



## Building Culturally Sustainable Futures: Exploring an ASEAN Leadership Competency Framework for the Halal Supply Chain

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines current issues and future challenges in the Halal supply chain sector, particularly focusing on attracting suitable talent to sustain its rapid growth. Special focus is placed on better understanding what attributes are needed to develop leaders in ASEAN who can ensure culturally safe and respectful cross-border interactions. While significant progress has been made in establishing technical Halal competence within supply chains there is a notable lack of discussion around creating a leadership framework to ensure the sector's ongoing sustainability. Presently, leadership knowledge within the Halal diaspora is largely influenced by Western-centric definitions of effective leadership, which often lack relevance to their cultural contexts and cross-border implications, leading to potential mismatches in application, especially in ASEAN settings. Given the increasing complexity of the trading environment, there is a pressing need for more focused research to develop meaningful and culturally relevant leadership competency frameworks for the Halal sector. This study adopts an exploratory approach, employing a qualitative document analysis to systematically examine and interpret the existing body of literature.

**Keywords:** *capability; competency; halal supply chain; leadership; ASEAN*

### A. INTRODUCTION

The human lived experience has been challenged and disrupted in unthinkable ways in recent years. As we emerge from the clutches of the pandemic and take small tentative steps towards economic recovery the pressure valve of constant change is yet to be released. This constant development is manifest in an array of societal challenges ranging from rapid technological advances, increasing levels of urbanisation, human mobility, and intense cross-border interactions (Fairman & Voak, 2023; Ismail & Masud, 2020; Qadri, 2024). At the forefront of this change is the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) region. This region is experiencing unprecedented growth (Abdullah & Azam, 2020; Alekhina & Ganelli, 2023). The concomitant changes in expectations of consumer markets within this altering context are spurring demand for new meta-competencies (Suarta, Suwintana, Sudhana, &

Hariyanti, 2020; Voak & Fairman, 2020a). This demand exerts pressure on the communities of the ASEAN member states to produce a productive, flexible and mobile workforce (Fairman & Voak, 2023; Voak & Fairman, 2020b).

In this paper, we explore the rationale for developing and building leadership capacity in the Halal supply chain sector as a means of enhancing the ASEAN States' ability to meet future demands for developing human capability (Azman, Sirat, Abdul Rahman, Ahmad, & Komoo, 2023; Indraswari, 2022). Our perspective is that this gap in human capability across the region is widening, and there is no clear and definitive plan to redress the growing hiatus. Without defined and practical human resource development interventions, the Halal sector's ability to attract and retain talented personnel will become increasingly challenged. This lack of depth in human resources, in a world beset by unprecedented change and increasing complexity, means that the area will increasingly face problems arising from an inability to react to unforeseen circumstances. Halal supply chains may not have the agility to react quickly enough to overcome future disruptions similar to the unprecedented impact that Covid-19 has had on National economies (Hidayat, Rafiki, & Nasution, 2022; Sari, Muis, Amatillah, & Janitra, 2023). Further, with many non-Islamic countries exploring the potential of offering Halal exports and establishing Halal industries, there is a pressing need to develop leaders sensitive to the next generation of leaders who are sensitive to the special requirements of compliance (Nawawi et al., 2020; Purwanto et al., 2020). Those leaders will need to be equipped with the appropriate cross-cultural awareness, value systems and abilities to discharge their roles ethically, meaningfully and respectfully (Voak, Fairman, & Wahyuni, 2023).

## **B. METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore and analyse existing literature about leadership competencies in the Halal sector. Specifically, it employs document analysis as the primary methodological approach to systematically review and interpret relevant academic articles, reports, and other scholarly publications. The data collection process involved gathering a comprehensive corpus of literature on leadership in the Halal sector. The search strategy utilises a combination of keywords such as "Halal leadership," "Halal supply chain," "global Halal marketplace," and "leadership competencies." The collected documents underwent a rigorous qualitative analysis to identify consistent themes, patterns, and findings related to leadership competencies in the Halal sector, particularly within an ASEAN context. This analysis involves coding the data, categorising key concepts, and synthesising overarching themes using thematic analysis techniques.

## **C. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS**

### **1. Meeting the Growth of the Global Halal Marketplace**

To meet these growing global challenges and increased complexity, the next generation of leaders working in Halal global supply chains must have the requisite skills, knowledge, and attitudes to dutifully serve their organisations. Those skills, knowledge and attitudes must not only meet today's workplace needs but also incorporate the flexibility, agility and insight to react

to changing circumstances. Such meta-competencies needed for reactive leadership extend well beyond technical Halal know-how and compliance. Future human mobility will be essential for multinational businesses since many still face historical talent challenges yet to be resolved (Voak & Fairman, 2020b). These challenges are evident in situations where multinational businesses operating in Muslim-majority countries in Asia fail to respectfully and meaningfully engage with the cultural circumstances (Bouckaert & Zsolnai, 2012). We contend that an opportunity exists in the Halal supply chain sector to equip future leaders with a sense of global citizenry and an ability to deploy culturally safe practices. These respectful and authentic leadership practices will be urgently needed to meet the demands of increasingly interconnected and interdependent global Halal supply chains.

Indeed, it is becoming evident that developing global leaders remains an elusive desiderata for multinational businesses since each geographic location presents its own set of challenges, cultural demands, needs and landscape (Latham, 2014). This is a talent acquisition problem, which is further heightened when we add the compliance complexities associated with maintaining trust and respect within Halal supply chains. The challenge is to equip our future leaders with the confidence and ability to traverse different cultures and religions, whilst carefully avoiding relationship-building impediments such as stereotyping and cultural indifference (Frost & Walker, 2007; Hanges, Aiken, Park, & Su, 2016). In facing this human capability development challenge, we need to think more broadly about human development, as an enterprise which means moving well beyond the acquisition of mere technical competence. As Latham (2014) recognises, this is not a simple task. This paper seeks to clarify and challenge our notions of cross-cultural competence and looks positively toward the development of Halal leadership meta-competencies. In doing this, we must look more closely at those attitudes and attributes captured and instilled in our next generation of leaders to establish respectful and trusting relationships across the Halal supply chain. Our underpinning aim is to contribute to the building of a broader definition of leadership competence, which, at its core, will help to develop individuals who successfully transcend notions of cultural difference.

## **2. Leadership in the Halal Sector across ASEAN**

It is recognised that valuable work is being done to highlight the need for technical Halal competence within the Tourism, Finance, and Health and Well-being sectors across the ASEAN region and globally (Amali, 2020; Churiyah, Pratikto, Susanti, Wibowo, & Voak, 2021; H. I. C. Hashim & Shariff, 2016; Jaelani, 2017; Joeliaty, Ahmad Faisal, & Wendra, 2020; Mansoor Khan & Ishaq Bhatti, 2008; Yuli & Wojtyla, 2020). Yet, notwithstanding this contribution, little focus has been placed on developing a new generation of leaders within the Halal supply chain sector who can display attributes that foster increasingly complex globalised relationships. The confounding problem is that, while it is clear that leadership competencies do not necessarily change between each level of authority, the expectations of managerial outputs certainly differ. Those expectations are further exacerbated as multinational businesses increasingly work across jurisdictions, a situation that requires encouragement for employee mobility and, additionally, added levels of responsibility due to talent shortages (Ab Talib, 2021; Ab Talib, Hamid, &

Zulfakar, 2015; H. I. C. Hashim & Shariff, 2016; N. H. Hashim, Kamarulzaman, Ab Rahman, & Othman, 2020).

To ensure talent within the region, ASEAN actively encourages greater mobility of skilled labour sectors through its Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC, 2025). An increased level of developed human mobility is required to potentially address personnel shortages in specialist areas, promote essential knowledge transfer, and boost productivity levels (Khonkhlong, 2022; Koty, 2016; Yue, Shrestha, Kimura, & Ha, 2019). In this regard, current ASEAN activities aim to better realise the freedom of resource movement within the region (Rillo, 2018). We anticipate that this freedom of movement will lead to an increase in the complexity within Halal industries as non-Muslim member states continue to enter Halal markets. Increasingly, countries like Thailand and Vietnam, together with others in ASEAN, are looking to establish potential Halal export opportunities (Abdullah & Azam, 2020; Nawawi et al., 2020; Rahman, Hassan, & Mohammad, 2020). Meeting this challenge will require substantially enhanced productivity and efficiency capabilities across supply chains, meaning that there will be a need for capability development investment within the labour force (Tasane & Srun, 2023; Yasin, 2023). This must be done whilst simultaneously building innovative business environments and economic frameworks appropriately to support Halal Compliance and its rapid expansion across the region (Abdullah & Azam, 2020; Al-Fatih & Esfandiari, 2020; Anggara, 2017; Johan, 2018; Voak, 2021).

To achieve this critical economic aspiration, the authors assert that developing competent and agile personnel is pivotal. However, as the region comes to grips with the development of Halal technical competence along cross-border supply chains, there has not been a concerted look at the specific details regarding leadership development within the Halal sector. In this somewhat uncertain situation, Corporations are pragmatically faced with attracting, recruiting, and retaining skilled leaders within the ASEAN bloc, including up-skilling and circulating talented human resources within all participating nations (Chen & Su-Yen, 2016; Dominic & Runde, 2016). This challenge is particularly relevant for the Halal sector, as it needs to not only attract technical competence but also be able to develop leaders who possess certain cultural attitudes and respectful attributes (Voak et al., 2023). If ASEAN businesses aim to capitalise on the anticipated expansion of post-COVID-19 developments, they must earnestly contend with the growing regional leadership scarcity (Hamid, 2023; Iqbal, Ahmad, & Halim, 2020).

The ASEAN region has more than 650 million people who speak a range of languages, having many idiosyncratic dialects and representing a wide range of cultures (Chaisse & Hsieh, 2023; Chuangchid & Siriwato). It is therefore a complex place to do business. This complexity requires that business leaders in the region must fully grasp and comprehend an array of differences, while at the same time respecting employees' and customers' multifaceted diversity. As we have indicated, we see this notion as being critically relevant in the burgeoning Halal sector in the ASEAN region. Careful tailoring of a respectful and ethical approach to Halal leadership across borders and supply chains could mutually increase the economic prospects of the region. To realise this potential, leaders within the ASEAN region must be acutely aware of

the challenges and complexities inherent in their food supply chains, particularly when working across multiple jurisdictions and cultures.

### **3. Better Understanding the Attributes of Halal Sector Leaders**

Much discussion has centred around the differences between Western and Islamic leadership development (Egel & Fry, 2017; E. ElKaleh & Samier, 2013; Rafiki & Wahab, 2014). Nonetheless, Fry (2003) concludes that a dearth of research exists on how the Islamic work ethic could be incorporated into more interdependent and mutually respectful foundational practice. A more holistic approach to leadership theory is envisaged by Suib and Said (2017), who suggest it should aim to focus on and integrate four fundamental areas: body, mind, heart and spirit. Particular reference is made in this context around the spiritual element of leadership and its critical role in determining ethical behaviour (Ahmad, Nawab, & Shafi, 2021; Egel & Fry, 2017; Nasution, Marpaung, & Amirulsyah, 2019). Spiritual leadership can also better facilitate organisational transformation, an approach that is consistent with the success of a 'learning organisation' (Djaelani, Sanusi, & Triatmanto, 2021; Egel & Fry, 2017; Supriyanto & Ekowati, 2020) and can act as an important guide in the complex changing milieu (Bandsuch & Cavanagh, 2005). Nevertheless, whilst there is significant ethical overlap for all food chains, it must be understood that Islamic ethical approaches come from different social requirements and are bound by dissimilar spiritual parameters (Eickelman, 1990; Elmessiri, 2006). A range of researchers have contended that today's leaders must display advanced levels of respect and cultural responsibility which can evoke high levels of interdependent cooperation (Bhatti, Alkahtani, Hassan, & Sulaiman, 2015; Kamil, Osman-Gani, Sulaiman, & Ahmad, 2010; N. Zainuddin, Saifudin, Deraman, & Osman, 2020; Z. I. Zainuddin, 2017). Indeed, Branine and Pollard (2010) believe that Islamic management principles could significantly enhance management practice generally, and indeed ultimately prove pivotal in enhancing Western approaches.

Therefore, leaders who work across borders need to exhibit a more spiritual outlook in their practice (Farmanesh, Zargar, Esenyel, & Vehbi, 2021; Salman, Irfan, & Jabeen, 2017). They are indeed senior organisational representatives of a valuable system of values that can provide important signposts for guidance when faced with critical cross-cultural decisions and ethical questions (Della Corte, Del Gaudio, Sepe, & Zamparelli, 2017). Some of the many examples of good behaviours and moral values stemming from Islamic management practices are steadfastness, trustworthiness, truthfulness, sincerity, cooperation and transparency (Branine & Pollard, 2010). There is also a sense of humanity that is displayed through personal discretions (Branine & Pollard, 2010). Again, the innate sense of 'humanness' comes to the forefront of these leadership discussions (Daiber, 2013; Diana, 2021). The authors contend that humanness is built from a set of values that are lived consistently and are constantly displayed without hesitation by the leader.

Of interest here is that these Islamic values outlined above could potentially be shared within a Western form of leadership theory notionally called values-based leadership (ZydzianaIte,



2018). In this system, the underlying framework stems from followers showing trust in the leader, and the leader transparently respecting the followers (Della Corte et al., 2017; E. ElKaleh & Samier, 2013; E. S. ElKaleh, 2023). In this context, respect, at its core, looks to a sense of placing trust in someone worthy. This worthiness stems from a notion that a leader's attributes consistently stem from, and reflect a values system (Haron, Jamil, & Ramli, 2020; Salamun & Ab Rahman, 2022). Working through this shared understanding, leaders purposively manifest organisational and personal values into their practice (Pruzan, 1998). Van Wart (1998) further enunciates that values-based leadership is already becoming the leading skill that is necessary for a rapidly changing global environment. By embracing this approach, a successful leader can develop a team that shares not only a pragmatic procedural structure but is dedicated to respecting relationships with their clientele (Della Corte et al., 2017).

It is also noted that leadership is a process of human interaction. Essentially there can be no leader without followers. The leader, as the organisation's visionary, must communicate with consistency, clarity and unwavering conviction. These values lived out across the whole supply chain (Gazi, 2020; Omar, 2022; Rizaldy & Hidayatullah, 2021). Values-based leaders are ethical and steadfast and believe strongly that ethical business practices are necessary for long-term organisational survival and the strengthening of the community in general (Parry & Proctor-Thomson, 2002). Further, the discussion around leadership based on values has illuminated the significance of trust and ethics in business dealings (Arun & Kahraman Gedik, 2022; Pratomo & Suhartati, 2021; Purnomo & Ausat, 2024; Sidani & Kaissi, 2023). In this respect, leaders must communicate their fundamental values with clarity and straightforwardness and integrate them into their consistent daily practice. This is vital for organisational development (Gardner, Karam, Alvesson, & Einola, 2021). Additionally, those organisations that operate across borders also need an acute understanding of cross-cultural leadership practices, an attribute that requires a respectful understanding of alternative cultural norms and practices (Sencal & Asutay, 2021).

#### **4. Focusing on the Development of Leadership Meta-Competencies in the Halal Sector**

A potential solution to the development of ASEAN Halal leadership is a move towards using 'adaptive' or 'meta-competencies'. These meta-competencies are essentially sets of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that underpin or allow for the development of appropriate practices in specific situations. Meta-competencies are what could be better described as 'foundational' attributes. Meta-competencies enable learning and contribute to adapting, anticipating and creating change. We suggest that the Halal sector could usefully look to the development of a leadership competency framework that would underpin practice across their food supply chains. These competencies could also contribute to the building of the foundations of cross-border interactions and Halal commerce. While much of the existing focus is placed on compliance and risk management practices in supply chains and logistics practices, such a framework could begin to expound requisite individual values that need to appropriately shape peoples' behaviours (Feather, 2021). Tubbs and Schulz (2006) in their study of leadership meta-competencies, believe that a proper attitude is essential, particularly concerning the notion of respect for diversity, which can markedly lead to an organisation's success.

One such meta-competency essential for leaders in Halal supply chains, and which has been promulgated by extant literature, is what has become known as global citizenry. Global citizen leaders understand inter-connectedness, recognise the importance of respectful practice and show empathy for all stakeholders impacted by corporate decisions (Doerr, Puente, & Kamiyoshi, 2020; Heath & Stafford Son, 2022), particularly when working globally in cross-cultural environments (Mendenhall, Reiche, Bird, & Osland, 2012). Further, global citizen leaders remain honourable to laws of country operation, even though no overarching jurisdiction conveys their rights and protections (Boss, 2020). That said, global citizenry as a leadership competency is fundamental in preserving the Islamic laws and principles that underpin the determination of Halal products and their integrity preservation across global supply chains.

Another key meta-competency that leaders should be able to imbue is Cultural Safety. Cultural Safety is a higher-order growth competency that encapsulates more than cultural competence (Curtis et al., 2019) and is of particular importance in Muslim ethnic minority communities. Cultural Safety is more than cultural awareness and the respect of others. It is about creating environments where an examination of cultural identity and attitudes is conducted with open-mindedness towards cultures other than your own. Here leaders, particularly those in parts of the Halal supply chain may not be capable of discharging their responsibilities satisfactorily in countries with Muslim majorities. In these contexts, there is a need to develop higher-order attitudes that are built on shared respect, knowledge and meaning. Culturally safe leaders are change agents who work to actively engage with their workforce so they may become aware of their cultural values, beliefs, attitudes and outlook, and where inappropriate actions or lack of action could act to comprise the integrity of a Halal supply chain.

#### **D. RECOMMENDATIONS**

The study underscores the intricate challenges facing the burgeoning global Halal marketplace, stressing the imperative for forthcoming leaders to possess a multifaceted skill set, comprehensive knowledge, and adaptable attitudes to effectively navigate the complexities inherent in Halal supply chains. It highlights the critical need for developing leadership competencies that transcend mere technical proficiency, extending into realms of cultural awareness and global citizenship. The authors advocate for future research endeavours to pivot towards crafting a bespoke leadership competency framework tailored explicitly to meet the unique demands of the Halal sector.

In delineating future research avenues, the research accentuates the significance of delving deeper into the attributes characterizing effective leaders within the Halal domain. It advocates for a paradigm shift towards values-based leadership, emphasizing the pivotal role of ethical conduct and trust-building in driving sustainable organizational growth. Furthermore, the discourse expounds on the importance of fostering meta-competencies, such as global citizenry and cultural safety, which are instrumental in engendering leaders capable of navigating diverse cultural landscapes with finesse and sensitivity. Moreover, this investigation underscores the exigency of understanding and embracing cross-cultural leadership practices, particularly in the

context of the Halal sector's expanding global footprint, particularly across ASEAN. It posits that comprehensive Halal leadership development strategies in the ASEAN region must encompass a holistic approach, embracing not only technical acumen but also cultural fluency and ethical integrity. The authors further advocate for a nuanced understanding of leadership as a dynamic process of human interaction, underpinned by values of transparency, respect, and ethical stewardship.

In essence, this paper outlines a roadmap for future research endeavours aimed at fortifying leadership capacities within the Halal sector within ASEAN, emphasizing the cultivation of meta-competencies and values-based leadership approaches. It underscores the critical role of effective leadership in fostering sustainable growth and resilience across Halal supply chains, advocating for a concerted effort to develop leaders equipped to navigate the multifaceted challenges of an increasingly interconnected global marketplace.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

We contend that building a Halal leadership competency framework for the ASEAN region based on core values and respectful cross-cultural dynamics is necessary to maintain trust along increasingly complex and interdependent global supply chains. The viewpoint advocated in this paper is that leaders across, and within, Halal supply chains influence others by their actions and behaviours. Therefore, by our definition, values-based leaders have the real potential to contribute to upholding the integrity and trust given implicitly to them by Halal consumers. We also recognise that whilst technical competencies are essential and critical to maintaining operational flows, and are therefore fundamental in ensuring Halal compliance, we must also urgently begin discussing how the Halal supply chain sector might work to attract and develop a generation of leaders suited to meet the value-needs of this rapidly growing industry.

Based on the findings of this study, future research directions may include empirical investigations to validate the identified leadership competencies in the Halal sector, as well as comparative analyses across different cultural contexts. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could explore the dynamics of leadership development and its impact on organizational performance in Halal supply chains. This increasingly complex global environment would also suggest that more focused research is needed to develop meaningful, respectful and relevant Halal sectorial leadership competency frameworks that successfully integrate the necessary socio-political values and cross-cultural complexities inherent in modern supply chains, particularly across the burgeoning ASEAN region. These frameworks must be contextually ASEAN to ensure their practical application. Moreover, a grassroots definition of success that transparently impacts multiple stakeholders along the increasingly global and progressively interdependent supply chain networks. It is asserted here that Halal leadership meta-competencies in ASEAN are urgently needed to ultimately ensure that trust and respect are maintained in services and products throughout these extremely complex economic and national food security systems which depend on trustworthy supply chains. Further, these meta-competencies are needed to realise the ASEAN's block goal of encouraging cross-border human mobility and trade.



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