service provision and staffing issues.

### 5.2.7 Wasta

The ‘wasta’ category reflects the common social practice discussed in Chapter Two (the literature review) whereby favours and concessions are obtained and conferred through the use of intermediaries, relying on social networks and power relations. Although wasta may be considered a social norm, it was singled out and emphasised by participants so frequently as to warrant being treated as a distinct category, and an emergent theme additional to the original research framework. Six codes were grouped within this category: *prevalence*, *goals*, *corruption*, *injustice*, *organisational impact*, and *social pressure* as follows.

The *prevalence* of wasta was noted by a number of participants, who referred to it as a common practice, widespread in the organisation and throughout society. For example, one manager commented:

“Wasta, for example, is widely used everywhere, for everything” (M1)

Other responses indicated the *goals* of wasta, that is, the purposes or targets it was intended to serve. For example, E2 mentioned that wasta is used “to serve a specific person or to obtain a particular objective or interest”. Several participants particularly highlighted the use of wasta in the interest of friends and relatives, for example to secure an appointment or promotion. It was suggested that decisions could be



influenced by “personal relationships with close friends and relatives” (E2), that managers were expected to provide a “personal service” (M2) for such people, and that Saudi society is characterized by “excessive devotion to the interests of friends and relatives” (M1).

Despite the acknowledged *prevalence* of *wasta*, it was perceived negatively by all the participants, who portrayed it as a kind of *corruption*, and explicitly associated it with nepotism and/or cronyism. For example:

“Such relationships lead to the use of nepotism or *wasta*, as employed in the process of evaluation of stuff, promotions and bonuses, as well as new hiring” (E6).

One participant particularly pointed out the *injustice* involved in such practices, as they involved a departure from proper procedure and standards, in order to confer a favour that was not otherwise warranted: “something undeserved or irregular” (E6).

The last code within the *wasta* category is “*organisational impact*”. It has already been indicated under the previous codes that *wasta* affects decisions on hiring, performance evaluation and promotion. One manager summed up the implications of the tendency to make decisions “just for nepotism, favouritism or cronyism” by asserting, “This, of course, comes at the expense of the work interests” (M1).

One reason for the deleterious consequences of *wasta*, as suggested by an employee, was that it resulted in favoured individuals being recruited, promoted or having influence “even if they are less qualified or with no or little experience” (E5). One of his colleagues argued that *wasta* involved “the leader’s abuse of his authority and the company’s resources” (E4).

A reason for the perpetuation of *wasta*, despite the espoused negative perceptions of it, can be found in frequent references to *social pressure*, which might engender a sense

of obligation on the part of a prospective intermediary. The pressure to appease or serve tribal leaders or other influential people, or indeed, pressures existing in the society more generally, might lead a manager to act in a manner contrary to his professional judgement, in order to fulfil community expectations and so preserve his own reputation. The following are among the comments that capture this phenomenon:

“Most leaders surrender to the *social pressure* to serve a friend or help a relative” (E1).

“He [the manager] is therefore subjected to the norms of the community, even if that breaches or interrupts his work .....” (E6).

“He [the manager] is under *social pressure* to accept the intercession of a prominent person in the community to provide a particular service or to recruits or promote certain employees in the company” (M2).

To summarize this category, NWC participants, both employees and managers, called attention to the widespread practice of *wasta* and its role in swaying decision-making in the interest of the leader or manager’s social network. Such behaviour, perceived as inappropriate and even corrupt, was seen to be sustained by expectations in the community and pressure from those with power, resulting in irregular decisions at the organisation’s expense.

### **5.2.8 Education**

Whereas categories 5.2.3 – 5.2.7 reflected deep-rooted traditional influences in Saudi culture, with a long history reaching back to the early societies in the region, the Education category is the first of two categories (the other being Technology) representing much more recent influences, bringing forces of change.

There was widespread agreement among employees and managers in NWC that both the type and level of education experienced have a strong influence on leadership,

although participants had differing opinions as to whether it was the type or the level that was most influential. Opinions on the influence of culture on leadership are discussed under four codes: *personality*, *freedom of thought*, *skills and attributes*, and *no influence*.

The first three of these identify specific areas of influence, while the last represents a rare dissenting view. Several respondents suggested that the influence of culture was manifested in its effect of shaping the leader's *personality*. It was suggested that:

“[Education] shapes [the leader's] personality and thus affects his decisions and style of dealing with others” (E6).

For example, E4 thought that a better education would make a leader more empathic and understanding of employees' needs and ways of thinking.

Two employees in particular suggested that a better (in the sense of higher level) education encouraged a leader's *freedom of thought*, since exposure to new ideas and training in critical thinking would render him less susceptible to social pressure:

“Better and higher educated leaders are more free from social norms and tribal customs and traditions, so they make better leaders” (E1).

Participant E3 agreed, even suggesting that some leaders had “rebelled” against social pressures because of their education.

Another way in which education was perceived to influence leadership was more direct, through the development of specific *skills and attributes*. In the view of M3, this was particularly the case for those with Western education, who had been exposed to up-to-date theory and practice in business and management. He argued:

“Leaders who have academic qualifications from the West normally have clear imprints in the use of modern methods of leadership and optimal use of resources as well as employing human energies and thus achieve the established objectives better” (M3).

There was, however, one dissenting voice on the impact of education, an employee who thought that education had *no influence* on leadership, because in his view, “leadership is a personal skill that cannot be taught, but could be gained [through experience], or may be inherited” (E2).

With this exception, however, the prevailing view in NWC was that higher education, and type of education, interpreted as of better quality, using modern best practices, and in particular, Western, shapes the leader’s personality, thinking and skills, enabling him/her to make effective decisions, unswayed by other influences.

### **5.2.9 Technology**

In Saudi Arabia, technological developments have been widely accepted in recent years and the availability of the internet (accepted in KSA in 1990) is a new force for change. It was universally agreed among participants in NWC that developments in information and communication technology had a positive influence on leadership. Their comments, which addressed the beneficial attributes of the technology, as well as the specific ways in which it was perceived to enhance leadership practice, generated nine codes: *speed*, *accuracy*, *re-engineering*, *communication*, *decision-making*, *openness*, *learning*, *information*, and *justice and equality*.

One of the most frequently occurring codes, raised by six participants, was *speed*, referring to the facility afforded by computers for information to be conveyed and procedures completed more quickly than by traditional means. This attribute of Information and Communication Technology, ICT, was invoked by use of the words ‘fast’ or ‘speed’, which in every case were attached to or associated with other codes, and so are not represented by individual quotations here. One participant additionally highlighted the improved *accuracy* provided by ICT, arguing that this “helps in

avoiding human errors” (E3). Another instrumental benefit of ICT, raised by one manager, was the potential it afforded for improving the workflow and productivity by *re-engineering* for the streamlining of processes and procedures. In this manager’s view:

“The leader’s conviction of the importance of technology can be translated into introducing new techniques for the development of work and re-engineering procedures” (M3).

The main area in which ICT was thought to enhance leadership practice, however, was *communication*, whether between leader and subordinates, or with clients. Eight out of the nine participants interviewed in NWC raised this point, as the following excerpts illustrate:

“It makes communication between the leaders and others through the new media or social websites more easily and fast” (E1).

“The technology revolution ... helped to remove barriers in communication between the leader and his staff, as well as current and target clients” (E4).

“Technology has also increased communication between individuals in various regions” (M2).

Several participants suggested that a specific benefit of such improved communication, for leadership in particular, was to speed up and inform *decision-making*: “decision-making becomes easier and faster” (M1). In this respect, an additional factor raised by one participant, which captures the way in which technology brings changes, was openness, referring to the opportunity provided by ICT for leaders to be exposed to ideas and practices from outside the organisation, or even the country, which could be used to inform his decisions. As this employee suggested:

“Factors like being open to the world and keeping abreast of the developed countries’ practices and successful experiences have enabled the leader to make the right decisions” (E4).

A related idea raised by two participants was that of *learning*, which was not necessarily or solely related to decision-making, but referred to the general opportunity for enhancement of a leader's capabilities as a result of the wider net of communications, which "facilitated the exchange of skills and learning from others' experiences" (M2).

Thus, technology, in addition to its practical benefits, was seen as a force for social change. The same idea rose in relation to the role of ICT in facilitating the storage and use of *information* for a variety of purposes. While two employees mentioned the direct practical benefits of this, one, uniquely, suggested the social benefit of "attaining *justice and equality* between staff" (E6). Although he did not elaborate on this point, the context of his remarks suggests that he saw this effect as a consequence of the information – related benefits to which he had just referred, namely, that information was clearly documented and accessible to all.

To summarize, participants in NWC perceived ICT as offering a variety of technical and social benefits that facilitated the leader's task. It allowed leaders to interact more quickly and effectively with colleagues, subordinates and clients, assisted in the management of information and the exchange of knowledge and experience, not only within the organisation, but worldwide. In this way it was seen to promote the speed and quality of decision-making, as well as to afford the potential to introduce more efficient and effective ways of working.

#### **5.2.10 Other Cultural Factors that Influence Leadership**

Three participants responded to the invitation to suggest other cultural factors that might influence the way leadership is practised, beyond those already discussed. Their answers generated three codes: *wealth*, *upbringing*, and *media*. The influence of

*wealth* was thought to be indirect, felt through the possibilities and opportunities it opened up for a broadening of experience:

“Wealth enables people to have a better education and more cultural exchange through travelling abroad” (E1).

The influence of *upbringing*, in contrast, was described as more direct, involving the deliberate inculcation of norms and behaviours, such that “some habits are instilled in a person from childhood” (M1).

In this respect, it might be said that this factor is not very different from such factors as social norms, discussed earlier. However, the focus here is not so much on the content of culture as on the way it is transmitted, and this may differ from one family to another. Thus, even within the same society, it is conceivable that leaders will have different attitudes and behaviours, resulting from different interpretations of cultural elements, and different degrees of adherence to them, experienced in their upbringing.

Finally, one participant mentioned a source of influence touched on briefly in earlier discussion of the sources of national culture, namely, *the media*. As the respondent argued:

“... It creates a point of view oriented to the society. It brings the thought of the community to a specific target” (E6).

Thus, the media might bring social pressure to bear on the leader by reinforcing social norms, conveying a sense of how a particular policy or action is or would be perceived, socially and politically, and mediates the relationship between the organisation and society.

### 5.3 Case 2: Saudi Electricity Company (SEC)

#### 5.3.1 Conceptualization

As in the case of NWC, SEC respondents' conceptualization of national culture reflected three sub-categories: *concept and components*, *sources*, and *effect*. One participant conceived of national culture as a "pattern of behaviours" (M1) and another referred to it as the "general trend being followed by members of the community" (E2). However, other participants focussed on the *components* of culture, often listing two or three within the same response. Most of these clustered round the notions of traditions and customs, as in the following response from an employee:

"The concept of the culture is the customs and traditions rooted in the minds of members of the community" (E5).

In a slightly different conception, another employee described national culture as "the accumulated knowledge and experience carried by a person, which are either inherited or acquired" (E4).

The last part of E4's statement touches on the *sources* of national culture. Several sources were mentioned, including "instructions from religious figures [and] tribal habits" (E1) and the "social inheritance" (E6) from one's forebears. The latter idea is captured in the following response, together with two other sources, education and technology, which were mentioned only by this particular respondent:

"The concept of national culture refers to the customs and traditions inherited generation after generation, in addition to other determinants, such as education and technology" (M2).

Only two participants mentioned specific *effects* of national culture. These interviewees, both managers, spoke of national culture as having a *controlling*, deterministic influence. Participant M1 suggested that it "steers and controls the daily



lives of people”, while his colleague, M3, referred to “awareness of the systems and laws and regulations that govern the behaviour of members of the community and regulate their relationships”.

Thus, to summarize, responses in SEC depicted national culture as a set of customs and traditions, derived mainly from inheritance and religious teachings, but also influenced by environmental factors such as education and technology, which have an impact on behaviour and relationships within a society.

### **5.3.2 Effects and Involvement of Culture**

With the exception of *wasta*, mentioned by five participants as an example of cultural influence, and discussed in section 5.3.7 as a distinct category, responses on this topic fell into seven categories, although none of these was represented by more than three participants. The categories identified were: *upbringing*, *community membership*, *transfer*, *attributes*, *principles*, *decision-making*, and *change*.

Just one participant mentioned the leader’s *upbringing*, noting that “the leader, of course, is influenced by the society he grew up in” (M1). Others highlighted the leader’s *community membership*, arguing that as part of the community, the leader “holds in his mind” (E3) the notions that he has learned from that community.

Whereas the above explanations appear to view cultural influence as relatively fixed, one participant, in contrast, saw it as more fluid and dynamic, emphasizing a process of *change* as the leader is gradually exposed to new influences;

“These factors or assets are constantly changing and are drawn largely from the process of education, learning and training that leaders go through in their respective lives” (M3).

The fact that he saw education as instrumental in such change is an important idea, addressed further in section 5.3.8.

Two employees evoked the idea of *transfer*, seeing culture as something the leader acquires outside the organisation, and even before becoming part of the organisation, and hence as something he “transfers” or “brings in” to the organisation;

“The leader transfers his culture to the work place, which inevitably will affect his thinking, behaviours and attitudes” (E1).

“The leader comes to the workplace bearing his culture and ideas that woven by the community” (E5).

Among the ways in which such influence was thought to be manifested were through the leader’s *attributes*, because it was thought that

“The leadership attributes in the leader may either be self-present, ‘built-in’ or acquired, and this is affected by the components of the society culture in which the leader lives” (E2).

Similarly, M2 argued that “the leadership characteristics in an individual are ‘built-in’, therefore, they can be influenced by various cultural constituents and features” (M2).

The impact of national culture was also thought to influence the leader’s “concepts and *principles*” (mentioned by both E3 and E4) which in turn influence his behaviour, while three participants highlighted the impact on *decision-making*. For example,

“... the leader holds a major concern while he is practising leadership, which influences his decisions, such as the opinions of elders and religious scholars, if he is religious, or the opinions of key figures or prominent members of the community, especially wealthy people, if the leader is liberal” (E5).

An interesting point made by E3 in the above quotation, however, is that the specific factors or people influencing the leader’s decision-making will differ according to his personal beliefs and values. Thus, the implication is that although national culture is

influential, it does not necessarily influence all leaders in the same way. Rather, the influence may be shaped by the interaction between community and individual factors.

Broadly speaking, however, national culture was seen in SEC as a set of influences predominantly from the leader's upbringing and the community, which he brings into the workplace, and which influences his attributes and thinking – and hence his behaviour.

### 5.3.3 Islamic Values

The responses elicited from participants in SEC, regarding the influence of Islamic values on the way leadership is exercised, as in NWC reflected a tension between the ideal or expected influence and other factors that affected the realization of Islamic values in practice. The views expressed were interpreted to cluster into six codes: *the "right" form, sources of reference, divine scrutiny, principles, confidence and external influence*.

Like their counterparts in NWC, three employees in SEC noted that the beneficial impact that Islamic values were expected to have on leadership depended on their being understood and implemented in *the 'right' form*:

“The right and correct Islamic values have a significant positive influence on leadership roles and practices” (E1).

“The leadership roles and practices are positively affected ... by Islamic principles and values when applied in the correct form” (E2).

“The Islamic values have a positive influence on the role and practices of the leadership, if applied in the right form” (E3).

By way of guidance as to what this “right form” may be, two participants pointed out, Islam provides *sources of reference* in the Sunnah, or traditions of the prophet

Mohammad, which reflect the interpretation of Quranic principles in daily life. In this regard, one participant advocated that leaders take the prophet as their role model:

“Drawing on the greatest leader in history, Muhammad (peace be upon him) I can safely say that whoever possesses and adheres to the Islamic principles and values as close to the prophet as possible, they will have a positive and direct impact on leadership” (M2).

Another participant suggested that the impetus to observance of Islamic values should be reinforced by the leader’s consciousness that all his thoughts and deeds are subjected to *divine scrutiny*, and will be judged accordingly:

“The leader realizes that he is monitored and observed by Allah, so he considers that when he is dealing with the subordinates ...” (M1).

Reference to specific teachings or *principles* of Islam, to which a leader should adhere, was made by six participants, making this the code most frequently represented in the responses from SEC participants. The most – cited values were honesty, mentioned by six participants, and justice, mentioned by five, Also mentioned were sincerity, loyalty, probity, equality, doing work precisely and correctly, dedication, kindness, and “striving to give one’s best” (M3). An example of these responses, in which participants tended to list several virtues, is the following:

“If the leader has only sincerity, loyalty and honesty as Islamic values, that should be enough to lead the organisation successfully and gain employees’ satisfaction, as well as that of shareholders and customers” (E5).

Another perspective on the way in which adherence to Islamic values might benefit a leader was provided by participant E4, who argued that the support and respect the leader would attract as a result would enhance his *confidence* in his leadership practice:

“The commitment to Islamic values enhances the status of the leader in the eyes of his subordinates ... which increases the leader’s confidence and thus helps him to apply the concept of leadership and exercise its roles in the right form”.

Just one participant in SEC, however, expressed a dissenting view, suggesting that the ideal is rarely achieved in practice:

“But you rarely find a leader who adheres to the Islamic values and is not affected by *external influences*” (E3).

Such a view suggests that in practice, Islamic values are challenged by competing values existing in society, which may erode their impact on leadership. Nevertheless, the prevailing view in SEC was that Islam is a rich source of positive values, which if applied conscientiously, would promote effective leadership and good relations between the leader and other stakeholders, particularly subordinates.

#### **5.3.4 Social Norms**

Discussion of social norms as a potentially influential dimension of culture affecting leadership elicited six codes, although only one of these was reflected in more than one response. The codes were: *pressure*, *shame*, *face*, *disregarding rules*, *responsiveness* and *professionalism*.

In the view of one participant, social norms have a strongly negative influence on leadership practice, since leaders are forced to “[give] in to some social *pressures*”; indeed, he went so far as to claim that a leader is “a prisoner of social norms” (E2), reflecting the constraining impact he perceived such norms to exert on leaders’ freedom of decision and action.

One manager described how, in cases of a conflict between organisation policies and prevailing social norms, the latter would take precedence, because of the sense of *shame* attached to certain behaviours.

“... Social norms collide with the proper practice of leadership. For example, ‘inappropriateness’ or “shame” is a factor that needs to be taken into

consideration by the leader ... at the workplace, even if giving in to the social norm is in breach of the policies of the workplace” (M2).

Both the above ideas are explained by the most prevalent response occurring in the social norms category: the idea that by failing to comply with social norms the leader would lose ‘*face*’ in his community, and the feelings of embarrassment incurred as a result found in five responses. In the view of participant E1, for example, social norms had to be taken into account by leaders, because the extent of compliance with such norms determined the respect accorded to people by society. Interestingly, one participant thought this could have a positive effect, “when the leader avoids committing error for fear of embarrassment in the face of society” (E3). Such a view depicts ‘*face*’ as a constraining factor, but one that keeps the leader on the right track. Another participant similarly thought the pressure of social norms might sometimes have a positive effect in motivating a leader to avoid making errors, but he thought that generally, the influence was negative, especially when it led to “*disregarding rules and regulations*” (M3).

However, one participant offered the interesting insight that the level of impact depended on the position of the leader within the organisation hierarchy:

“Social norms have a slight negative influence on leadership roles and practices at a high level, but have a huge negative influence ... at the middle and lower levels, because they [leaders at that level] care a lot about their reputation in the eyes of society” (M1).

This participant (himself of the senior managers in the organisation) seemed to suggest that higher level leaders are to some degree immune from censure, or feel more able to withstand social pressure because of the security and prestige conferred by their position, while those lower on the career ladder cannot afford to attract negative attention.

Whereas the majority of participants in SEC had negative, or at best ambivalent views on the way social norms influenced leadership practices, one participant construed the impact more positively. A favourable interpretation of social norms was that they motivate the *responsiveness* of the organisation to society and that adherence to social norms in this way contributes to the organisation's success. The employee who offered this view asserted:

“Social norms and standards positively influence leadership roles and practices. The leader normally is in line with the community. He will give in to their pressure and consequently will respond to their requirements, which I believe is a reason for the success of the enterprise” (E6).

Finally, in contrast to his colleagues, there was one participant who perceived little or no impact of social norms on leadership, because in his view, such influence had declined as a result of social change and a focus on economic imperatives, resulting in a new *professionalism* amongst organisation leaders:

“There is no clear impact .... As a result of the shift in Saudi society, the influence of social norms and mores has probably begun to decrease, especially in large companies and enterprises that focus on professionalism and the search for financial return is what drives the leader” (E4).

Thus, in SEC the issue of social norms attracted a variety of views. Whilst it was generally agreed that their influence was constraining or directive, some participants perceived such effects as potentially positive, in preventing error and encouraging responsiveness to community requirements; others saw it in negative terms as a pressure that swayed leaders' judgement unfavourably. The view expressed by one employee that modern standards of professionalism had outweighed the influence of social norms was contrary to the prevailing view in the organisation.

### 5.3.5 Tribal Customs and Traditions

There was a prevailing view in SEC that tribalism as a long-standing and deep-rooted force in Saudi society, continues to have a strong, negative impact on the exercise of leadership, although there was one employee who offered a dissenting view. The opinions expressed on this subject are discussed under four codes, labelled *tribal society, power, injustice, reputation* and *little influence*.

In Saudi society, leaders are tied into a tight web of social relations which they strive to preserve. This entails, in particular, an obligation to defer to the wishes of senior members of the tribe. The *power* wielded by the tribal sheikh and elders, which could sway the leader's decisions, particularly on human resources issues, was highlighted by several participants, making this the most frequently mentioned aspect of tribalism in this organisation. The following extracts are examples.

"Tribal customs and traditions sometimes are considered as criteria for hiring or during the annual evaluation. For example, the leader will listen to the tribal leader (sheikh), whom he meets most frequently and offer him full respect, and agree to help or serve somebody from his tribe" (E1).

"Saudi society sets high store by age, so the leader is under pressure from elders in the tribe and this causes him to respond to their demands and consider their interests" (E3).

"Tribal customs and traditions affect the neutrality of the leader, control his orientations and his decisions become tribally-motivated. ... the leader will listen to the elderly of his tribe and consider their interest, and take their views" (E5).

Indeed, one manager went so far as to say that tribal considerations might even affect the actual selection of the leader, and it can be expected that a leader who owes his position to tribal influence will feel under particular pressure to act in the tribe's interests and in accordance with its elders' wishes, in order to repay and retain their support.



The outcome of such exercise of power and influence, according to two participants was *injustice* in organisation decisions.

“This [negative influence] can be seen through provision of services for tribal reasons and in compliance to customs and traditions. In general, tribal customs and traditions cause feeling of injustice in the workplace” (M1).

“They [tribal customs and traditions] normally are causes for injustice and prejudice” (E1).

The employee who made the latter remark illustrated his claim with reference to the influence of the tribal sheikh on hiring decisions (quoted earlier) and also suggested that tribalism might influence the “annual evaluation”, that is, the outcomes of performance appraisal, with members of the favoured tribe, supported by tribal interest, being rated more favourably – which in turn would have implications for the award of bonuses and the like, although the participant did not explicitly highlight such implications.

An explanation offered by one manager for such behaviour was the concern for *reputation*:

“The boss usually acts in his name and the name of his tribe in the field of his work. In so doing, he takes into account his reputation and the reputation of his tribe” (M2).

Indeed, the reputation of the tribe and its members are closely linked, so if a leader made a decision or performed an action that enhanced the prestige of his tribe, the impact would be reflected in his own reputation, whereas if his decisions neglected, or worse, harmed the tribe’s interest, not only would he lose the benefit of the tribe’s reflected glory, but he would suffer harm to his reputation, as he would be seen to have acted dishonourably towards the tribe. Under such pressure, this manager argued, a

leader “even when he is well-educated, he may still give up some principles of leadership” (M2).

In contrast to the above views, just one participant in SEC thought tribalism was in decline and that tribal considerations now had *little influence*, because of competing influences, particularly as Saudi Arabia has become more exposed to ideas from the outside world:

“Tribal customs and traditions have become less influential on the process of leadership than ever before, due to the remarkable transformation in Saudi society and community awareness and openness to other cultures” (E4).

Nevertheless, as the earlier quotations in this section demonstrate, other participants in SEC seemed to be less convinced of this “remarkable transformation”. The dominant view was that tribal considerations, particularly as reflected in the power of the sheikh and elders, still exerted a strong influence, and had a negative impact as a source of bias and injustice.

### **5.3.6 Regional Affiliation**

The history of SEC, as originally a number of separate regional companies, as noted previously, was one factor contributing to disparities among regions in the amount and quality of infrastructure; some rural areas were supplied with electricity only a relatively few years ago. In SEC, therefore, it might have been expected that regionalism would be seen as an important factor influencing leadership.

In SEC the issue of regional affiliation elicited a variety of views, which resulted in the creation of six codes: *priority*, *privilege*, *confidence*, “*sons of the region*”, “*a double-edged sword*”, and *no influence*. The majority of these reflect a perception that

regional affiliation is influential, although there was some ambivalence as to its negative or positive impact.

Two respondents drew attention to the *priority* in service that might be given to a particular region as a result of the regional affiliation of a leader within the organisation. One of these, participant E1 also mentioned the tendency to accord *privilege* to those employees who come from the same region as the leader. He expressed his views in the following terms:

“Leaders in the utilities sector commonly give priority to providing services to their own regions rather than other regions, because they have had relations with the people from their region since childhood, so they will prioritize the people they have known for a long time. Moreover, it also impacts on a personal level; for example, a person can be promoted in his job just for regional reason.” (E1).

Both this employee, and participant M3, who also raised the issue of priority for the leader’s home region, saw the impact of regional affiliation as wholly negative. Another participant, who also expressed the opinion that the impact is negative, tried to give an explanation for leaders privileging their own region and community, in terms of the leader’s greater comfort and feeling of *confidence* in communicating, working and transacting business with people of his own region. He explained:

“Regional affiliation often has a negative influence on the process of leadership, because most leaders find it better to deal with someone they know, and they feel a sense of confidence and harmony with someone who comes from the same region where the leader comes from” (M1).

Two participants used the local expression, “*sons of the region*” in explaining the phenomenon of regional affiliation, although they drew slightly different conclusions from the concept. One employee used it to express a kind of pressure exerted on leaders by fellow members of the same tribe, and explicitly likened it to tribalism:

“Yes, regional affiliation has a clear and obvious effect on the process of leadership, similar to the influence of tribal customs and traditions, but it is governed by the ‘sons of the region’, the wider circle of the tribe” (E2).

The other, in contrast, did not see a direct connection between regional affiliation and the practice of leadership, but considered that the leader’s regional origins would contribute in shaping his character: “Regional affiliation has no effect on the process of leadership, but may affect the leader’s character, as he is a ‘son of his region’” (E4). This being the case, it might be argued that there may be an indirect influence on leadership, as a leader’s character might induce a tendency towards certain attitudes and behaviours.

A further two participants were somewhat ambivalent in their views on regional affiliation, perceiving the potential for such affiliation to have either positive or negative effects, depending on the leader and the circumstances. Their views are reflected in the code, “*double-edged sword*”, taken directly from participant M2’s response. The two responses differed in their focus. Participant E5 spoke in terms of the way regional affiliation was reflected in the leader’s own behaviour:

“Yes, regional affiliation has an impact on leadership; a positive impact when the leader is diligent and dedicated to serve his district; in contrast a negative impact when he deprives other areas of their rights without justification, only belonging to another area”

M2, however, answered more from the perspective of the impact of regional affiliation on the achievement of organisational objectives. Moreover, whereas other participants in SEC had interpreted regional affiliation as an attitude and behaviour of leaders, M2 noted the potential impact of others’ regional affiliation on the leader’s ability to do his job, particularly if posted to a branch or project outside his home region:

“The effect of regional affiliation on leadership is a double-edged sword. On a positive note, it can be a catalyst for growth, productivity and the achievement of the corporate goals ... on the other hand, if the leader or

boss was assigned to a region other than the one he originates from, there could be a negative side to the process, as the new leader might be resisted or fail to put his vision to practice, or start creating animosities in the workplace as a result of this regional affiliation”.

In contrast, there were two employees in SEC who perceived regional affiliation to have *little or no influence* on leadership. Both gave the same reason: the idea that national unity had superseded regional differences.

“Regional affiliation ... has less impact in recent years due to the change of leadership and the efforts of the state to dissolve the membership of a particular area and urge the community to belong to the nation as one country and hold national unity” (E3).

“Regional affiliation has no impact on the leadership process; everybody feels that we have one home throughout” (E6).

Nevertheless, the prevailing view in SEC was that regional affiliation is an active influence on leadership and, however understandable in terms of the natural tendency to gravitate to known, familiar people, is generally negative in its effects. Only two participants perceived a potential positive role of regional affiliation as a motivator of the leader’s efforts, which might have beneficial outcomes, especially if such efforts are in line with organisational objectives.

### **5.3.7 Wasta**

Comments in the wasta category by SEC interviewees encompassed five codes: *prevalence*, *goals*, *corruption*, *organisational impact*, and *social pressure*. These can be seen to correspond with the codes elicited in NWC, except that the ‘*injustice*’ code did not appear in the responses of SEC respondents.

The *prevalence* of wasta was attested by several participants, who claimed that it influenced “most of the decisions” (M1). This was particularly captured in the vivid language of two employees, who likened it to the spread of a disease. E4 referred to

“outbreaks” of *wasta*, while his colleague E1 went so far as to describe it as the “cancer of the current era”, thereby conveying both the *prevalence* of this phenomenon, and his perception of its damaging, corrupting influence.

Again, the *goals* of *wasta* were said to be to serve “personal interests and favouritism towards close people” such as “relatives, acquaintances and friends” (M3). Another manager made the same point, speaking of “the favouritism towards family and relatives and the effect of personal and close relationships” (M2).

The code appearing most frequently among SEC respondents, with regard to *wasta*, was *corruption*, reflecting the universally negative perception of this practice. It was widely equated with nepotism (E1, E2, E3, M1), described as “malpractice” to which a leader might “fall prey” (M3), said to have a “negative influence” (E3) and condemned unequivocally as “unacceptable” (E1).

A negative *organisational impact* of *wasta* was captured by one manager, who focused on the fact that *wasta* constitutes a departure from legitimate, formally constituted organisation practice. As he pointed out, the leader’s subjective decisions, exercised in the interest of his network, entail “disregarding rules and regulations” (M3).

Only one participant in SEC noted the *social pressure* contributing to the persistence of *wasta*, and specifically the role of the tribal leader or sheikh, as a person with power and influence in the community, who can command the allegiance of members, to the extent of influencing workplace decisions:

“The leader will listen to the tribal leader (sheikh), whom he meets most frequently and offer him full respect, and agree to help or serve somebody from his tribe” (E1).

To summarize, *wasta* was acknowledged to be prevalent by SEC employees and managers, who criticised the tendency for decision-making to be swayed by the

interests and expectations of the leader's friends and relatives. Although the code '*injustice*' as such did not appear here, nor was there much explicit attention to the *organisational impact*, interviewees were agreed in condemning *wasta* as a form of *corruption* and a social evil.

#### **5.3.8 Education**

As in NWC, education was seen in SEC as a modern influence and a force for change. The views expressed in SEC with regard to the influence of education on leadership are represented in four codes, namely, *constituent of culture, skills and attributes*, *specialized education*, and *no influence*.

Like two of their counterparts in NWC, two employees viewed education as influential because it formed part of the overall web of cultural influences. They described education as "one of the most important elements that wove the leaders' culture in the receiving formative stage" (E2), accounting for "half of the leadership qualities and attributes" derived from culture (the remainder being inherited) (E3).

Three participants suggested that education is important in developing the leader's *skills and attributes*. For example, one participant suggested that "the type of education is more influential as it is specifically designed to hone the leaders' skills and develop their overall abilities" (M2). Participant E4 agreed, identifying in particular the leader's "maturity" and "[ability] to absorb the requirements of the organisation". However, he added a further dimension by suggesting that this applies especially if the leader had "*specialized education*" (E4).

Three participants, however, rejected this view, perceiving *no influence* of education on leadership, for a variety of reasons. One thought that:

“Leadership is awareness and understanding, so the leadership skills are either inherited or acquired from the environment, but not from education” (E1).

The other two based their arguments on experience of the reality in organisations that sometimes, a leader may be seen to be successful in leading a team containing more highly-educated individuals (E6). Moreover, as one manager argued:

“Sometimes, you may find a leader whose level of education is less, but who has better qualities than others with a higher level of education” (M1).

Thus, the majority view in SEC was that education can be influential in developing leadership abilities, but a minority perceived leadership, rather, as a personal ability, inherent or acquired through life experience, but which cannot be taught and may be possessed by those with only modest formal education.

### **5.3.9 Technology**

Similarly to NWC, in SEC too, despite the variety of technologies relevant to the organisation’s operations as a productive enterprise, participants focused solely on ICT, the technology with which they were most familiar in their job roles. The use of ICT was perceived in wholly positive terms as a facilitating factor for effective leadership. The comments on the subject received in this organisation resulted in six codes: *speed*, *communication*, *decision-making*, *information*, *community awareness*, and *learning*. Whilst most four represent practical benefits of ICT, the last invokes the social impact of ICT.

To begin with the practical benefits, three participants highlighted the advantage of *speed* offered by ICT, using the words ‘speed’ or ‘faster’ in conjunction with reference to other benefits. Foremost among these, in the perception of SEC participants, was communication, one of the most frequently occurring codes in the ICT category. Five



participants commented on the way ICT facilitated communication between leaders and subordinates, as in this example:

“It makes the communication and socialisation between the leader and subordinates much easier and faster than ever before” (E1).

Another area in which ICT was thought to assist leaders in *decision-making*. Whilst some saw the impact simply in terms of speed, one manager suggested that ICT also has the potential to inform decision content and improve decision quality, by widening the knowledge-base on which the leader is able to draw. He argued:

“I think leadership is based on decision-making and decision-taking ... In fact, I would say that technology has enabled leaders to do so [i.e. to make better decisions] because of the easy access to others’ experiences - it is a job - facilitating tool” (M3).

Two participants, E6 and M2, referred briefly to “access to *information*”, without elaboration, although the latter raised the important point that one could access the information “unaided”, which would speed the process.

A key aspect of the information – accessing potential of ICT mentioned by six respondents (making this the aspect of ICT most frequently highlighted by SEC participants) was the opportunity this afforded for *learning*, as a result of access to the knowledge of others. Participant E1 argued that such exposure “enriches the leader’s mind”, while a manager suggested that it could lead to technical benefits because “it enables the leader to explore the best practice in his area” (M1). In the view of his colleague, participant M2, technological developments have been central in enhancing leaders’ knowledge and skills, and in turn promoting effectiveness in their work, because

“It is through these technological breakthroughs that one can keep abreast of others’ experiences and become better informed ... technology has become an inspiration for those working and striving for excellence and distinction. It certainly makes it easier” (M2).

Finally, an interesting impact of technology raised only in this organisation, where it was mentioned by two people, was *community awareness*, given that social media enable an organisation's clients to express their views and engage in online conversation about the organisation's policies and services, which can affect the organisation's image. Awareness of such exchanges was important to leaders, in order to gauge community reaction to any decisions they made, and could actually influence such decisions, as they sought to avoid actions that would negatively affect the public image of the organisation. This situation, which was perceived to be a recent trend, is captured in the following extracts:

"Technology enables the leader to know the impression of the community about any coming change, or any service provided by the organisation" (E4).

"Yes, the technology revolution has a strong influence on the leadership ... through what we observed recently, that leaders consider the community in order to avoid embarrassment through social networking sites" (E5).

As the latter quotation implies, the use of ICT by others outside the organisation could potentially damage the organisation through the spreading of negative word of mouth. However, use of ICT by leaders themselves could keep them informed of public opinion and so offer the opportunity for tailoring their decisions to avoid such impact. Moreover, they were seen to benefit from ICT through enhanced communication and opportunities for learning, which could increase their effectiveness in their work, leading to ICT being seen as a valuable aid to leaders.

#### **5.3.10 Other Cultural Factors that Influence Leadership**

Two additional cultural influences emerged in SEC: *wealth* and *cultural experience*.

One participant perceived potential for *wealth* to influence the exercise of leadership both practically and psychologically, by opening up opportunities for wider experience,

and through the confidence generated by having wealth to rely on as a cushion against failure:

“I think ... wealthy people are more open to other cultures, and also more daring in decision-making because they have nothing to lose” (E2).

Like E2, his fellow employee E3 saw *cultural experience* as a source of influence on leaders. However, E3 did not suggest this is necessarily an attribute of wealthy people, but that it derives from “mixing with various other cultures, and openness to others” (E3).

Such experience may, of course, be more readily available to those who have the means to travel. However, increasingly Saudis in managerial positions have the opportunity to travel abroad on study scholarships. This, together with the large number of expatriates employed in Saudi Arabia, means that many Saudi leaders and managers may have opportunities for exposure to ideas and practices from other cultures.

#### **5.4 Case 3: Saudi Telecommunications Company (STC)**

As noted previously, STC is the most profit-oriented of the three organisations and also, as a former monopoly now exposed to competition, perhaps the one most subject to commercial imperatives. It was of interest, therefore, to see whether such concerns outweighed the impacts of culture. The findings, however, show that in STC too, leadership processes were perceived as strongly open to the influence – in most cases negative – of cultural factors. Moreover, the same tensions appeared as in NWC and SEC, between traditional and modernizing forces, as the following sections show.

### 5.4.1 Conceptualization

Conceptualizations of national culture in STC focussed predominantly on its *sources*, although four respondents attempted to define it or identify its *components*, and just one mentioned the perceived *effect* of national culture on society.

As regards the general concept, national culture was described as a set of “principles and concepts” (E2) and as the “prevailing ideology that people have” (E3). As in the other two companies, the components of culture highlighted in an attempt to illustrate the concept were habits, traditions and customs, as in the following example:

“.....as I understand it, it is the habits and traditions that exist in the society that everyone is obliged and committed to follow” (E1).

However, the participant added the proviso, “as long as there is no contradiction with the religion” (E1), suggesting a possible distinction between national culture as a social inheritance and religion, as a source of enlightenment that might challenge and modify this inheritance.

In general, however, participants in STC, like those in the other two companies, did not make this distinction, but saw religion as one of the main *sources* of national culture, alongside the social inheritance or derived from it, as these examples illustrate:

“The concept of national culture of society is a mixture of religious values, social norms, and behaviours and habits inherited and acquired from the surroundings” (E6).

“The concept of national culture is the customs and traditions that are practised by the majority of members of the community and are accepted, some of which are derived from the religion and others are inherited and customary” (M3).

A wider range of sources was indicated by participant M2, who mentioned several ways in which culture is shaped and transmitted including two - the media and work

experience - not mentioned by any other respondent, in this or the other case companies:

“[It is] the outcomes of the way of upbringing at home, what is learned at school, what is received from the media, and what is accumulated from work experience, plus the religious values that someone holds” (M2).

Only one participant in this company touched on the *effects* of national culture, saying that it is “expressed in [people’s] behaviours and deeds” (E3). Unlike participants in the other two companies, however, he did not emphasize control as a feature of national culture.

Overall, responses in STC reflect an agreement that national culture consists of habits, customs and traditions, stemming from social inheritance and religion, education and other influences in the environment, the influence of which is manifested in people’s actions.

#### **5.4.2 Effects and Involvement of Culture**

The one point made almost universally (being mentioned by eight out of the nine participants in the company) in STC concerned the pervasiveness of *wasta* as a manifestation of culture’s influence. Since discussion of *wasta* is deferred to section 5.3.9, this section concerns the remaining five codes identified in the responses of STC participants – albeit in most cases raised by only one participant. The codes are; *upbringing*, *community membership*, *transfer*, *decision-making* and *attitudes*.

The influence of the leader’s *upbringing* was highlighted by participant E1, who noted that “cultural factors are inculcated in leaders since they were of school age”, and so inevitably affect the leader’s thoughts and behaviour. Participant M3, however, focused more on *community membership*, saying that,

“The leader is part of the society; therefore, the influence of the surrounding community will be reflected in his behaviours”.

Like the two participants quoted above, three others viewed culture as something formed or existing outside the organisation, and they added the notion of *transfer*, whereby the leader brings his culture with him when he enters an organisation. The following quotations express this idea:

“This [influence] can be seen in the way people bring some habits into the organisation” (E4).

“The leader ... comes to the workplace bearing his culture that he gained from the society, and employs the embedded culture in the practice of his daily work” (E6).

Participant E6 pointed out that such application of thinking derived from the national culture will “have a mark on his work, including his *decisions*”, while two participants, E1 and E2, mentioned that cultural influence affects the leader’s *attitudes*, although they did not elaborate.

Discussion of the involvement and influence of national culture in the practice of leadership, in STC, reflected similar ideas to those noted earlier, regarding culture as something formed by upbringing and community membership, which the leader brings to the organisation, and which shapes his thinking and behaviour. It is noteworthy, however, that the only point frequently raised by STC employees (more so than in either of the other organisations) was the pervasive manifestation of cultural influence in a negative form, through the practice of *wasta* – a point to which I shall return later.

### **5.4.3 Islamic Values**

Discussion of the impact of Islamic values in STC is presented under four codes: *the ‘right’ form, sources of reference, principles, and abandonment*.

Individual commitment would determine whether Islamic values are implemented in *the 'right form'*, the essential condition for a positive influence, pointed out by participants E4 and M3:

“To a great extent, I can say that leadership roles and practices are positively influenced by Islamic values, if these values are held in the right way” (E4).

“Islamic values are noble, beautiful and fair values, so they will have a positive reflection. But they are mixed with other values that may be conflicting, which results in Islamic values not being applied in the correct way” (M3).

Examples of such conflicting values will be found in later sub-sections – for example, regional affiliation (5.3.4), social norms (5.3.5), tribalism (5.3.6) and *wasta* (5.3.7).

Two respondents, however, pointed out the existence of *sources of reference*, where the true Islamic values and guidance on their application in daily life are set out.

“...the Qur'an and the Sunnah are the genuine references that influence the behaviours and attitudes of the leader and control his way of dealing with others and consequently his leadership qualities” (E1).

“...learning from the Qur'an and imitating the great leader Muhammed will inevitably influence the behaviours of the leader” (E4).

Specific *principles* said to be encouraged by Islam included honesty, justice / fairness, fidelity, equality, commitment to work, punctuality and purity.

Three participants, however, complained of neglect or “*abandonment*” of these values by leaders. E3, for example, argued that the “relatively positive influence” of Islamic values on leadership was limited because “Islamic values such as honesty, justice and equality, are not employed in the workplace”. Another employee elaborated on the consequences of leaders' failure to adhere to Islamic values:

“The abandonment of these values has a negative impact on the leadership and the organisation such as the lack of transparency and credibility, which

leads to the loss of the confidence of employees, customers and organisations dealing with the company” (E5).

A further interesting, albeit cynical, insight on this phenomenon was provided by one of the managers interviewed, who suggested that adherence to Islamic principles depended on one’s position within the organisation, and that once an individual attained a position of authority, he would sacrifice the principles he had espoused previously:

“... Islamic values ... have a more significant influence on the subordinates, in the sense that a subordinate who is strongly influenced by Islamic values will ‘change his hat’ when he becomes a leader and his behaviour accordingly will be changed” (M2).

Thus, while the predominant view in STC was that Islamic values are intrinsically positive in their implications for the conduct of leadership, there were also concerns that the failure of some leaders to uphold such values was detrimental to the performance of their roles, and to the organisation as a whole.

#### **5.4.4 Social Norms**

Discussion of the impact of social norms in STC elicited a particularly wide range of perspectives, of which all but one were raised by only one participant each. Six codes are discussed here: *pressure*, *relatives and friends*, *toadying*, *generosity*, *responsiveness* and *decline*.

One of the managers interviewed expressed the view, raised in the other two case organisations, that the effect of social norms is manifested through the exertion of social pressure towards particular behaviours, an example being social norms regarding women’s roles:

“There are some social restrictions that hinder the leader. For example, not being able to benefit from employing women in many areas of work had a



negative impact on the performance of some of the work, as the leadership was forced to look for alternatives and accept less. The result was a negative impact on leadership, because of social pressure” (M3).

This participant indicates that social norms might force the leader to employ workers of a lower calibre than might be available if he had complete freedom of choice. Similar implications for the quality of the workforce were raised by another manager, who highlighted the “excessive attention to *relatives, friends* and acquaintances” (M1). Since this idea overlaps with the notion of *wasta* (although the participant did not actually use the term) it is discussed further in the later section devoted to that category. Another negative impact of social norms, highlighted by one of the managers, was the inducement of a tendency among leaders towards obsequiousness, or what the participant referred to as “*toadying*” towards influential people in society, which could bias leaders’ decisions. He argued that:

“Social norms still exist and have a negative influence on leadership roles and practices ... generally ... through toadying to prominent figures in society and providing them with special services” (M2).

In contrast to these wholly negative views of the influence of social norms, some employees suggested that the impacts of social norms could be positive in some circumstances.

An example of a social norm which was perceived to have the potential to result in either positive or negative behaviours was given by participant E5, who spoke of Saudi society’s attachment to the value of *generosity*, and how this might be manifested in different ways in a leader’s behaviour:

“For example, a generous leader may lavishly reward his staff even if they do not deserve it, just because of generosity, and this has pros, if it takes the bonus format, and has also cons if it takes the form of nepotism”.

It might be argued that rewarding staff who ‘do not deserve it’ is a negative behaviour, but E5’s acceptance of such behaviour, as long as it remained within what he perceived as the legitimate boundaries of organisation policy and practice (the payment of bonuses) demonstrates his own internalization of the norm in question. However, he clearly perceived some behaviour, albeit driven by the same norm, as unacceptable, and here we have one of the many references to *wasta* (nepotism) that contributed to the decision to reassign it to the level of a distinct category, as a major cultural factor causing widespread concern.

Another example of the impact of social norms which might be favourable for the organisation was given by an employee, who raised the issue of the organisation’s *responsiveness* to the community it serves:

“The organisation is a point of service, it therefore, is a part of society and so is committed to the values and social norms, to gain the satisfaction of the society members and then market the service” (E6).

Whilst the majority view in STC was that social norms were strongly influential, for good or ill, on leadership practices, just two participants suggested that such influence was in *decline* as a result of social change, as reflected in the following quotation:

“Social norms still have a tangible negative influence on leadership roles and practices, but much less than before, when the Saudi society was closed. Now it is more open and with knowledge exchange, the influence of social norms has become less” (E1).

Despite the above suggestion that in the modern era, openness to the outside world and developments in knowledge are eroding the influence of social norms, the dominant view in STC was that they remain a strong and active influence. Whilst some norms, and the pressure to conform to society’s expectations, could have beneficial impacts, the general view was that the influence was mostly negative, pushing leaders towards behaviour that was not conducive to organisational efficiency.

#### 5.4.5 Tribal Customs and Traditions

Participants in STC in general perceived tribal tradition as having a substantial and negative impact on leadership, although as will be seen, two participants perceived the impact as variable, and one thought tribalism was no longer a strongly influential factor. Responses in this category are presented under six codes: *power*, *wasta*, *pride*, *financial impact*, *leader characteristics*, and *little influence*, although the *wasta* code eventually become a separate category (see section 5.3.7).

Tribalism was seen to be reflected in the *power* of the sheikh and tribal elders, who could call on the loyalty of tribe members in order to secure favours. As one employee explained,

“The leader in the workplace will definitely listen to the tribe leader (sheikh) and acquiesce in any request to help or serve somebody from his tribe” (E2).

“The leader cannot reject the claims of ... the seniors of a tribe ...” (E2).

“If the supervisor comes from a tribal background, then his decisions are ... not free of bias ... because of tribal influences, normally from the tribe's sheikh” (E2).

The general perception was that such influence was negative in its impacts, and in particular resulted in *wasta*, because personal considerations took precedence over need and merit, so that some individuals gained unearned privileges, or succeeded in attaining their objectives because of intercession by tribal figures. The prevalence of this perception in STC resulted in this being the code that occurred most often among participants' responses, in particular those of employees. However, as noted previously, the subject of *wasta* is deferred to a later section.

Another impact of tribalism, according to one of the managers, was an exaggerated *pride* that led to disdain for and undervaluing of those who could not boast of tribal affiliation, however talented and capable they might be. The participant explained:

“Belonging to a tribe is a source of pride for the individual, that takes precedence over education, qualification and efficiency in performance, while someone who does not belong to a tribe is seen as inferior and of less importance, even if he has leadership abilities and qualities” (M3).

Tribal considerations, one employee suggested, could even result in a leader making decisions that were detrimental to the organisation’s interest, to the extent that the organisation might suffer a negative *financial impact*:

“Although the company is considered as a business organisation looking for profits, it may still provide unprofitable service for tribal reasons ...” (E1).

This would be a serious concern for STC, as a profit-oriented company and a major source of revenue for the government as a shareholder. Two participants, however, did not believe such influences were universally present or equally strong in every instance, but perceived the *leader’s characteristics* to be a determining factor. Specifically, they both considered that difference in the strength of the leader’s tribal affiliation affected the degree of influence exerted by the tribe. As one employee explained:

“Tribal customs and traditions negatively influence the process of leadership if the leader is very integrated and involved with his tribe, because this will influence his decisions, which will mainly be for the interest and privileges of the tribe .... On the other hand, when the leader is independent from his tribe, his decisions will be for the benefit of the organisation and to serve the members of society” (E4).

One of the managers in the organisation, participant M2, made the same point, suggesting that decisions would be made objectively and in the interest of the organisation, only when the leader is “free from tribal traditions” (M2).

Whilst the two participants quoted above perceived variation in the impact of tribal influence attributable to individual differences among leaders, nevertheless, they still saw such influence as prevalent. Only one participant in STC perceived tribal traditions to have *little influence*, arguing that education had made leaders more independent minded, “so they do not give much attention to tribal customs and traditions” (M1).

This view was, however, completely at odds with that of the majority of interviewees in STC. The general consensus was that tribal considerations had a pervasive, negative impact on leadership, resulting in a common tendency for leaders to defer to the demands of tribal elders, and to make biased decisions to serve the benefit of tribe members, even at the expense of justice and the organisation’s interest.

#### **5.4.6 Regional Affiliation**

Discussion of regional affiliation with participants in STC yielded five codes: *priority*, *privilege*, *confidence*, *hidden*, and *no influence*.

The most frequently – occurring codes in this company were *priority*, reflecting the leader’s tendency to prioritize his own area for service, and *privilege*, reflecting favourable treatment given by the leader to those who come from the same regional background as himself. Each of these was mentioned by four participants, and in fact three of them raised both issues within the same response. All saw regional affiliation as having a negative impact. The following quotations reflect the views expressed:

“Yes, I think that regional affiliation negatively impacts the process of leadership, because the leader’s preference will be for his region to be served first, regardless of the need. Also, he will be biased to the region’s inhabitants, regardless of their qualification” (E1).

“Regional affiliation has a negative effect ... it may be shown in the leader's preference for a son of his area at the expense of another, or inclination to

serve his region at the expense of another region which should have priority for service” (M3).

Three participants offered an explanation of such behaviour in terms of the greater *confidence*, comfort and trust felt by individuals when dealing with someone familiar, with whom they share a common background and experience, rather than a stranger. For example:

“Yes, regional affiliation has a negative impact on the leadership. The fact is that a leader would prefer to deal with a son of his area, someone he understands and trusts, and can be comfortable with. Therefore, there is no doubt that [such a person] will be a favourite with the leader of the facility, at the expense of a person who is not from the region, even if he is more efficient, and this is a general impression among a lot of leaders” (E5).

Another participant, whilst agreeing that some leaders’ decision-making being biased in favour of their own region and its inhabitants, was less convinced of the prevalence of such behaviour. However, he raised an interesting point which casts a new perspective on the issue of prevalence – the claim that the behaviour is *hidden*, rather than openly acknowledged.

“That is not a prevalent phenomenon, it is rather with some leaders only. Its impact is often hidden, as it is not practised openly” (E6).

Only two participants in this organisation completely denied the influence of regional affiliation on leadership. They both ascribed its having no influence to the modern sense of national unity, which one attributed to education, and the other to government policy.

“Leaders these days are likely to be educated and view the country as an integrated unit” (M1).

“No, regional affiliation has no impact on the process of leadership. This is because of the sensitivity of this issue in the Saudi society. It is also the desire of the political leadership to eradicate regionalism” (E3).

These views, however, were the exception. The prevailing perception in STC was that, whether openly or not, organisation leaders displayed bias towards their own areas, and the impact of this was viewed in wholly negative terms. Such influence was thought to result in subjective, inappropriate and unfair decisions, both in the preferential allocation of resources and scheduling of services to the leader's own region, and in the selection, reward and promotion of employees.

#### 5.4.7 Wasta

As in NWC and SEC, the negative impacts of traditional culture were perceived as manifested in the emergent category of wasta. Comments on wasta made by interviewees in STC included six codes: four (*prevalence*, *goals*, *corruption* and *social pressure*) shared with both NWC and SEC, one (*injustice*) shared with NWC, and one (*impunity*) mentioned only in this company, and by only one employee.

The *prevalence* of wasta was attested by several participants, who referred to it as "most common" (E2), a "normal habit" (E6) and a "most prominent phenomenon that is used everywhere" (M1). In terms of *goals*, it was said to entail "a leader using his power personally for his interest, or that of his family" (E2).

As in the other organisations, participants were critical of wasta as a form of *corruption*, describing the intervention of personal interests and favouritism in such areas as hiring and promotion as nepotism and cronyism. Two participants specifically asserted the *injustice* inherent in these practices, since the award of positions and favours to those who did not merit them came at the expense of more capable and conscientious employees who were overlooked. E3 and M3 both reflected this perspective:

"Wasta ..... is now threatening qualified and talented people. Unfortunately, wasta, in its multi-faceted forms of nepotism, cronyism, favouritism and friendship makes social justice an obsolete concept" (E3).

“The spread of *wasta*, for example, as an influential power at the facility is not reasonable and cannot be imagined, where those who are not deserving are given everything they need and the deserving are left out” (M3).

Several participants, however, acknowledged that the practice was endorsed and even expected in the wider society, so that leaders faced *social pressure* to act accordingly. E1, noting the impact of “external influences, normally from key figures in the society” went on to say that

“cultural factors are inculcated in leaders since they were of school age, so inevitably they will impact their attitudes, behaviours and thoughts. This can be seen in the broad spread of *wasta* all over the kingdom”.

Under such pressure, professional and personal judgement counted for little because “the leader cannot reject the claims of a community leader or the seniors of a tribe to intercede for a certain person” (E5). As one of his colleagues expressed, a leader might deliberately act against his better judgement, succumbing to cultural influences so that

“leaders keep up some customs and habits, even bad ones, such as going through an intermediary or what is called *wasta*, for example, despite the conviction sometimes that it is unacceptable” (E6).

Finally, one employee mentioned an issue not raised by any others in any of the three organisations, that is, the *impunity* with which leaders are able to practise *wasta*: “No one is blamed for it” (E4). On the one hand, this comment may seem to contradict the negative tone adopted by participants when talking about *wasta*; in a sense, it could be argued that in their criticism, they “blamed” perpetrators. On the other hand, as the comments overall indicated, *wasta* is widespread, continuing and apparently sanctioned, expected and even demanded by members of the community. Hence, no sanctions are applied by organisations or community members against those who exploit *wasta*, whether as intermediaries or as clients. In this sense, organisation



leaders and managers can practice *wasta* with *impunity*, even if it attracts disapproval, particularly from those who are not themselves beneficiaries.

#### 5.4.8 Education

As in NWC and SEC, the negatively perceived traditional cultural influences were contrasted with the positive influences of education and technology. Perceptions of the role of education as an influence in leadership, as expressed in STC, are discussed here in four codes: *skills and attributes*, *specialization*, *maturity*, *freedom of thought*, and *no influence*.

Several respondents perceived that education was influential in developing specific *skills and attributes* related to leadership, which enhanced the leader's effectiveness. As participant E1 argued, "knowledge comes mainly from education and then that will affect the qualities and skills of the leader". In particular, in the view of one manager a high level of education endows the leader with "a broader perception of the concept of leadership" (M3).

Two participants drew attention to particular ways in which education might affect the leader's thinking and decision-making. Participant E5 thought that, with more education, the leader becomes "more mature and able to make the right decisions". The same participant also believed that education opened the leader's mind to the outside world, resulting in greater *freedom of thought*. The same view was held by a manager, who suggested:

"Leaders have become more educated and independent from their families, so they do not give much attention to tribal customs and traditions" (M1).

Nevertheless, as in the other two organisations, there was a small number of participants in STC who thought that education has *no influence* on leadership. Three

of the four participants who expressed this view all gave the same reason: that it was common in organisations to find leaders who were effective and successful, despite having a lower level of education and fewer formal qualifications than some of their subordinates. The fourth expressed the opinion, reflected by some participants in the other two organisations, that leadership “is a personal skill not related to education” (E4).

To summarize, as in NWC and SEC, participants in STC had mixed views on the influence of education on leadership. The majority believed that education develops the leader’s skills, maturity and capacity for independent thought, with positive impact on their decision-making. Others, however, were unconvinced, especially given their experience of less educated but nonetheless very capable leaders.

#### **5.4.9 Technology**

Like education, technology, a recent influence, was seen as wholly in positive effect. The facilitating role played by ICT, to the benefit of leadership performance, was widely acknowledged in ICT, positive expressed in six codes: *speed, communication, decision-making, information, learning, customer service*, only two participants claimed *limited influence*.

As in the other two organisations, a number of participants used the words ‘fast’ or ‘*speed*’ in describing the impact of ICT in various areas, notably communication, which seven of the nine participants thought was made quicker and easier by the use of this technology. For example, one manager expressed the view that “the technology revolution ... makes the communication between the leader and subordinates fast and easy, which leads to speeding the implementation of work with high quality” (M2). The majority of those who commented on the *communication* benefits of ICT similarly

confined their focus to the interaction between leader and subordinates. One participant, however, reflecting STC's customer orientation, noted that the same advantage extended outside the organisation, "it facilitates communication between leaders and subordinates from one side, and between the organisation and customer from the other side" (E4).

Two managers referred to the influence of ICT on the *decision-making* role of leaders. One of these simply stated that the "impact on the process of leadership is highlighted in the speed of decision-making" (M3). The other, however, suggested a possible input into decision content, based on access to wider sources of information:

"There is more exposure to other parts of the world through using the internet services, which enables leaders to take decisions ..." (M1).

Three participants highlighted access to *information* as a benefit brought by the use of ICT, although two of these simply mentioned that "it makes access to information far easier" (E3), and "providing information" (M3) in passing, among a list of perceived benefits. One employee, however, elaborated by mentioning the specific applications or facilities he thought were especially valuable for this purpose:

"The technology revolution ... enables more exposure to information, wherever it is, by using the internet and video and conference calls" (E1).

The words, "wherever it is", used by this participant, connote an important feature of ICT, that the information available is not only that within the organisation, but can be sourced from other organisations, regions and even countries, enabling a broadening of the leader's mental horizons through exposure to a range of ideas and experiences that might not be gained otherwise. In this respect, as two participants pointed out, ICT provided leaders with a tool for *learning*, and facilitated their self-development:

“Technology has an essential positive influence ... [because] it makes access to information far easier, as it does for access to other experiences ... moreover, technology allows for the possibility of self-development” (E3).

In particular, a fellow employee suggested that ICT facilitated leaders’ professional development because it “transfers the leadership concept between societies” (E4). Another effect, related to learning, in the view of one of the managers was in the area of *customer service*, important to STC as a commercial organisation in a competitive sector, he argued that exposure to other parts of the world through the internet “enables the leaders to ... serve customers in a better way” (M1).

In contrast to the prevailing view, however, two employees suggested that ICT has only *limited influence* on leadership. They both gave the same rationale; that effective leadership was not necessarily confined to those who exploited such technology. As one employee argued, “You may find a successful leader who does not use modern methods and developments in the field of technology” (E6).

Such views, however, were exceptional. The prevailing view in STC was that technology played an important role in informing leaders, speeding communications and decision-making, and affording transfer of ideas and experiences across societies.

#### **5.4.10 Other Cultural Factors that Influence Leadership**

Five participants in STC mentioned other factors they perceived as potentially influencing leadership, generating six codes: *wealth*, *upbringing*, *masculinity*, *politics*, *others’ attitudes*, and *the media*.

*Wealth* was the only “other” factor mentioned in all three companies. However, the STC respondent who mentioned “a person's wealth status” as potentially influential did not elaborate on how this effect might occur. However, considering responses discussed in other sections, there are two likely scenarios; on the one hand, the leader’s

own wealth might enable education and travel that broaden the mind, or allow him/her to be less risk-averse. On the other, the wealth of others in society, relative to the leader, might enable them to impose social pressure, influencing the leader's decisions.

*Upbringing* was thought to have an influence through the provision of role models, on the basis that "like father, like son. If the father is a good leader, then the son mostly will acquire leadership skills by nature" (M1).

This respondent, typically of most of those interviewed, shows an implicit assumption that the leader is male (as leaders were in these organisations). Interestingly, then, one participant identified "the *masculinity* in Saudi Arabian society" (E1), as influential on leadership. It has been noted earlier that Saudi Arabia is both a male-dominated and in many respects a gender segregated society. While women have opportunities to rise to leadership positions in all-female sections and branches of various organisations, often they are still subject to a higher decision-making authority in the corresponding men's section. Leadership is still seen predominantly as a male preserve, reflecting masculine values and behaviour.

The impact of *politics*, one participant suggested, also influenced leadership, as the scope of the leader's autonomy can be enlarged or curtailed, according to the nature of the regime in power:

"Democratic regimes are more helpful to enable the leader to act freely without constraint, while dictator regimes constrain the leader and make him abide by certain conditions" (E2).

A fifth potential influence was *others' attitudes*, referring to the psychological impact on morale and confidence derived from the perception of support (or lack of it) from the people surrounding the leader. Thus, colleagues, superiors, and even those outside

the organisation might influence the leader's behaviours "positively by encouraging, or negatively by discouraging" (E3).

Finally, one participant mentioned a source of influence touched on briefly in earlier discussion of the sources of national culture, namely, *the media*. As the respondent argued:

"... It creates a point of view oriented to the society. It brings the thought of the community to a specific target" (E6).

Thus, the media might bring social pressure to bear on the leader by reinforcing social norms, conveying a sense of how a particular policy or action is or would be perceived, socially and politically, and mediates the relationship between the organisation and society.

## 5.5 Summary

This chapter has presented the perceptions expressed in the three organisations about aspects of national culture and their impact on leadership. Conceptualizations of culture were expressed in terms of its components, sources, and effects in the individual and the organisation. It was generally agreed that cultural factors are influential on leadership, in either positive or negative ways. Only education and technology were perceived in wholly positive ways, while Islamic values were thought to be inherently positive, but not necessarily adhered to in practice. Deeply rooted traditions of regional affiliation, social norms and tribal influences were perceived in generally negative terms, reflected in the universally condemned practice of *wasta*. Several other factors outside the original theoretical framework, were mentioned as influencing leadership, including wealth, upbringing and the media. These findings, together with those of the previous chapter, will be explored further through cross-case analysis and discussion in the next chapter, in order to address the research questions.

## CHAPTER 6 CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### 6.1 Introduction

In Chapter Three (Methodology), reference was made to the advice of Creswell (2014) regarding analysis of multiple case studies, in which a two-stage process is suggested. The first stage, within-case analysis, that is, analysis for each case individually, was reported in Chapters Four and Five, for the themes of leadership and culture, respectively. This chapter addresses the second stage of the process, cross-case analysis, whereby the cases are compared in order to identify similarities and differences between them. For this purpose, the main categories identified in the previous two chapters will be revisited; this does not mean, however, that every individual code will be addressed again here, particularly as some codes reflected the opinion or expression of a single individual. The aim, rather, is to identify categories on which there were substantial concentrations of opinion within one or more organisation, and those which, while perhaps reflecting a minority view, add an important dimension to understanding of leadership, national culture and the relationship between them, in the Saudi context. A second purpose of the chapter is to discuss the outcomes of the cross-case analysis in the light of relevant literature, thereby indicating how the current findings support, challenge or develop extant theory, and to what extent they agree with previous empirical findings, particularly in Saudi Arabia or other Arab contexts. Comparison with previous empirical work may shed light on the relative distinctiveness of the Saudi context and whether previous claims about 'the Arab world' or 'the Middle East' apply equally to Saudi Arabia. It may also provide some insight into whether or how perceptions, values and practices may be changing over time.

In order to address those purposes, the chapter is divided into three main sections, each relating to one or more of the research questions. Section 6.2 addresses the first question, concerned with how participants in the selected organisations conceptualized the leadership role. Section 6.3 is concerned with the second question on the traits and behaviours associated with effective leadership in the eyes of participants. The last two research questions, 3 and 4, are addressed together in section 6.4. Research question 3 concerned the cultural factors perceived to influence the practice of leadership in the selected organisations, while research question 4 asked whether those influences, for each factor identified, are perceived as positive or negative. The two questions are so closely related that it would be impossible to address RQ3 without touching also on RQ4, and so the decision was made to present and discuss the findings for the two questions together, in order to avoid repetition.

## **6.2 Research Question 1:**

### **How do leaders and subordinates in Saudi utilities organisations understand the leader's role?**

This question is addressed with reference to two categories emerging from the within-case analysis: Conceptualization of Leadership, reflecting broad notions of the nature of leadership and the extent to which participants thought it was understood and practised within the organisation, and Role, reflecting more specific perceptions of leadership roles and functions.

#### **6.2.1 Cross-case analysis**

With regard to the first category, reflecting broad understanding, Conceptualizations of leadership within NWC, SEC and STC were reported in Chapter Four, in sections 4.1.1, 4.2.1 and 4.3.1 respectively. Comparison of responses across the three



organisations reveals a high level of similarity between them on five codes: objective/vision, working through others, teamwork, leadership vs. management, and perception.

The first code, objective/vision, reflects a common understanding in all three organisations that leadership is a future-oriented function, concerned with identifying and communicating some desired state to be reached or goal to be accomplished, whether at departmental or organisation level. Participants differed in the terminology they used to express this idea, some referring to objectives, some to goals and some to vision, and it could be argued that these differences may reflect differences in perception (among individual participants, rather than organisations) of the scope and time-horizon involved. It might also be argued that the differences reflect a distinction – albeit contested – between the concepts and remit of leadership and management, an issue raised as a later code in this sub-section and discussed in section 6.1.2. It is by no means clear from the context, however, that participants were consciously using language to reflect such a distinction, and the differences in expression may not be significant. What was clear, however, was that substantial numbers of participants in all three organisations associated leadership with having some sort of aim or direction in mind, to be attained in the future.

Participants across the organisations also agreed in perceiving leadership in terms of influence on and accomplishment through other people, reflected in the codes, ‘working through others’ and ‘teamwork’. A variety of nuances were observed within both codes. Individuals differed, for example, in their descriptions of the ways in which ‘working through others’ was achieved, some referring to activities such as allocation of duties, or motivation, others focusing more on the nature of the relationship, for example whether the leader was seen as ‘directing’ or ‘managing’ others’ contributions.

Similarly with 'teamwork' participants had differing views on where the leader stood in relation to the team. In this respect, the leader's roles were variously seen as forming the team, directing it, facilitating teamwork through provision of the appropriate conditions, or even being, himself, a member of the team. Despite the subtle distinctions implied by individual responses, these codes nevertheless suggest a generalized understanding in the organisations that leadership depends on the ability to work with and through other people, who are subject to the leader's influence.

An issue frequently raised in each of the case organisations was the blurring of the distinction between leadership and management, which took two forms. In some cases, participants made a distinction between the two, and complained that the distinction was not well understood or practised by others in the organisation, or characterized a particular superior as being, for example, a good manager but not a good leader. Among such responses, however, only one participant expressed his understanding of the distinction between the two. The other form in which the "leadership vs. management" issue arose was when the blurring of these concepts or roles was demonstrated in the responses of participants who used the terms interchangeably.

The last code on which there was a substantial concentration of agreement across the organisations was "perception". In each of the companies, participants discussed their views of whether the notion of leadership was understood and practised by members of their organisations. A common theme occurring in this respect was the view that leadership was not understood or of interest to subordinates, or even if it was (and even if, as some participants suggested, they possessed what were seen as leadership qualities) (see RQ2, below), they had no opportunity to perform such a role. The prevailing view in all the organisations was that leadership was a function confined to incumbents of particular positions within the organisation. Thus, it was seen as outside

subordinates' remit. Despite talk of "teamwork", the picture that emerged was of strictly defined and hierarchical roles.

As for those responses in the 'Role' category itself, these were somewhat more diverse than those in the 'Conceptualization' category, although there were certain roles on which there was agreement across the three case studies. Two of these in fact overlapped with the "Conceptualization" responses, namely, 'setting vision' and 'achieving objectives'. Setting vision has an obvious relationship to the 'Objectives/vision' code discussed above, and illustrates the emphasis on the leader's role in actively deciding on guiding and even creating the future of the organisation. 'Achieving objectives' however, is slightly different from the earlier conceptualization, denoting a view that the leader does not only set and communicate objectives, but is actually accountable for their achievement. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that one of the most frequently occurring codes across all the organisations referred to the leader's role of "setting strategy". In other words, participants in each of the organisations shared a view that a leader is responsible for planning exactly how the team, department or organisation is going to achieve its objectives and make the journey (indeed, some participants used metaphors such as 'road map') from the current situation to the desired future.

Other roles ascribed to leaders in all organisations were related to the responsibility for meeting the needs of external and internal stakeholders, captured by the codes, "customer satisfaction" and "satisfying workforce" respectively. The former can be seen as a more focused element of the general responsibility for 'achieving objectives'. All three organisations, as providers of utilities, saw themselves as having a duty to provide a public service, whether through the extension of infrastructure or through provision of specific products, although this view was more prevalent in STC than in

the other two organisations (see section 4.3.2). Customer satisfaction was key to their ability to generate profit and to their reputation of the company, and even if the leader was not involved directly in some of these activities, he was seen as having the ultimate responsibility for ensuring that the work was done in a way that customer satisfaction was maintained. At the same time, the leader was also seen as playing an important role in satisfying the employees who constitute the internal customers of the organisation. This might involve, for example, safeguarding their rights, facilitating a harmonious working environment, distributing rewards, and representing subordinates to higher echelons of the organisation.

Other roles on which differences were observed among the three organisations included “making profit”, a variant of the role of “achieving objectives” which was mentioned by only a few participants and did not arise in NWC. However, NWC was unique among the organisations in drawing attention to an ‘evaluating’ role, referring to a leader’s responsibility for continuously monitoring the organisation’s performance and progress towards its objectives.

Another role assigned to leaders which showed differences among the organisations was “problem solving”, which was mentioned only in STC. This can be seen as related to the ‘meeting objectives’ and ‘making profit’ roles, in the sense that the leader was expected to be able to resolve or circumvent obstacles which stood in the way of attaining those objectives. However, it could be suggested that this code reflects not only a role of the leader, but specific skills and attributes (for example analytical thought, creativity, or diplomacy) which enable him to achieve it.

Two organisations, NWC and STC, identified a liaison/representation role for the leader, although such a role was not frequently mentioned in either organisation. It referred to a view of the leader as the interface, both between his subordinates and

other levels of the organisation, and between the organisation and its customers. In the latter sense, the leader might be the public face of the organisation whose dealings with external stakeholders contributed in their formation of an image of the organisation, and hence to its perceived status and credibility.

Before ending this section, it may be of interest to note one further 'role', which was distinct from all the other roles mentioned, in focusing not on what the leader's role includes, but what it should not include. The code is "non-interference" and it reflects an insistence – expressed by only small numbers of participants, but nevertheless present in all three organisations, that the leader should not intervene in the day-to-day activities. He could demand, direct, and delegate as appropriate to ensure objectives were met, but having done so, he should leave the employees to do their own jobs. This view is a further reflection of the idea of specific, position-related spheres of responsibility, noted earlier. However, the fact that several participants found it necessary to draw attention to this point suggests that some leaders were perceived as crossing the boundary and resented for doing so.

To summarize this section, leaders and subordinates in the three utilities organisations shared common perceptions that the role of a leader is to set and communicate a vision or set of objectives, to plan the detailed strategy for their achievement, and to work through others in pursuit of the set goals such a way as to secure customer satisfaction. Leaders are also expected to take care of subordinates' needs. It appeared that leadership was expected to be confined to people occupying specific positions, leading to some blurring of leadership and management roles. It was agreed that leadership was not the concern or remit of employees, nevertheless, they had their own roles with which leaders should not interfere.

### 6.2.2 Discussion

As noted in Chapter Two, literature contains a range of definitions of and perspectives on leadership, many of which owe their origins to Western theory and practice. In many respects the views of the Saudi managers and employees interviewed in this study as to the leader's role were consistent with common perspectives found in this body of literature. The emphasis, in both the Conceptualization and Role categories, on the leader's vision and objective-setting, for example, is a common theme in the literature, corresponding to Grint's (2005) 'who' and 'what' questions – in other words, the leader's role is concerned with the question, 'who are we (or who do we want to be)?' which addresses the organisation's identity, and the question, 'what do we want to achieve?' concerned with the organisation's purpose and aspirations. Such an emphasis reflects Northhouse's (2010) view that the leader's influence is directed towards a purpose – a view also reflected in the concept of "leadership as results" (Grint, 2005) underpinning interviewees' suggestions that leaders are responsible for achieving objectives, satisfying customers and making profit and in the view of some participants in STC, solving problems in order to ensure that obstacles to achievement are overcome and the vision or objectives are realised.

Another aspect of interviewees' view of leadership which resonates with prevailing trends in the literature is reflected in the notions that a leader works through others, is responsible for facilitating and directing team efforts, and has a duty to satisfy the workforce. All these perceptions reflect facets of the notion that leadership is a process, which is interactive and relational (Northhouse 2010). Thus, while leaders may sometimes be expected to have particular traits and attributes (addressed in RQ2, in section 6.2), these do not in themselves make a leader; a leader cannot lead without followers, and thus an important facet of leadership is the ability to influence others' thinking and behaviour. In this way, as Northhouse (2010) points out, the pursuit of

the organisation's objectives and vision becomes a shared endeavour. The responses concerning the leader's interaction with others, specifically the concern with the leader's role of "satisfying the workforce" are of interest also, in shadding light on one of the sources of power ascribed to leaders in Saudi utilities organisations. Referring to the typology proposed by French and Roven (1959) as cited by Northhouse (2010) it can be suggested that one of the types of power exercised by Saudi leaders is reward power, based on the ability to confer or withhold rewards such as commendation, bonuses, pay increases and promotion. It is, perhaps, not suprising to find this emphasis in Saudi organisations as it is consistent with the traditional role of the sheikh (tribal leader) whose psychological contract with followers was based on the exchange of their loyalty and obedience for his protection and patronage (Al-Twajjri et al. 1994), reinforced by the power acquired by leaders as distributors of resources in the post-oil era (Common, 2011). It is, moreover, consistent with Islamic values that present laedership as a trust and emphasize leaders' responsibility towards subordinates (Tayeb, 1997; Khan et al. 2010).

The latter point, indeed, raises interesting broader questions of the influence of Islamic values on these Saudi participants' conceptualization of leadership roles, and the degree of correspondence between Islamic and Western perspectives on leadership. In fact, Islam makes a number of points in relation to leadership and the reciprocal roles of leaders and followers, including for instance, the emphasis on reward (Iles et al. 2012) noted above, and the importance attached to co-operation as part of the "Islamic Work Ethic" (Yousef, 2000) reflected in participants' focus on "teamwork". Referring to Khaliq and Ogunsola's (2011) construct of "Management from an Islamic perspective" (MIP), correspondence can be seen between the leadership roles proposed by interviewees in this study and the MIP principles of visionary leadership and strategic thinking, while Saudi participants concern with 'satisfying the workforce'

might arguably be linked to the MIP principles of fair treatment of employees and motivation. These issues will be discussed further in the consideration of leadership style in section 6.2, and the impact of culture on leadership in section 6.3. At this point, however, it can be suggested that the idea of leadership roles espoused by participants and reflected in the two categories analysed here is consistent with both prevalent Western conceptualizations and Islamic values.

A final point of interest worth noting before concluding this section is the confusion or blurring between management and leadership, referred to in many of the responses across all three organisations. Whether or not the two concepts are distinct has been long debated. Those participants who perceived a distinction between the two can be seen as following in the footsteps of Kotter (1990), while the emphasis on 'vision' as part of the leader's role is also consistent with Kotter's perspective. Indeed, the one interviewee who attempted to articulate in some detail his understanding of the distinction between leadership and management did so in terms very reminiscent of Kotter, suggesting that leaders are concerned with vision and movement, while managers are concerned with day-to-day order and the organisation of the status quo. Abdalla and Al-Homoud (2001) have previously reported a tendency in the Arab world to make such a distinction. Nevertheless, they acknowledged that in practice the roles were somewhat blurred and both might be performed by the same person. Such blurring, evident in the responses of several participants in this study, and reportedly prevalent in all the organisations, is consistent with the view of writers such as Schriesheim and Neider (1993) who suggested that in practice, leaders need organisational and managerial skills in order to achieve their vision effectively, while managers' role has an interpersonal aspect that can be seen as leadership. In the context of Saudi utilities organisations, moreover, it can be suggested that the blurring of the concepts of leadership and management in part reflects the hierarchical structure of the



organisations, whereby leadership roles were seen as the exclusive preserve of people occupying particular (managerial) positions. This in fact suggests the prevalence of a second type of power from French and Raven's (1959 in Northhouse 2010) typology, namely "legitimate power", the power that an individual is seen as entitled to exercise by virtue of holding a particular position or status. It also corresponds to Grint's (2005) notion of leadership as position.

In summary, leaders and subordinates in the selected Saudi organisations expressed views of leadership roles consistent with Islamic values and with Western perspectives of leadership as position and results, as well as an interactive, relational process, in which both reward and legitimate power are exercised. Further light on the way leadership is conceived and practised in the three organisations is, however, provided in relation to RQ2 in the next section, from which a more complex and contested picture emerges.

### **6.3 Research Question 2:**

**How do leaders and subordinates perceive the qualities and behaviours that characterize an effective leader?**

This question is addressed through four categories from the within-case analysis presented in Chapter 4: Traits and behaviours, Leadership style, Decision-making and Superior-Subordinate Relationships, the latter two reflecting perceptions of how leadership traits and behaviours are demonstrated in practice in the three organisations.

#### **6.3.1 Cross-case analysis**

To begin with the traits and behaviours category, there was agreement across all three organisations on certain characteristics expected of the leader. Participants thought that

an effective leader should have the ability to influence others, which some participants expressed using terms such as persuasiveness, and others the ability to inspire. Thus ability was needed, they thought, in order to gain commitment to the leader's vision for the organisation, making it a shared goal, and to gain the support needed from other stakeholders in order to achieve it. Closely related to this power of influence, moreover, was the expectation that the leader would act as a role model, demonstrating by his own traits and behaviours the qualities he expected of others. There was also widespread agreement that the leader should possess personal and professional integrity, which would be reflected in his honesty and fairness – for example, treating employees justly according to their abilities and efforts, without favouritism or letting his judgement be influenced by personal considerations.

One of the behaviours most strongly ascribed to effective leaders in each of the case organisations was decision-making. While some participants simply listed this as a desired behaviour, others gave slightly more nuanced responses, referring for example, to the ability to make decisions quickly, or to confidence and even bravery in making decisions and standing by them in the face of opposition. This quality might be linked, moreover, to two other attributes mentioned in all three organisations, albeit by a minority of participants: professional and organisational knowledge, and problem-solving ability, which would enable the leader to make appropriate decisions based on the needs and circumstances of the organisation, and to address potential obstacles that might pose impediments to implementation of the decision.

The last shared code in the 'traits and behaviours' category was interpersonal skills. This rather broad and general code was assigned to encompass a range of responses, some of which were mentioned by only one or two participants. The rationale for combining these varied responses under one code was the belief that, however

differently expressed, participants' views reflected a common underlying principle or concern. This was the conviction that an effective leader needed to be able to form and maintain good relationships with others, based on respect, care, and concern. It was suggested, for example, that the leader's interpersonal skills would be reflected in his being a good listener, willing to allow others to express their views, and to listen to them with respectful consideration.

Whilst the above – mentioned traits and behaviours were mentioned by participants in all three organisations, there were others on which differences appeared, that is, codes that emerged in one or two organisations, but not all. One of these was vision, which was mentioned by participants from SEC and STC, but not those in NWC. One should not, however, assume too readily that this reflects an important difference between the organisations, given that setting a vision was agreed in all organisations to be a role of the leader, as indicated in the previous section. The apparent contradiction may reflect the difficulty, for some participants, of differentiating between the leader's role, traits and behaviours, manifested in a number of overlapping areas among responses under different categories. This is understandable, given that a leader's performance of functional roles will be manifested through specific behaviours, which are likely in turn to be influenced by the leader's personal attributes and skills. Thus, individual participants may have disagreed on whether "vision" is something a leader "does" or something he "has", but members of NWC, like those of the other two organisations, had previously asserted the importance of the leader's vision, even if they did not see it as a personal trait.

The other two codes on which there was disagreement were 'self-confidence' and 'humility', both mentioned in NWC and SEC, but not in STC.

Participants' perceptions of the attributes that characterize an effective leader were also reflected in their responses under the category, 'leadership style', where the interesting finding was that certain characteristics perceived as pertaining to the 'ideal' leadership style were agreed on in all three organisations, but also in all the organisations were perceived to be lacking. Participants across the cases agreed in perceiving the existence of an actual leadership style in marked contrast to the one they described as desirable, resulting in the situation where there was almost universal agreement in finding the present leadership style unsatisfactory.

With regard to the ideal leadership style, although a number of codes were generated across the organisations, there were two ideas on which there was substantial agreement. The first was expressed in the general code 'harmony', which was assigned to reflect a number of separate codes including concepts such as 'friendship'. 'Harmony' reflects a general feeling among participants that the preferred leadership style should be one in which cordial, harmonious relationships are maintained in the workplace, making it a pleasant and comfortable place in which to work. Participants expressed a wish for positive feelings and emotional attachment between the boss and his subordinates, as well as among employees, with organisation members treating each other with consideration and respect. This attitude was most strikingly expressed in NWC, by a manager who talked of "leadership by love", but similar ideas were found to be present in all three organisations.

The other key idea on which there were similarities among the three cases was that an effective leader should value his employees and treat them accordingly as an asset to be nurtured and developed. Participants expressed this in a variety of ways. The code "employees as assets", for example, reflected the explicit claim that employees should be recognised as having a value to the organisation, and to contribute to its survival,

success and competitiveness in the same way as material assets such as finance and equipment. They do so through the skills and knowledge they deploy in the organisation's interest, and in their positive attitudes and goodwill, which induce them to cooperate and exert effort. It was suggested, therefore, that effective leaders would be concerned with "developing people", for example by providing opportunities for training and the accumulation of experience, enabling employees to achieve their full potential.

In contrast to these shared perceptions, there were other features of the preferred leadership on which there was less agreement. One of these was 'flexibility', which was mentioned as a desirable characteristic in NWC and SEC, but not in STC. This may perhaps be related to the ambivalence surrounding the notion of flexibility in the Saudi context, as on the one hand, it can refer to a desirable willingness to adapt to circumstances, and on the other, it is sometimes interpreted as inconsistency and caprice, such that there are unwarranted discrepancies in the ways employees are treated and selective application of regulations according to the manager's interest; such behaviour was raised in various categories as characteristic of leadership as actually practised, as will be seen further in later paragraphs.

Other aspects of leadership style on which there were differences between the organisations reflected the preferences of individual employees for specific management techniques: "reward and punishment" (reflecting a transactional, behaviourist – inspired approach to leadership), mentioned in SEC and STC but not NWC, and management by objectives, mentioned only by an employee in NWC. Since these techniques were mentioned only in isolated instances, and given the small sample size in each organisation, it would be unwise to assume that they reflect general views in the organisations concerned; they may simply reflect differences in individuals'

awareness or experience of a range of management techniques. What they have in common, however, is a concern for the provision of a degree of certainty in the leadership process, such that employees know what is expected of them, and what will be the consequences of meeting or violating expectations for performance or behaviour.

The above preferences have particular salience when viewed in the light of perceptions of the actual leadership style practised in the organisations, where two ideas predominated: autocracy and unfairness. In all three organisations, it was generally agreed that the prevailing leadership style was autocratic and centralized, with power concentrated in the hands of bosses, who showed little concern for the opinions or needs of employees. There was talk of “absolute power”, a “big gap” between leaders and subordinates and “domination”. However, it is interesting to note that, whereas NWC and SEC both had substantial concentrations of agreement on this notion, in STC only one employee raised this concern.

In contrast, the most substantial area of agreement within STC (although it was raised in the other two organisations also) was around the idea of unfairness, which in STC was expressed particularly in terms of lack of transparency, such that it was not clear how certain decisions were reached or which regulations or policies were being employed. This left the door open for arbitrary exercise of managerial discretion and favouritism. The strength of this perception in STC in particular may help to explain why “flexibility” was not mentioned as a desirable leadership quality in that organisation. However, it was to some extent a concern in that organisation – a perception that contrasted sharply with the earlier assertions that “integrity”, often expressed in terms of fairness, was a desirable trait of effective leaders. Given these differences between what participants described as their preferred leadership style, and the situation they perceived as prevailing in reality in their organisations, it was not

surprising that with very rare exceptions (one respondent in SEC who saw the leadership style as consistent with prevailing norms, and one in STC who claimed the existence of a degree of participation), participants were almost unanimous in expressing their dissatisfaction.

Participants' perceptions of the way leadership is practised in their organisations were reflected in their comments with regard to two specific aspects of organisational life that were strongly influenced by the roles, qualities and behaviour of leaders: decision-making practices and the relationship between supervisor and subordinates. Both of these categories were loci of contradictions and inconsistencies, such as have already been pointed out in relation to the tension between ideal and actual leadership styles.

With regard to decision-making, for example, there was agreement in all three organisations around five codes: bias, objectivity, participation, autocracy and pseudo-participation. The first two of these codes reflected perceptions of the character of the decisions themselves, while the other three pertain to involvement in the decision-making process. In terms of the decisions themselves, in each organisation, there was a contradiction between participants who thought that decisions were made objectively, reflecting a reasoned consideration of the needs of the organisation and a fair judgement of employees' performance, and those who saw decisions as biased, influenced by the leader's favouritism and personal agenda. Even those who claimed the objectivity of organisational decisions, however, showed some ambivalence, suggesting that decisions were not made in the interest of employees. The more common view, however, was that decisions might be made under social pressure, to please people with power and influence, or might be swayed by the manager's own personal preference and interests. The latter was a common thread throughout the interviews in all three organisations, reflected, as noted previously, in the concern that

leaders should display integrity and that they should maintain harmony in the workplace, contrasted with perceptions of actual leadership characterized by unfairness.

The conditions allowing such bias to be exercised were created by the nature of the decision-making procedures. Although there were a minority of participants in each organisation who described the decision-making process as participative, particularly with regard to technical matters, the majority view in all three organisations was that decisions were made in an autocratic, top-down manner, and that lower level employees were completely excluded from the process. This was explained by an employee in STC in terms of a cultural assumption that decision-making is the preserve of leaders; they feel entitled to exercise power and are expected to do so, and it is not generally perceived that subordinates have any role or interest in this process.

Moreover, a small number of participants cast doubt on the nature of any participation perceived by some of their colleagues, when they described what I have called “pseudo-participation” – a superficial appearance of consultation, for the sake of securing good will and compliance, but without genuine consideration of the views expressed.

Just as there were contradictions and inconsistencies in participants’ perceptions of decision-making in their organisations, there were also contradictions in their perceptions of superior-subordinate relationships, manifested in the two major concentrations of responses: dignity (positive) and dignity (negative). The former, which was the majority response in each organisation, reflected a perception that employees were treated with dignity, respect and courtesy. Respondents in each organisation attributed such treatment to Islamic values and prevailing social norms, which advocate social solidarity, harmony and consideration. This being the case, it



was interesting to find that a number of participants in each organisation – albeit a minority – perceived quite the opposite, reflected in the code, dignity (negative). This was a code assigned to allegations that supervisors did not appreciate employees, subjecting them to unwarranted criticism, failing to consider their needs, and demanding unquestioning subservience; at the extreme, one employee in NWC described what he called a “master-slave relationship”.

Although these two codes were the only ones that attracted substantial concentrations of response in all three organisations, the other varied codes appearing, sometimes in isolated individual responses, nevertheless tended towards a common theme. This was the view that the nature of superior-subordinate relations had the potential to exert a deep impact, positive or negative, on the organisation. A good relationship, characterized by mutual trust and respect, would be motivating to employees and beneficial for the organisation. On the other hand, poor relations, or inappropriate exploitation of personal connections leading to laxity and favouritism towards some employees, undermined productivity and harmed the organisation.

It has been seen that contradiction and tension were common themes running through all the categories considered in this section, and that a similar range of ideals, perceptions and concerns was manifested in each of the three organisations. These are further discussed and interpreted below.

### **6.3.2 Discussion**

The issues addressed in this section – leaders’ traits and behaviours, leadership style, decision-making procedures and superior-subordinate relations, essentially concern what Grint (2000) referred to as the ‘why’ of leadership – in other words, why should employees accept the leader’s vision, strategy and direction? It is noteworthy that in

many respects, the qualities participants thought should characterize an effective leader appear consistent with aspects of what Western theory terms Transformational Leadership (Bass, 1990). In the suggestions that the leader should be a role model and display integrity, one can see parallels to Bass's (1990) dimension of idealized influence or charisma, relying on trust and respect which attract the emulation of followers. As Northouse (2010) notes, such leaders express strong values and ideals, a characteristic that participants expected of leaders. It was also suggested that leaders should be inspiring and have the ability to influence others, as well as interpersonal skills. Such assumptions invite comparison with Grint's (2000) suggestion that the leader should be a persuasive communicator, and with Bass's (1990) dimension of inspirational motivation, which suggests that transformational leaders inspire followers' commitment to a shared vision. A further dimension of transformational leadership, "individualized consideration", could also be perceived in participants' view of the ideal leadership style, as one where leaders value and develop their employees, as well as in the emphasis on dignity, respect and courtesy in superior-subordinate relations.

The ideal leadership style and preferred leadership traits expressed by participants, while having much in common with the Western notion of transformational leadership, actually have their roots in Islamic values and social norms prevailing in the Arab world. A similar preoccupation with harmonious relationships, for example, was seen in the GLOBE study construct of Humane Orientation, which scored highly in the three Arab countries surveyed (House et al. 2004). It is also consistent with Abdalla and Al-Homoud's (2001) finding of the perceived importance in Kuwait and Qatar of a dimension they termed "Considerate leadership". Such preferences as to leadership style can be linked with the Islamic view of leadership that emphasises the psychological contract between leader and subordinates and his responsibility to treat

them with humanity and consideration, as well as concerns for social solidarity and for the preservation of individual dignity (Tayeb, 1997; Khan et al. 2010; Hutchings & Weir, 2006a).

Thus far, then, the findings suggest that despite Shahin and Wright's (2004) caveat concerning the applicability of Western views of leadership in other cultural contexts, there are some aspects of correspondence between the Western concept of transformational leadership and certain Arabic and Islamic values and expectations.

However, the picture becomes more complex when we consider the contradictions and inconsistencies that emerged throughout the 'leadership' theme, between the espoused preferences and ideals, and the prevailing reality described by the majority of participants. Such a contrast between ideal and actual, of course, is not unique or confined to the Arab context. Argyris (1993) referred to contradictions between "espoused" and "exercised" leadership, while Klein et al. (2009) noted tendencies of divergence between the "ideal" and "operational". A variety of practical or social considerations may result in declared preferences, principles and policies being implemented incompletely or inconsistently in practice. In the case of the three Saudi organisations studied here, despite the rhetoric of politeness, dignity, harmony and even love, the actual leadership behaviour was depicted as predominantly autocratic. This was reflected, for instance, in descriptions of the decision-making process, with a general agreement that subordinates are excluded, and suggestions that any practice of consultation is no more than a token gesture for the sake of appearance, and does not mean that employees' opinions are heeded or taken into account in decisions.

This finding invites comparison with an earlier study of leadership in Saudi organisations by Ali and Swiercz (1993), who reported that 28 per cent of the managers they surveyed employed a "pseudo-consultative" leadership style, in which they

created a feeling of consultation, but with the aim of reducing resistance to managers' decisions and enhancing the managers' image rather than genuinely to empower employees. In practice, their behaviour was authoritarian and a strict hierarchy prevailed. Nevertheless, Ali and Swiercz also reported that 39 per cent of their managers used a consultative style and 20 per cent a participative style – a suggestion apparently contradicted by the present study, where autocracy was the majority perception of actual leadership style, and of decision-making. This difference may perhaps be explained by the fact that Ali and Swiercz's study was conducted across a large number and wider range of organisations than the present one. Another factor may be that their findings were based on self-reports by managers, whereas this study captured subordinates' perspectives also.

In fact, the doubt cast in this study on the genuineness of any appearance of participation, the conflict between ideal and perceived actual leadership style, and the significant minority of participants in all three organisations who expressed negative views of superior-subordinate relations are all consistent with findings of studies in other Arab countries with a similar culture. Such studies tend to report an apparently contradictory situation of espoused preferences for a leadership style that seems to contain some transformational aspects and an Islamic advocacy of consultation, combined with strong elements of authoritarian behaviour. An example can be found in Shahin and Wright's (2004) study in Egypt, in which they emphasise that although charismatic leadership is favoured, it is by no means the same as transformational leadership, having strong authoritarian and transactional components.

This latter element was seen in this study also in the concern with the leader's role in controlling or influencing the distribution of rewards such as bonuses and promotions, and with whether this role was performed fairly and objectively. Returning to French

and Raven's (1959) typology of power, it seems that in practice, Arab managers in the three case study organisations relied predominantly on a mixture of reward power and (to the extent that reward was thought often to depend on subservience to or relationship with the manager, rather than objective criteria) coercive power.

The attitudes of employees and managers in the three case-study organisations were torn between criticism and acceptance of authoritarian behaviour. On the one hand, they espoused a view that effective leaders possessed transformational characteristics, leading by example, inspiring followers, and promoting teamwork and harmony. Moreover, their descriptions of actual leadership style as autocratic – and also unsatisfactory – as well as their views on the decision-making process, suggested that they wanted and expected some degree of participation, or at least consultation. Such a view can be explained in terms of the high need for affiliation associated with a collectivist society, bearing in mind that Saudi Arabia's score on Hofstede's (1980) Individualism dimension places it at the Collectivist end of the spectrum (Bjerke and Al-Meer, 1993). It is also consistent with the Islamic value of *shura* or consultation, discussed by, for example, Tayeb (1997), Aabed (2006), Khan (2007) and Khan et al. (2010).

On the other hand, it can be argued that in some respects participants also accepted the fact that in practice, few people were actually consulted or involved in decision-making, as observed previously in the Saudi context by Aabed (2006) and Khan (2007). Decision-making featured strongly in participants' views of the role of the leader, and a number of participants, both employees and managers, appeared to take for granted that decision-making does not concern subordinates. This confusion or contradiction can be interpreted in the light of the fact that, while Islamic values favour consultation, they also urge obedience to duly constituted authority. This stance is mirrored by social

norms that traditionally involved willing submission to the authority of the tribal sheikh in return for protection and patronage – reflected in Saudi Arabia's high score on the Power Distance dimension (Bjerke & Al-Meer, 1993, Hofstede et al. 2010). As noted in the literature review, a high power distance reflects an acceptance of inequalities in power and status, and is associated with hierarchical organisational structures and processes. Indeed, as Iles et al. (2012) pointed out, in such a culture, joint decision-making, or any perceived reluctance of a leader to take firm control of decision-making and solve problems, even if in an authoritarian manner, can be seen as a sign of weakness. Similarly, with reference to authoritarianism in Omani leadership style, Commom (2011) pointed out employees' expectation that decision-making and leadership are the preserve of managers.

Thus, as the data analysis and discussion have shown, participants' views on the traits and behaviours of an effective leader showed inconsistencies, not only between the 'ideal' and the way leadership was enacted in practice, but also among participants' expectations. These inconsistencies seemed to be underpinned by apparently contradictory cultural values. It is possible, also, that they reflect a society in transition, whereby the hierarchical relations accepted in the past, while still widespread, are facing challenges from new ideas. This indeed, was how Ali and Swiercz (1993) explained the number of Saudi managers in their study who espoused a participative leadership style, which the researchers attributed to exposure to Western influence through education and business contacts. Further light will be shed on the possible role of cultural factors in influencing how leadership is perceived and enacted in the three case study organisations, in the next section, which addresses Research Questions 3 and 4.

#### **6.4 Research Questions 3 and 4:**

**How do cultural factors influence leadership and, for each of the factors identified, is the impact positive or negative?**

The answers to these two questions are derived from several categories in the data: the conceptualization of culture, effects and involvement of culture (reflecting a general perception as to whether culture is influential on leadership) and a number of categories pertaining to several specific aspects of culture, namely, Islamic values, social norms, tribalism, regional affiliation, education, technology and *wasta*.

##### **6.4.1 Cross-case analysis**

Participants in all three organisations conceptualized culture predominantly in terms of what they perceived to be its components and sources. There was a high level of agreement across the organisations in viewing culture as constituted of a set of habits, traditions and customs that guide and even control individuals' behaviour. Moreover, there was widespread agreement on two main sources of culture. The first was ancestors or forebears, the general view being that ways of behaving, and ideas about what is or is not socially acceptable, are passed down through the generations and become entrenched in what one participant called the "fabric" of society. The other main source was said to be religion. It was generally acknowledged that, since Saudi Arabia is an Islamic state, Islam governs all aspects of life, with certain behaviours proscribed as 'haram' and others recommended or required. While these sources of cultural influence were cited by the majority of respondents in all three organisations and were evidently seen as the most important and pervasive cultural influences, a few other sources were also mentioned, but only in individual instances. These included education and technology (both mentioned only in SEC), the media and work experience (both mentioned only in STC). This is not to say that these elements were

not considered as important or influential – as will be seen, education and technology were seen as influential by a number of participants in all organisations – but simply that they were not generally identified as main sources or foundations of culture in the same way that ancestors and religion were perceived to be.

As regards general impressions of whether culture was influential in the exercise of leadership, three issues were widely raised and agreed across the case study organisations. One was the view that such an influence was inevitable, since the leader, as a member of a particular society, was subject to socialization through upbringing, and to the pressures and expectations generated by community membership, which he could not afford to ignore. The second point made was that cultural influences were particularly evident in the area of decision-making. For example, decisions might be swayed by the influence of powerful people and opinion leaders in the community, or made to serve particular interests. More specific examples of how culture affects particular kinds of decisions, whether in service provision or human resources management, were provided under other categories concerning individual cultural factors, addressed below. The third issue arising from the general question about the effects and involvement of culture was the large number of participants who highlighted the widespread practice of *wasta*, as an example, which resulted in its being treated, here as in the within-case analyses, as a separate category, addressed later in this section.

The remainder of the discussion of cultural influences on leadership centred on the impacts of a number of specific cultural factors. Since the interview questions had been formulated in part with the aim of exploring perceptions of specific factors suggested, on the basis of the literature review, as likely to be salient, it was inevitable that the same core factors were discussed in all three organisations. Nevertheless, the open



nature of the discussion allowed all participants freedom in expressing their opinions on these factors, to dismiss any particular factor as irrelevant if they thought that was the case, and to suggest any others, not raised in the interview schedule, that they thought were important. This being the case, it was interesting to find a strong level of agreement across the organisations, both as to the factors seen as influential, and as to the positive or negative nature of their impact.

Islamic values were universally seen as an important influence, with strong agreement in two main areas. One was that the influence of Islam is felt through its encouragement of a number of specific principles which should guide the leader towards conscientious endeavour, ethical behaviour and courteous, humane treatment of others. Although each participant gave his own list of the Islamic values that he perceived as influential, there were commonalities across the organisations in the tendency to highlight honesty, justice and fairness. In this sense, Islamic values were universally seen as having, at least potentially, a positive influence. This view was, however, somewhat undermined by the second point of agreement – the proviso that such values must be understood and practised in “the right form”. The frequency with which this and similar phrases were used reflected concerns in all three organisations that, due to misunderstanding of Islamic values or the effect of other competing imperatives, leaders did not necessarily behave in a manner consistent with these espoused values.

One of the traditional factors perceived to conflict with Islamic values was social norms, whilst there was a wide diversity of responses, with a total of 16 codes generated, nine of which were represented by single responses, there was a general acknowledgement in all three organisations that such norms exert pressure on leaders. Moreover, there was agreement in two of the organisations, NWC and SEC, that such

norms operate through the force of “shame”; that is, the leader would risk losing face and suffer damage to his reputation (with wider repercussions for the organisation, and for his family) if he failed to act in a manner consistent with the community’s expectations and standards. Among those who perceived social norms as influencing leadership, the majority regarded the impact as negative, resulting in behaviours such as disregard for rules and obsequiousness to influential members of society. In two organisations, SEC and STC, however, there was a minority view that the influence could sometimes be positive, depending which norms were followed and how they were interpreted. For example, social pressures could prevent a leader committing errors, and increase his responsiveness to the community, while values such as generosity might be invoked to benefit subordinates.

The next factor considered, tribalism, divided opinion in all three organisations, with the majority regarding it as influential, but a minority in each case rejecting this idea, on the assumption that social change has eroded the influence of tribalism. Those who saw tribalism as an influence on leadership, in all three organisations, expressed a similar rationale, and described similar impacts. The rationale expressed for the influential role played by tribalism was that Saudi society is essentially tribal in nature, and so tribal hierarchies, interests, rivalries and alliances permeate social relations. The leader, as a member of such a society, in participants’ view, could not avoid being influenced by it. He would be expected to show loyalty to his tribe, pursue its interests and provide support and assistance to its members. Moreover, he would be subject to the power and influence of the sheikh and tribal elders, which could sway his decisions. Such influences were seen in negative terms, as leading to prejudice against employees who lack the benefit of an illustrious tribal background. It was also perceived to be a cause of unfairness in decision making, particularly in areas such as recruitment and

promotion, when candidates with the right tribal connections might be favoured at the expense of others who could be more skilled, knowledgeable, or hardworking.

Another of the cultural factors seen to conflict with Islamic values, and perceived by the majority of participants in all three organisations, was regional affiliation. There was agreement in all three cases that regionalism was manifested in leaders prioritizing their home region in matters of service allocation, and privileging employees who shared the same regional origin. In contrast, there was a minority in each organisation – only one or two individuals in each case – who believed that the new trend of national unity promoted in government policy was superseding regionalism. These two contrasting viewpoints were held in similar proportion in each organisation. The only observed difference between the organisations was that in SEC, two participants saw a positive side to regional affiliation in motivating the leader to provide a high level of service, whereas in both NWC and STC, regionalism was seen in wholly negative terms, associated with unfairness and partiality.

The problems associated with tribalism and regionalism were particularly mentioned in terms of *wasta*, the use of social networks to secure benefits; the practice was also mentioned under a number of other categories, and was one of the issues on which agreement was most widespread and strongly expressed across all three organisations. Points of agreement included the prevalence of *wasta*, and the goals that individuals attempted to pursue through *wasta*, such as an appointment or promotion, either for themselves or to serve the interest of a friend or family member. Participants were unanimous in perceiving the practice as a form of corruption, reflected in the use of images such as “cancer”, and saw it as a major source of injustice, since talented and conscientious workers who lacked influential connections to promote their interests were disadvantaged, while others received benefits they did not deserve. There was

widespread agreement that this situation was perpetuated by social pressure. Leaders were expected to make decisions in favour of those who invoked *wasta* and could not afford to offend those with influence to whom they owed favours, or who might confer favours in the future. Very few responses fell outside these common codes, and these did not contradict the prevailing view, but simply mentioned some additional features. In NWC and SEC, two participants referred explicitly to organisational impacts of *wasta*, beyond the impacts on hiring, performance evaluation and promotion generally mentioned. One suggested in broad terms that all such practices were to the detriment of the work interests, while another criticized the flouting of rules and regulations by decisions that were not consistent with authorized practice. Another individual response, from a participant in STC, raised the idea of impunity by suggesting that those who used *wasta* were beyond challenge or criticism, because the practice was so deeply entrenched.

In contrast to above-mentioned factors, two others were seen in positive terms. There was a prevailing view that education influenced leadership, because it was the means through skills and attributes were developed, which the leader would bring to the workplace, and would affect both his grasp of business methods and his way of dealing with others. Participants differed in their perceptions as to whether type or level of education was most important, although there were some suggestions that exposure to Western education was a valuable source of knowledge about modern management methods. In two of the three organisations, moreover, it was suggested that education promotes freedom of thought, even to the extent of enabling leaders to overcome or set aside other influences. Only a very small minority in each organisation doubted the influence of education, on the basis that some leaders were effective despite having lower educational qualifications than some of their colleagues or even subordinates.

A cultural influence on which there was almost unanimous agreement (being doubted by only two participants, both in STC) was technology, perceived as wholly beneficial in impact. There were similarities in all three organisations in highlighting technology as facilitating effective leadership through improved communication (the most frequently occurring code), access to and management of information, and the opportunity for learning afforded by access to wider resources and new ideas from outside the organisation and even outside the country. In all these ways, technology was seen as an aid to the leader's key role of decision-making. The only two participants who challenged the majority view did so on the ground that it was possible to find leaders who were effective without using technology and to this extent, they saw the influence as "limited".

The cultural factors discussed above were all factors that had been anticipated as a result of the literature review, and all were supported by the majority of participants as factors perceived to influence the practice of leadership. When invited to propose other factors that might be relevant, few participants did so and there were few factors on which there was any agreement. Some participants in NWC and STC mentioned the leader's upbringing, and the media, both of which had in fact been raised in discussion of sources of culture, although not identified as main components of culture in themselves. The only additional factor raised in all three organisations (although only by very few participants) was wealth, which might have indirect influence through, for example, enabling greater opportunity for education and travel, resulting in broadening the mind.

In the next section, these findings are interpreted in the light of previous literature.

#### **6.4.2 Discussion**

As will be seen in this section, the findings of this study reveal a number of commonalities with previous literature regarding ways in which culture has been said to influence leadership in Arab and specifically Saudi contexts. However, the details of the effects of cultural factors and perceptions as to their positive or negative impact reveal interesting tensions and contradictions, which present a picture of a society in transition, maintaining strong traditions yet striving also to keep pace with the modern world, and to find a place within the traditional social framework for new values and practices. This is seen in a broad distinction between two bodies of responses, one reflecting tradition and continuity, the other representing modernity and change.

The continuity of traditional cultural norms and practices is reflected in the predominant trend of responses pertaining to sources and influences of culture in general, and in relation to the majority of the cultural factors discussed: Islamic values, social norms, tribalism, regional affiliation and *wasta*. The recognition of ancestors and religion as the main sources of culture, and the acknowledgement of the pervasive role that the above – mentioned factors continue to play in influencing Saudi society, including leadership in organisations, appears consistent with, for example Schwartz (1992, 1994, 2006) in the characterization of a conservative social order marked by strong respect for tradition.

However, it is interesting to note that these cultural factors were perceived by participants at best with ambivalence, and often as wholly negative in their impact on organisational leadership. Only one of the “traditional” factors, Islamic values, was seen as having a beneficial impact, but even this was seen more as an ideal than an operational reality (similar to the contradiction between espoused and actual leadership style discussed in section 6.2.2 earlier). The agreement on the pervasiveness

of Islam is consistent with the view of both Arab and Western writers, for example Tayeb (1997) and Hutchings and Weir (2006a); the latter described a typology of relations between religion and state, in which Saudi Arabia is characterized at the strongest end of the continuum, where there is no distinction between religion and public life. Participants also agreed in identifying a number of key Islamic values such as fairness, which have been described by, for example, Khan et al. (2010) and Iles et al. (2012). In keeping with these authors (Ali, 2005; Weir, 2008) participants recognized that these values should have positive implications for leadership, since as declared by the mentioned authors, Islam regards leadership as a trust, to be exercised with humanity, fairness and justice. A connection can be seen here with the earlier responses related to RQ2, concerning the treatment of employees with courtesy, dignity and respect, which was widely attributed to the influence of Islam. Nevertheless, as we have already seen, actual leadership behaviours were perceived in many ways to depart from this ideal, a situation which participants ascribed to incorrect understanding of religious requirements, or even a willingness to set them aside under the contradictory influences of traditional affiliations or commercial imperatives. As Tayeb (1997) acknowledges, despite the strength of Islam as a cultural force, many Saudi behaviours owe as much to other equally deep-rooted socio-cultural institutions, and this was borne out in the findings of this study.

All the other factors of the tradition/continuity dimension of culture were perceived in predominantly negative terms, the main complaint being that they led to unfair and unjust leadership behaviour, particularly the influence of favouritism, rather than merit, in hiring and promotion decisions, performance appraisal and the distribution of perceived perquisites, such as training.

One source of such behaviours, regional affiliation, can be linked to Trompenaars' (1993) dimension of Ascription, connoting a society in which social status is conferred on the basis of personal background, rather than individual achievement. Trompenaars found the Arab world in general to be ascription oriented, and Saudi Arabia in particular scored highly on this value. The impact of regional affiliation can also be viewed in terms of Hofstede's (1980, 2001) Uncertainty Avoidance dimension, on which Saudi Arabia also scores highly (Bjerke & Al-Meer, 1993; Hofstede et al. 2010). Historically, when the Arabian Peninsula was inhabited by warring tribes, seeking and competing for scarce resources, safety lay in familiar territory, the support of kin and neighbours, and group solidarity (At-Twajiri et al. 1994; Mohamed & Mohamad, 2011). Similar concerns for the protective value of social solidarity (and, conversely, the danger of being relegated to the 'outgroup') can be seen also to underpin the social pressure of 'shame' and 'face', which the GLOBE study (House et al. 2004) found to be manifested in what they called a "self-preserving" style of leadership, which is procedure – bound and status conscious. Although the GLOBE study did not include Saudi Arabia, it found this face-saving concern in leadership among other Arab states which are neighbours of Saudi Arabia, such as Kuwait.

The tribe, as a basic component of the Saudi social structure and source of personal and social identity (Barnett et al. 2013; Ali et al. 2013) is another cultural factor in status ascription. Hence, tribalism, like regional affiliation and adherence to social norms, operates to reduce uncertainty in a risky environment. Participants' perceptions of the influence of tribal loyalties on leaders' decisions and relations with subordinates also confirm the continued impact of collectivism (Hofstede, 1980, 2001) which, again, the GLOBE study (House et al. 2004) found to be high in the Arab states. However, the influence of the tribe also operates through the power of particular individuals, mainly the sheikh or tribal leader, but also other senior figures within the



tribe, who are able to exercise autocratic authority over members, consistent with Trompenaars' (1993) and Schwartz's (2006) dimension of hierarchy and Hofstede's (1980, 2001) Power Distance. The influence of power and hierarchy were frequently mentioned by participants in their explanation of the cultural pressures seen to influence the way leaders conduct relations with members of the organisation and with the wider society. In this respect, the influence of power distance and hierarchy can be seen as two-fold. On the one hand, leaders in organisations, by virtue of their position in the organisation hierarchy, have power over subordinates, as was seen earlier in descriptions of 'actual' leadership style, the limited participation in decision-making, and superior-subordinate relations (see section 6.2). on the other hand, the leader, as a member of a tribe, is also caught in a web of external relationships and subject to the influence and authority of the sheikh and tribal elite. He is therefore under pressure to make decisions that support the interest of the tribe and its members, whether in the prioritization of service provision, or in securing a promotion for a candidate favoured by those with power within the tribe.

Thus, the prevailing view was that the cultural forces of regionalism, social norms and tribalism, which originated as mechanisms for promoting peace, safety and prosperity in an uncertain and often hostile world, and encompass many strengths such as generosity and loyalty (Rice, 2004; Idris, 2007) have often been misdirected in the organisational context. These factors were seen to result in decision-making and relationships influenced by personal considerations, even when these might be counter to the efficiency and effectiveness of the organisation (compare Commom, 2011), or to the fairness that should prevail in distribution of organisational rewards.

Nowhere were these perceived negative influences of traditional cultural norms and practices more keenly felt and resented, than in relation to *wasta*, which some

participants likened to a disease, even a cancer. As with the earlier – mentioned factors of social norms, tribalism and regional affiliation, the continued, widespread practice of *wasta* can be explained in terms of Saudi Arabia's high scores on Hofstede's (1980, 2001) dimensions of Uncertainty Avoidance, Power Distance and Collectivism. Literature traces its origin to the role of powerful figures such as the sheikh (PD) in managing relations between families and tribes and in the distribution of scarce resources (UA) in order to maintain social cohesion (collectivism) (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993; Mohamed & Mohamad, 2011; Ali, 2013). Another parallel can be drawn with Trompenaars' (1993) dimension of Universalism versus Particularism, reflecting the relative importance attached to general principles versus unique circumstances and relationships. The practice of *wasta* is consistent with the particularistic orientation Trompenaars observed in Arab societies, resulting in the prioritization of individual circumstances and personal relations over formal rules and procedures in intra-organisation relationships. Participants recounted frequent instances of such privileging of personal relationships, which some acknowledged resulted in actions contrary to formally constituted authority and official procedures. This situation was reflected in the ambivalence observed in relation to "flexibility", which some participants took to imply an unwarranted exercise of the leader's discretion to waive rules in order to benefit those with whom he shared kinship or social relationships.

The reported prevalence of *wasta* is consistent with previous reports on the application of ascriptive social criteria in organisations and business in the Arab world (Metcalf, 2006; Common, 2011; Ali et al. 2013; Barnett et al. 2013). Also consistent with previous reports were the examples given of the goals pursued by *wasta*, confirming Barnett et al.'s (2013) contention of a shift in *wasta*'s purpose from collective to individual interest. Similar uses of *wasta* in recruitment and promotion decisions have

been reported by, for example, Hutchings and Weir (2006b) and Whiteoak et al. (2006). More surprising, perhaps, is the unanimity among participants of this study in equating *wasta* with corruption. This contradicts the claim of authors such as Tlaiss and Kauser (2011b) that *wasta* is not seen as corruption because it does not involve bribery. The criticisms of *wasta* by participants in this study clearly reflected personal frustration and resentment among those who do not benefit from *wasta*'s support (similarly reported by Makhoul and Harrison, 2004) and are accordingly disadvantaged (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993). Participants also agreed with previous reports in viewing *wasta* as a cause of poor job performance and organisational inefficiency (Kilani & Sakijha, 2002; Loewe et al. 2008). Nevertheless, their acknowledgement that leaders, as members of a community, cannot afford to ignore social norms or to risk alienating those on whom they depend for support, supports the explanation of *wasta*'s continued prevalence offered by Hutchings and Weir (2006b), Loewe et al. (2008) and Iles et al. (2012) that *wasta* is seen as part of the social structure, associated with trust, solidarity, allegiance and mutual responsibility. Hence, espoused philosophical considerations yield in the face of the deeper, implicit reciprocal obligation associated with family, kin and social networks.

In contrast to the theme of tradition and continuity, discussed above, a counter-theme was observed, related to modernity and change. This was reflected to some extent in specific codes within the categories of social norms, tribalism and regional affiliation, suggesting a view – albeit a minority perception – that these cultural influences are becoming superseded by new values associated with social change. Thus, in the above categories, there were scattered responses such as “decline” and “little influence”. Participants who contended that traditional cultural influences were becoming weakened offered such explanations as professionalism among managers, the ability to separate role requirements from cultural influences, and the impact of new political

imperatives such as national unity – although it is not clear how far these might have been conventional, “politically correct” responses, given the weight of evidence supporting the impact on “exerted” (Argyris, 1993) or “operational” (Klein et al. 2009) culture of deep rooted social norms and values.

More convincing evidence of changing trends, however, was found in relation to Education and Technology, the only categories perceived as almost wholly positive in their impact. For some years, the Saudi government has placed strong emphasis on quantitative expansion and qualitative improvement of education (Atiyyah, 1993; Hunt & At-Twajri 1996b). The private sector has been allowed and even encouraged to take a greater role in educational provision, access to higher education has increased with the establishment of new universities, and scholarships have been provided to enable organisation employees to undertake Master’s and PhD programmes overseas, notably in the United Kingdom and United States of America (At-Twajri et al. 1994; Hunt & At-Twajri, 1996a). Consistent with this trend, participants associated education with exposure to new (and especially Western) ideas, and suggested that a “better” education (whether interpreted as higher level, better quality or more specialized) was associated with leaders’ better understanding of modern management theories and practices, and reduced reliance on constraining social norms. Such perceptions support the claims made from the 1980s onwards that developments in education are beginning to produce a generation of managers influenced by external values, resulting in decreased use of formal power and reflection of tribalistic, conformist values (Moran et al. 2014), a greater tolerance for alternative ideas and a more goal-directed approach (Ali & Al-Shakis, 1985). This can be seen in participants’ descriptions of the “ideal” leadership style (see section 6.2.1), although the contrast between this view and the perceived reality suggests that the cultural convergence claimed by Yavas and Rezayat (2003) is still far from reality.

Similar broadening of cultural horizons was seen for the influence of technology, which participants associated with learning and open-mindedness. Participants' perceptions in this regard were consistent with the assumption in Western literature that technological developments will broaden managers' competencies, and social understanding (Harris, 1993). Nevertheless, a note of caution, consistent with Elmusa's (2015) recognition of the "ambiguity" of technology, can be seen in the awareness that social media, for example, can serve to increase social pressure on leaders, which could have either positive or negative impacts. Moreover, it is perhaps worth pointing out that the case study organisations were large organisations likely to have the resources to invest in new technology; the impact of technology in smaller organisations may be less apparent.

Overall, the findings of this study depict a tension between the two major themes or trends of tradition / continuity and modernity / change, reflecting a society in transition, consistent with earlier findings by Abdalla and Al-Homoud (2001), who reported the existence of dual values, especially among the more educated. Despite the modernising influences of education and technology, however, traditional values remain deeply entrenched, with strong effects on 'actual' as opposed to 'ideal' leadership practices. Three reasons might be suggested for the slow pace of change. First, Ogburn's (1922) notion of "cultural lag" suggests that cultural values and social processes change more slowly than the technical and material features of a society. Second, Saudi Arabia's high power distance accords power and status to seniority; much power in organisations still lies in the hands of the "old guard" who may have had less exposure (whether through education, travel or technology) to new ideas than the upcoming generation of managers. Thirdly, as pointed out by Abdalla and Al-Homoud (2001), leaders who are trying to change can do so only slowly, as in a society structured around tight-knit webs of social relations and reciprocal obligation, they cannot afford

to alienate sources of support. New ideas are very gradually taking hold, as evident in the critical stance taken by participants towards negative aspects of traditional values and practices. Perhaps change will accelerate somewhat as the current generation of Western educated managers move into senior decision-making roles.

## **CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION**

### **7.1 Introduction**

The foregoing chapters have reported the conducting and outcomes of an exploration of the concept of leadership and the way it is affected by national culture, in three Saudi utilities organisations. As indicated in Chapter One, the research was intended to investigate how leaders and subordinates in the selected organisations perceive the leader's role; how they perceive the qualities and behaviours that characterize an effective leader; to what extent and in what ways leadership roles and practices are influenced by a variety of cultural factors, and for each factor identified, to what extent the factor is perceived as having a positive or negative effect on leadership effectiveness. Data was collected by semi-structured interview with three leaders and six subordinates in each of the organisations, and analysed thematically, first for each organisation individually, then across the organisations.

This concluding chapter brings together the main themes of the thesis, offers an evaluation of its outcomes, and points the way forward for future work. The chapter begins with a summary of the main findings in relation to the four research questions posed in Chapter One, in order to demonstrate that the objectives of the research have been met. There follows a discussion of the theoretical, practical and methodological contributions of the study. The limitations of the research are acknowledged and suggestions are offered for further research.

### **7.2 Summary of Main Findings**

This section contains a brief recapitulation of the main findings from the within-case analysis (in Chapters Four and Five for Leadership and Culture, respectively) and cross-case analysis (Chapter Six), presented in accordance with the research questions.

In this way it is demonstrated that the thesis has fulfilled the aims established in the introductory chapter.

### **7.2.1 Research Question 1:**

**How do leaders and subordinates in Saudi utilities organisations understand the leader's role?**

It was generally agreed among leaders and subordinates in all three organisations that leadership is future-oriented. Leaders were expected to set and communicate a vision, to plan strategy and to direct and influence others towards its fulfilment – for example through facilitating and directing teamwork. Thus, leadership was seen as an interactive, relational process. Roles widely ascribed to leaders, apart from setting vision and strategy, included satisfying both internal and external stakeholders, the former through managing opportunities and rewards, the latter through overseeing service quality and making profit. A tendency was observed for participants to display – or ascribe to others – a blurring of the roles of leadership and management, especially as leadership was seen as a role attached to specific positions in the organisation hierarchy, and assumed to be not understood by or of interest to those in subordinate positions. The idea of functional separation was reinforced by assertions that the leader should not interfere in day to day operations.

### **7.2.2 Research Question 2:**

**How do leaders and subordinates perceive the qualities and behaviours that characterize an effective leader?**

Qualities attributed to effective leaders evoked elements associated both with the transformational leadership style of Western models, and the “humane orientation” or



“considerate” style described in Arab contexts. Participants suggested that an effective leader should have the ability to influence, persuade and inspire, and should serve as a role model to his employees (it should be remembered that this study was conducted in an all-male context and all participants characterized leaders as male). A strong ethical dimension was assumed also, in that participants widely asserted the importance of honesty and fairness as leadership attributes. Expected behaviours fell into two basic categories: decision-making and interpersonal skills, perceived as the ability to form and maintain good relationships with subordinates and clients, based on respect and concern.

Interestingly, however, a dichotomy was presented in participants’ responses, between the perceived ideal leadership style, characterized by valuing employees and maintaining a harmonious, friendly and even “loving” environment, and “exercised” or “operational” leadership. Participants – both managers and subordinates – reported a centralized leadership style characterized by autocratic behaviour towards subordinates and arbitrary exercise of discretion in matters such as recruitment, performance evaluation, reward and promotion. These characteristics were said to be manifested in centralization and lack of transparency in decision-making, or what I have termed “pseudo-participation”, where an appearance of consultation and involvement of subordinates was maintained in an attempt to avert resistance, but without any real attention to the views expressed. Similarly, contradictory responses emerged in relation to superior-subordinate relations, whereby the majority of participants described polite day to day dealings in which dignity or “face” was preserved, seemingly inconsistent with the equally widespread complaints of high-handedness and unfairness. The picture emerged of a leadership style that scrupulously observed surface formalities, but equally maintained strongly hierarchical power relations.

### **7.2.3 Research Question 3:**

**To what extent, and in what ways, are leadership roles and practices in utilities organisations influenced by cultural factors, e.g. Islamic values, social norms, tribal customs and traditions, regional affiliation, the education system, and technology changes?**

Participants exhibited common core understandings of the meaning and sources of “culture”; they viewed it as a set of habits, traditions and customs, derived predominantly from one’s forebears and religion, which influence (some went so far as to say control) social action. It was agreed that the influence of cultural factors on leadership is pervasive, and this was viewed as inevitable, because the leader is a member of a particular community, socialized in its ways by upbringing, and subject to social pressure from its members. All the factors listed above were perceived by the great majority of participants as influential. The ‘traditional’ factors: Islamic values, social norms, tribal customs and traditions, and regional affiliation, were seen to have pervasive, direct impacts on specific behaviours and decisions of leaders, notably in the areas highlighted also in relation to Question 2, that is, recruitment and selection, performance evaluation, distribution of rewards and perquisites such as bonuses and training, and promotion. In such decisions, leaders were said to be constrained by social expectations and pressure from powerful individuals, such as the interests of their own family, tribe and region, above other considerations. This was most evident in the strength of influence attributed to the social norm of “wasta”, whereby “connections” were invoked in such decisions. The small minority who doubted the strength of influence of these factors explained their views in terms of old values having been superseded by social change and professional values.

While the above – mentioned traditional cultural factors were perceived to have pervasive, tangible effects on leaders' day-to-day behaviour, the impacts of the “modernizing” cultural factors of education and technology were seen to be more subtle and intangible. They were seen to influence leaders' attitudes and behaviour indirectly, through opportunities for exposure to new ideas and wider alternatives, thereby encouraging open-mindedness and freedom of thought. Interestingly, these factors were particularly associated with foreign, particularly Western influence: Western-style education, opportunity for travel, communication with counterparts in other countries, and exposure to Western thinking on business and management. As with the traditional factors, there was a dominant perception that these factors were influential, but again, a minority of participants who were less convinced of their impact. They attributed their doubts to a view, borne out by their personal experiences, that some leaders appeared to be as effective as their colleagues, or more so, despite not having high levels of education or familiarity with technology.

#### **7.2.4 Research Question 4:**

**For each of the cultural factors identified, to what extent is the factor perceived as having a positive or negative impact on leadership effectiveness?**

As in the case of the previous question, a broad distinction was observed between the “traditional” and “modernizing” factors. The “traditional” factors of social norms (particularly *wasta*), tribalism and regional affiliation were perceived as having almost wholly negative effects. Whilst one or two individuals conceded that such factors might motivate a leader to provide good service, and that the exertion of social pressure might prevent him from making mistakes, by far the dominant view was that these cultural influences were associated with favouritism and cronyism, manifested in unfair decisions. Leaders were depicted as to some extent victims of social pressure

who frequently made decisions – particularly on human resource management and service allocation – based on social factors, at the expense of efficiency, economic rationale, or relative need. The exception to this pattern among the traditional factors was Islamic values, which were seen at least in theory as having positive effects in promoting integrity and consideration. Even those values, however, were seen in practice not to have the beneficial effects expected, due to their being “misunderstood”, “set aside”, or undermined by competing values.

In contrast, the “modernizing” cultural factors of education and technology were seen as almost wholly positive in effect – the only caveat being that technology, in the form of social media, might be another source of negative social pressure. The dominant view, however, was that both level and type of education, by exposing leaders to a wide range of ideas and specialist knowledge, could enhance their decision-making and problem-solving capabilities, and thereby increase their effectiveness in their roles. Education, moreover, was perceived by a few individuals to play a role in challenging and weakening the influence of entrenched negatively – perceived social values, such as tribalism and regionalism. Similarly, technology (which participants tended to interpret specifically in terms of ICT), in addition to its practical value in facilitating communication and access to information within the organisation, was thought to have a developmental, mind-broadening effect, by enabling exchange of ideas and access to “best practice” in other organisations within and outside Saudi Arabia. Although, as noted above, there were a few individuals who did not consider such influences as essential for leadership effectiveness, the prevailing view, nevertheless, was that they tended to promote effective performance of leadership roles.

### **7.3 Contributions and Implications of the Research**

This research offers a number of contributions to knowledge in the areas of leadership and culture, as well as implications for practice and for research methodology in the Saudi context.

#### **7.3.1 Theoretical Contributions and Implications**

Although leadership is an extensively discussed concept, distinctive cultural understandings of leadership have received less attention, and the Saudi context, in particular, is under-researched. This study contributes to the understanding of leadership, by an investigation of how it is conceptualized and practised in the Saudi context and in so doing challenges universal conceptualizations, showing that leadership is socially and culturally constructed. The research findings demonstrate the limitations of applicability of Western theories and concepts of leadership and how context – specific factors may modify their interpretation and constrain their application. Although, for example, leadership as understood and enacted in the participating Saudi utilities organisations contained some features of both transactional and transformational leadership, to the extent that these theories apply in the Saudi context, they do so in a distinctive manner, influenced by social and cultural values. Whilst participants recognized and favoured a transactional leadership role of distributing rewards and sanctions, in practice, a combination of Power Distance and social forces (tribalism, regional affiliation, *wasta*) meant that such transactions did not follow clear and consistently applied rules and standards, but were applied at the leader's discretion, and subject to his social agenda. Similarly, although aspects of the behaviour expected of and performed by leaders exhibited some transactional characteristics, such as idealized influence, inspirational motivation and individualized consideration, the leadership style in these organisations was far from the

transformational model as described in the West, as it had a strong autocratic component. It was noticed, for example, how notions such as “flexibility”, “consultation” and “participation” took an ambivalent tone when seen through the lens of Saudi social norms. By uncovering and exploring such seeming contradictions in leadership ideals and practices, the research contributes to developing the idea of a specifically Arab style of leadership, which has been suggested in other contexts (for example Shahin and Wright’s (2004) study in Egypt) but not elaborated qualitatively or in the Saudi context.

An interesting feature of this Saudi view of leadership has been shown to be the complex interplay between traditional and modernizing influences and, as a result, the contested relationship between espoused and enacted values. Managers and employees alike asserted the role of education and technology change in weakening the hold of traditional values and expressed an “ideal” of leadership that appeared to reflect “modern” (for which one might read “Western”) thinking and perhaps reflected exposure to Western professional education; an example is the participant who defined and distinguished between leadership and management in terms closely akin to Kotter (1990). At the same time they recognized the power of traditional social and cultural values that made it very difficult for a leader to depart from expected norms of behaviour, and indeed internalized and perpetuated those values themselves. The general agreement that decision-making is the leader’s role, despite the espoused wish for consultation and participation, is a case in point.

Another dimension of this study’s contribution to understanding Arab and specifically Saudi leadership as manifested in the utilities organisations is the intertwining of political and social influences. The Saudi utilities organisations were historically public sector, and although they are currently being partially privatized, the

government is still a major stakeholder and influence in decision-making. The government / public role of these organisations is, however, only partially reflected in a service ethic. Although a small number of participants saw satisfying stakeholders and ensuring service quality as part of the leader's role, others mentioned more commercial imperatives, such as making profit. Nevertheless, both these drivers seemed to be subordinate to more narrowly – defined social interests. Consistent with Saudi Arabia's history as a rentier economy, leadership in these utilities organisations has been associated with the use of power and influence in order to perform favours for, and distribute resources to, in-groups. Thus, favoured tribes and regions were seen to benefit, not only in the form of jobs, bonuses and promotions, but even in allocation of the utilities services themselves. It can be suggested, then, that in the Saudi context, not only can the applicability of Western leadership models be challenged, as discussed above, but also the conventional distinction between public sector and private sector values, and their implications for leadership, are blurred. The service ethic is seen to be challenged, not only by commercial imperatives, but also by long-standing traditions of patronage and clientelism. In this situation, pressure to adopt either a national level social service agenda or a purely rational economic motivation, with an attendant concern for efficiency, is reduced and practices such as *wasta*, although criticized, remain entrenched. In this situation, the relevance and applicability, in the Saudi context, of many Western notions of leadership, are called into question.

### **7.3.2 Practical Implications**

In view of the above discussion, it would be inappropriate, if not futile, to offer prescriptions for leadership in the Saudi utilities organisations, based on Western theory or some supposed concept of best practice. As the research has demonstrated, leadership is not a universal construct, and even within the case study organisations,

there are tensions and contestations around the meaning and practice of leadership. This study, therefore, does not offer a ‘recipe’ for – for example – subordinates’ participation or motivation. Its practical contribution, rather, lies in bringing to the surface these tensions, shedding light on the current dynamics in the organisations. Examples of issues uncovered include the undercurrent of condemnation of waste among those who perceive that hard work, loyalty and talent are not equitably rewarded; the cynicism regarding “pseudo-participation”; concerns about the distortion, misunderstanding or neglect of Islamic values; and the conflicting perceptions reflected by the positive and negative dimensions of “dignity”, suggesting that the surface appearance of politeness and harmony masks tensions and resentments. By highlighting these issues, the research draws attention to matters that need to be considered by organisations and their leaders when planning and implementing their practices. This can help boards and lower-level managers to better understand the complexities of the dimensions of leadership and the antecedents and impacts of leadership behaviours, thereby informing the processes of negotiation and exercise of judgement.

Whilst, as noted above, it is not the intention in this thesis to offer “solutions” based on a supposition of universal “best practices”, it is, nonetheless, worth commenting on the impacts of existing initiatives. The Saudi government in recent years has invested heavily in the expansion and qualitative development of education at all levels, and in the acquisition and spread of technology. Both these factors were perceived by a majority of participants to play a part in enhancing leadership effectiveness. Not only were they seen to contribute directly by the provision of relevant technical and managerial knowledge and skills, and by facilitating communication and information management; they were also seen as contributing indirectly by encouraging open-mindedness and, in turn, even contributing to a weakening of negatively perceived



social norms and customs. Whilst the practical impact of these initiatives so far is limited, the attitudes expressed by the research participants suggest the important role that will be played by education and technology in the ongoing transition taking place in Saudi society, including thinking about leadership.

### **7.3.3 Methodological Contributions and Implications**

Although the most important contributions of this study have been in the area of theory – building, and in pointing to the need for a context – sensitive approach to leadership, it is worth drawing attention to two methodological issues.

Firstly, the evidence of the ongoing influence of regionalism and tribalism in influencing cultural norms and practices has implications for researchers. The distinction in treatment between in-group and out-group means that it can be difficult for a researcher to meet insiders and collect data, particularly on sensitive issues. In this study, I was an insider to one of the case study organisations and a citizen of the region where the research was conducted. Nevertheless, gaining access to the organisations for research purposes, and building rapport in order to encourage frank disclosures, necessitated the exploitation of personal social networks – as is customary practice in Saudi culture. The experience of this research, and the strength of influence attributed to tribal and regional affiliation, suggest that other researchers wishing to study Saudi organisations would be well-advised to spend some time in advance, building relationships and establishing connections, in order to facilitate access.

The second point concerns the decision to conduct a wholly – qualitative study. The research thus contributes to a small but growing body of qualitative research in Saudi Arabia, a context where quantitative approaches have traditionally been preferred. The general preference for quantitative methods among Saudi researchers can be attributed

to several reasons: a still – developing research culture, social norms related to privacy, the constraints imposed by gender segregation, and discomfort with the idea of ontological relativism underpinning interpretive approaches (the latter can be linked to Saudi Arabia’s high score on Hofstede’s (1980, 2010) dimension of Uncertainty Avoidance and, in this study, participants’ insistence that Islamic values must be understood and practised in “the right form”). Nevertheless, in recent years, a number of researchers have, despite these difficulties, conducted qualitative studies which have provided deeper insights into social phenomena in the Saudi context. By adding to this body of work, this research demonstrates the feasibility and value of adopting a qualitative approach and examining Saudi culture and practices through an interpretive lens.

Despite the value of these theoretical, practical and methodological contributions and implications, the research, nevertheless, has certain limitations, which are acknowledged in the next section.

#### **7.4 Limitations**

All research is subject to limitations, and acknowledging these is an important aspect of the researcher’s reflexivity. The following are limitations of the present research.

The selection of a case study strategy brings certain inherent limitations, in that the research has focused on just three organisations, and its findings are therefore context – specific. The ecological validity of case study, in that it represents an authentic, naturally – occurring setting, comes at the expense of generalizability. No claims can be made, therefore, that the findings of this study will apply to all large organisations, even within the same national context.

In this respect, a further limitation is the selection of the specific organisations in focus, which represent a particular sector. Organisations in Saudi Arabia differ in terms of public, private or mixed ownership, and the level of expatriate employment, which may contribute to differences in the conceptualization and practice of leadership, which could not be captured by the present study. The sample of participants, too, was limited in both size and constitution, being confined to employees and certain managerial levels in the organisation; it did not include, for example, directors, government ministers, or customers, who may have different perspectives on leadership within this group of organisations.

An issue that any study in Saudi Arabia must confront is the sensitivity of gender, and the implications of a gender – segregated social structure. A limitation of this study was that the participating organisations did not employ women and so the research was unable to reflect a female perspective, although given that in Hofstede's (2010) terms, Saudi Arabia leans toward masculine values, this might have been of interest.

A final limitation that should be considered is the potential impact of my own positionality on the research. I am of Saudi nationality, a Muslim, have lived all my life in Saudi society, apart from the recent few years of study abroad, and work for one of the organisations studied. This was to some extent an advantage in facilitating access to the organisations and in interpreting respondents' comments and experiences. Nevertheless, the possibility cannot be discounted that social norms and values derived from inheritance and socialization may have coloured my experience and interpretations of the research setting. Indeed, it is both a strength and a limitation of qualitative, interpretive research, that understandings are shaped by the researcher's own subjectivity, as well as that of the participants.

With the above limitations in mind, in the next section, some suggestions are offered for further research.

## **7.5 Future Research**

A number of avenues for future research can be suggested, in order to address the limitations of the present work and to build on its contributions, as follows:

1. This study focused on the three main utilities companies in Saudi Arabia. However, there are a number of reasons to suggest that leadership style, and the interaction of leadership with culture, may be different in other companies. Saudi Arabia has embarked on a programme of privatization, although the government retains a substantial stake in many of the former public sector companies. It would be of interest, therefore, to compare the way in which leadership is conceptualized and practised between public, private and mixed companies. Another potentially significant factor is the ethnic composition of the workforce. On the one hand, there are companies such as the oil giant, ARAMCO, which have brought in significant foreign (and notably Western) influences, which may moderate the influence of the Saudi national culture. On the other hand, the government's indigenization policy, which imposes quotas for number of Saudi employees, for companies above a certain size, may tend to increase national cultural influences. Investigating a variety of companies of different size and origin would shed further light on the ways in which leadership and cultural factors interact.

2. This study included participants from two groups: managers and employees. However, as responses in this study demonstrated, leadership roles are performed in relation to various levels in the organisation hierarchy, as well as stakeholders outside the company, including the government, customers and local community leaders.

These other constituencies have various types and levels of interaction with organisation leaders, and can exert various kinds of legislative or social pressure to influence their performance. It would therefore be of interest to explore the perspectives of such groups on organisation leadership and to examine in more depth their relationship with and influence on organisation leaders.

3. This study, like others in the Saudi context, was affected by gender issues, in that the maintenance of gender segregation and cultural perceptions of gender roles mean that certain occupations and organisations are not open to women, and in the professions where women work, they usually have their own department, section or institution. This raises the question whether leadership is perceived and practised differently by women; whether there is a distinctive type of “female leadership”. It would be of interest, therefore, for similar research to the present study to be carried out by female researchers in women’s organisations which are not accessible to men. A rare instance of men and women working alongside each other is in hospitals. Research in these institutions would provide an interesting opportunity to compare men’s and women’s leadership styles.

4. An interesting theme emerging from the present research was a perceived tension between normative Islamic values and the ways in which such values were (or were not) understood and practised. This suggests that a possible avenue for further research, whether in Saudi Arabia or other Islamic countries, would be to explore more deeply Islamic conceptions of leadership and their interaction with social and commercial values. Such research could lead to theory-building on leadership in an Islamic context, and point to ways in which Islamic values can be harnessed to provide culturally – relevant solutions to leadership and management issues in such contexts.

5. The contributions of participants in this study highlighted the contestations around the practice of *wasta*, which appears to remain deeply entrenched, despite the criticisms and resentment of the practice voiced by participants. Although *wasta* has been discussed and researched in a variety of contexts, questions remain as to how it is perceived (this study, for example, differs from much previous research in finding that *wasta* was widely depicted as a form of corruption), the factors that perpetuate it, and the effects on leadership. Investigation of such issues would add to the understanding of how leadership is practised in Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf countries, as well as the extent to which the traditional view and practice of *wasta* is being challenged or superseded by more recent influences.

6. A point touched on briefly in this study, but with potentially deeper significance and wider resonance is the perceived dual role of technology, particularly social media, in influencing the way leadership is viewed and practised. On the one hand, it was suggested that such media can be a source of increased social pressure for leaders, who must be careful to maintain their own reputation and that of the organisation in the face of community expectations and can suffer from adverse postings. On the other hand, technology was seen by some participants as a liberating influence, offering access to new ideas, facilitating professional development and encouraging open-mindedness. With the growing penetration of such media in Saudi Arabia and other countries, it would be worthwhile to investigate more deeply how organisations' relationships with their publics are affected by such media, and how this may influence the conceptualization and exercise of leadership.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix 1: Interview List of Questions**

#### **Semi-Structured Interview**

##### **Introduction**

I would like, in the beginning, to thank you so much for giving your time to participate in this research. The interview will take about an hour; with your permission, the interview will be recorded. I promise and assure you that your answers to the interview questions will be anonymous and kept in strict confidence. The data will only be used for purely academic purposes and will not be related to any profit institutions. The research topic is about the influence of the national culture on the leadership process in the utilities sector in Saudi Arabia.

##### **Section One: Background of Respondents**

1. I would like to start with your qualification and background and then your job. Could you please talk about it?

Prompt; Job name, position, number of years working in this organization, and qualification.

##### **Section Two: Concept of leadership and national culture**

2. Could you please describe the concept of the leadership as you understand it?

Prompt; meaning, aims, process and procedure.

3. Could you please describe the concept of national culture as you understand it?

Prompt; meaning, factors.

### **Section Three: Leadership Conceptualization**

4. Do you think that your boss/subordinates perceive the meaning of leadership?

Prompt; meaning, practising.

5. Do you think that your boss/subordinate realize the role(s) of the leader?

Prompt; meaning, practising.

6. How much do you know about how the process of leadership is employed and how the decisions are made?

Prompt; supervisor told you about the leadership process, are you able to raise questions about the process.

7. To what extent do you feel that the style of leadership used by your supervisor is right and good for the business in the organization?

Prompt; follow the company procedure, how and why?

8. Do you feel that the relationship between supervisor and subordinates impacts the leadership process?

Prompt; explain and provide an example please.

9. Do you feel that the decisions of the supervisor are made objectively and free of personal bias?

Prompt; free of external pressure, personal corruption, free of bias.

**10.** In your opinion, what is the leader's role in Saudi utilities organizations?

Prompt; explain and provide an example please.

**11.** In your opinion, what qualities and behaviours do you think characterize an effective leader?

Prompt; explain and provide an example please.

#### **Section Four: Participation**

**12.** Does your supervisor frequently let you participate in making decisions?

Prompt; give you information, ask you about your opinion.

**13.** Does your supervisor treat you with dignity, respect and politeness?

Prompt; in everyday dealing, privacy, sensitive to your feelings, if yes how, if no why and how

**14.** In general, are you satisfied with the leadership process at your organization?

Prompt; if yes tell me about the main aspect that makes you satisfied, if not why and example please.

#### **Section Five: Culture**

**15.** Do you think that cultural factors affect or are involved in the process of leadership?

Prompt; nepotism, cronyism, favouritism, family, friendship, (Wasta).

- 16.** To what extent and in what ways are leadership roles and practices influenced by Islamic values?

Prompt; examples and how, positive or negative, how often.

- 17.** To what extent, and in what ways are leadership roles and practices influenced by social norms?

Prompt; examples and how, positive or negative, how often.

- 18.** Do you think that tribal customs and traditions play a role in the process of leadership?

Prompt; examples and how, positive or negative, how often.

- 19.** Do you think that regional affiliation impacts the process of leadership?

Prompt; examples and how, positive or negative, how often.

- 20.** Do you think that type and level of education play a role in the process of leadership?

Prompt; examples and how, positive or negative, how often.

- 21.** Do you think that the technology revolution influences the process of leadership?

Prompt; examples and how, positive or negative, how often.

- 22.** Do you know any other cultural factors that influence the leadership process?

Prompt; example, what, positive, negative

## **Closing**

Thank you so much for the valuable time that you spent with me to complete this interview. You have given me very important information that will help in my study. If you feel there is anything that you wish to add or something I missed please feel free to express your feeling. I may conduct follow-up interviews later in order to fill any gaps in the data. At this point, thank you again for your time and contributions.

# Research Ethics Proforma

Appendix A



Business School

## A PROFORMA FOR

### STAFF AND STUDENTS BEGINNING A RESEARCH PROJECT

This proforma should be completed by all staff and research students undertaking any research project and by taught students undertaking a research project as part of a taught module.

#### Part A (compulsory)

Research Proposer(s): Khalid A. Alogaili

Student number (if applicable): 201018151

University of Hull email address: k.a.alogaili@2010.hull.ac.uk

Programme of Study: Ph.D. Business Management

Research (Working Dissertation/Thesis) Title: The Influence of National Culture on Leadership Style in Saudi Arabia

Research (brief): This research will explore how aspects of national culture in Saudi Arabia such as Islamic values, social norms, tribal customs and traditions, and education, how these factors influence perceptions and practices of leadership in Saudi utility organizations.

Proforma Completion Date: 05 March 2013

Tick and sign by one of the following statements:

☐

- 1) I confirm that human participants are not involved in my research and in addition no other ethical considerations are envisaged.

Signature of researcher: .....

☒

- 2) Human participants are involved in my research and/or there are other ethical considerations in my research.

Signature of researcher: [Signature]

If statement 1 is ticked and signed, there is no need to proceed further with this proforma, and research may proceed now.

If statement 2 is ticked and signed the researcher should complete part B of this proforma.



## Part B

*This proforma should be read in conjunction with the Ethical Principles for Researchers and the HUBS flow chart of research ethics procedures. It should be completed by the researchers. It should be sent on completion, together with a brief (maximum one page) summary of the issues/problems in the research (and how they are proposed to be dealt with), for approval to the Chair of the HUBS Research Ethics Committee (or nominated Committee member) or in the case of research being completed as part of a taught module to the student's supervisor or module leader prior to the beginning of any research.*

### NOTE

If this research has a research population of those under 18 years of age it requires specific authorisation, including that from authorities outside the University. It should not proceed until such authorisation has been obtained in writing.

1. Will you obtain written informed consent from the participants? ☒ Y ☐ N  
*If yes, please include a copy of the information letter requesting consent. In the case of electronic surveys it is acceptable to advise participants that completion of the survey constitutes consent. Please provide a printout of the survey template.*  
*If no, the research should not proceed unless you can specifically satisfy the Research Ethics Committee with the measures you will take to deal with this matter.*
2. Has there been any withholding of disclosure of information regarding the research/teaching to the participants? ☐ Y ☒ N  
*If yes, please describe the measures you have taken to deal with this.*
3. Issues for participants. Please answer the following and state how you will manage perceived risks if any answer is YES:
  - a) Do any aspects of the study pose a possible risk to participants' physical well-being (e.g. use of substances such as alcohol or extreme situations such as sleep deprivation)? YES ☐ NO ☒
  - b) Are there any aspects of the study that participants might find humiliating, embarrassing, ego-threatening, in conflict with their values, or be otherwise emotionally upsetting? YES ☐ NO ☒
  - c) Are there any aspects of the study that might threaten participants' privacy (e.g. questions of a very personal nature; observation of individuals in situations which are not obviously 'public')? YES ☐ NO ☒
  - d) Does the study require access to confidential sources of information (e.g. medical records)? YES ☐ NO ☒
  - e) Could the intended participants for the study be expected to be more than usually emotionally vulnerable (e.g. medical patients, bereaved individuals)? YES ☐ NO ☒
  - f) Will the study take place in a setting other than the University campus or residential buildings? ☒ YES ☐ NO
  - g) Will the intended participants of the study be individuals who are not members of the University community? ☒ YES ☐ NO

\*Note: If the intended participants are of a different social, racial, cultural, age or sex group to the researcher(s) and there is any doubt about the possible impact of the planned procedures, then opinion should be sought from members of the relevant group.

4. Might conducting the study expose the researcher to any risks (e.g. collecting data in potentially dangerous environments)? Explain your method of dealing with this. YES ☒ NO
5. Is the research being conducted on a group culturally different from the researcher/student/supervisors? ☒ Y ☒ N  
If yes, are sensitivities and problems likely to arise? ☒ Y ☒ N  
If yes, please describe how you have addressed/will address them.
6. Does the research conflict with any of the HUBS's research ethics principles? ☒ Y ☒ N  
If YES do not proceed Describe for the Research Ethics Committee what action you have taken to address this?
7. If the research requires the consent of any organisation, have you obtained it? ☒ Y ☒ N  
If NO do not proceed Describe for the Research Ethics Committee what action you have taken to overcome this problem.
8. Did you have to discuss the likelihood of ethical problems with this research with an informed colleague? ☒ Y ☒ N  
If yes, please name the colleague and provide the date and results of the discussion.

Dr. Marianne Afanassieva, Supervisor  
many times through supervisor meetings, result  
consent letters has to be granted.

Thank you for completing this proforma. If you are a research student/member of staff this form must be signed by you, your supervisor/colleague and the HUBS Research Ethics Committee representative for your area. In the case of students undertaking research as part of a taught module, it must be signed by you and your supervisor or module leader. Once signed, staff and research students should send copies of this form, and the proposal must be sent to the Secretary of the Research Ethics Committee, Hull University Business School (see flow chart), including where possible examples of letters describing the purposes and implications of the research, and any Consent Forms (see appendices).

Name of Researcher/Student Khalid A. Alogaili

Signature [Signature] Date 05/03/2013

Name of Supervisor/Colleague/Module leader Dr. Marianne Afanassieva

Signature ..... Date .....

For proformas completed by staff and research students only:

Name of Research Ethics Committee member .....

Signature ..... Date .....

For proformas relating to research funded by grants, please complete the following:

pFact no: .....

RAR no: .....

Funder/sponsor.....

## Data Collection Documents

### Supervisor's Consent Letter



4 February 2013

Saudi Cultural Bureau  
Embassy of Saudi Arabia  
London  
UK

#### TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This is to confirm that Mr Khalid Alogaili, PhD student at Hull University Business School, is collecting data in Saudi Arabia during the period from 15<sup>th</sup> January to 15<sup>th</sup> April 2013 for his PhD dissertation titled "The Influence of National Culture on Leadership style in Saudi Arabia".

Please do not hesitate to get in touch if you have any queries about this.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "M. Afanassieva", with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Dr Marianne Afanassieva

PhD supervisor to Mr Khalid Alogaili



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شركة المياه الوطنية  
National Water Company

### إلى من يهمه الأمر

السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته وبعد،،،  
تفيد شركة المياه الوطنية أنه لا مانع من قيام الطالب/ خالد بن عبد الله العفيلي بدراسة ميدانية في مقر الشركة بالرياض ومقابلة بعض الموظفين في ما يتعلق في بحثه في موضوع "تأثير ثقافة المجتمع على القيادات الإدارية في القطاع الخاص بالمملكة العربية السعودية" وذلك لمرحلة الدكتوراه في جامعة هل البريطانية.  
وقد تم إصدار هذا الخطاب بناء على طلبه وذلك لتقديمه للجامعة والملحقية الثقافية السعودية بلندن دون أدنى مسؤولية على الشركة.  
وتقبلوا تحياتي،،،

### To whom it may concern

This letter is to certify that Mr. Khalid Abdullah Alogaili has asked the Water National Company to conduct his field study and interview some employees in the company for the purpose of his research for the PhD at University of Hull, UK, that titled as "the influence of national culture on leadership styles in Saudi Arabia".

This letter has been issued upon his request to be presented to the university and the Saudi Cultural Bureau in London with no any responsibility on the Water National Company.  
Best regards.

مدير أعلى التدريب والتطوير

مروان بن محمد القفاص

Head Quarter

المركز الرئيس



الشركة السعودية للكهرباء  
Saudi Electricity Company  
طاقة مثمرة

الرقم: ١٣٠  
التاريخ: ١٤٣٢ / ١ / ١  
الموافق: ٢٠١٢ / ١ / ١

(إلى من يهمه الأمر)

السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته...

تقدم إلينا الطالب في مرحلة الدكتوراه / خالد عبدالله العقيلي بطلب للقيام بدراسة ميدانية في مقر الشركة السعودية للكهرباء بالرياض، ومقابلة عدد من الموظفين لغرض بحثه في موضوع (تأثير ثقافة المجتمع على القيادات الإدارية في القطاع الخاص بالمملكة) وذلك لمرحلة الدكتوراه في جامعة هل بالمملكة المتحدة.  
وقد تم كتابة هذا الخطاب بناءً على طلبه لتقديمه للجامعة والملحق الثقافي السعودي بلندن دون أدنى مسئولية على الشركة.

وتقبلوا تحياتي وتقديري...

نائب رئيس أول للموارد البشرية

إبراهيم محمد بالغنيم

To whom it may concern

This letter is to certify that Mr. Khalid Abdullah Alogaili has asked the Saudi Electric Company to conduct his field study and interview some employees in the company for the purpose of his research for the PhD at University of Hull, UK that titled as "the influence of national culture on leadership styles in Saudi Arabia". This letter has been issued upon his request to be presented to the university and the Saudi Cultural Bureau in London with no any responsibility on the Saudi Telecom Company.

Human Resources, VP

Ibrahim M. Balghunaim

Date: --- -- --, ....

لَا يَخْفَى

1998

A scatter plot showing the relationship between the number of children (x-axis, 0 to 10) and the number of abortions (y-axis, 0 to 10). The data points are widely scattered, indicating a weak or no correlation.

P.O. Box 67912 Riyadh 11652 Telephone +966 1 452 7000 Fax +966 1 452 8005 E-Mail: contact@slc.com.sa