

# An Appreciative Journey to the Formulation of a Business School Credo

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*This paper narrates how a community outreach initiative to interview local leaders on organizational adaptation to COVID morphed into a systematic reflection on Emirati-expatriate leadership relations in the UAE with an eclectic mix of thinkers serving as guides along the journey. Influenced by Cooperrider's call for an appreciative inquiry into the tragic as well as the ordinary and extraordinary, a deep dive is undertaken into the following questions:*

- *Why and for whom do Emiratis and expatriates sustain their pursuit of excellence?*
- *Why and how do Emiratis seek to engage expatriates in this pursuit?*
- *Why are expatriates initially charmed but often prematurely 'exit' as this engagement runs its course?*
- *Where in some of the stories told about Sheikh Zayed can be found a more life-giving purpose?*

*The journey eventually returns home by discussing how it influenced the formulation of a philosophy to guide the strategic process in my business school and could be relevant to other academic 'place shapers' seeking cross-cultural enrichment.*

*Keywords: appreciative inquiry, Emirati-expatriate relations, place-shaping, Credo formulation*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper was not originally intended to make a scholarly contribution. It started with the intention of documenting a community outreach initiative I undertook as the Dean of a small School of Business (SoB), in a university located in the Northern United Arab Emirates (UAE)

Following my appointment in 2018, I was delegated the authority to do what was necessary, within the framework of the University's mission and strategy, to lead the School toward achieving, within five years, initial accreditation with the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB, 2022). This involved building a team to restructure programs, redesign curricula, refocus faculty on higher quality and more socially impactful research, establish clear guidelines for performance evaluation, foster pedagogical innovation, assure student learning and, of course, build mutually beneficial linkages with local suppliers of organizational leadership to enhance our educational impact within the local eco-system and beyond. We made steady, across-the-board progress in all respects. This was validated by AACSB's response to various progress reports and their judgment that we were ready to host a peer review team in February 2023 as the final step on our journey to initial accreditation.

However, like all higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UAE, we were confronted during the 2020-21 COVID episode with the challenge of shifting to an online working and teaching modality. Like most such adaptive challenges, this one also contained seeds of opportunity.

One opportunity I saw, as Dean, was to conduct a series of online interviews with prominent executives who I had already met, interacted with, seen as key players in the supply of locally-based organizational leadership and thought could help us even more than they had already done in our future strategic initiatives.

The topic was 'Leading Your Organization Through the COVID Crisis', with five hour-long interviews, two with Emirati citizens (E1 and E2) and three with non-Emirati expatriates (N1, N2 and N3). In common with most organizations operating outside 'free zones' in the UAE, their organizations were either government-owned or hybrid in nature. E1 led a non-profit making higher education institution (HEI), E2 a government department, N1 a national bank, N2 a local cluster of an international hotel group, and N3 a government-owned port company.

My initial expectations were somewhat modest. I thought the interviews could generate useful local content for leadership courses. I hoped they could enrich our connections and social capital with key stakeholders. This relatively modest intent is reflected in the nature of the questions (See Appendix 1). Apart from the relatively open-ended first question, the others were all 'what', 'which' and particularly 'how' questions. There was not a single 'why' question!

They were appreciative but 'safe' designed to signal to the interviewees that this would be a positive, constructive interview in which they would be asked to elaborate on how they drew from their resilience to sustain organizational resilience in adapting to COVID.

However, an appreciative 'flow' developed as the interviewees were charmed and disarmed enough to move to a discussion, or at least an intimation, of their 'whys' with interesting differences emerging between Emirati and expatriate explanations. Illuminating these may be a constructive contribution toward finding potentially transformative ways through some of the issues, tensions and misunderstandings that can arise as Emiratis and expatriates engage cross-culturally in pursuing organizational excellence. Even more interestingly, this led to a critical re-evaluation of 'pursuing excellence' that is almost universally taken for granted as the basis of shared organizational purpose in almost every sphere of UAE life, including higher education.

This paper is divided into four further sections. The next will relate Cooperrider and Fry's (2020) articulation of the 'spirit' and potential depth dimensions of appreciative inquiry to the three 'why' and one 'where' - type questions that will be explored in subsequent sections:

- Why and for whom do we need to strive to pursue excellence when the 'shadow of death' is passing over our organizations during a crisis?
- Why and how do Emiratis seek to engage expatriates in pursuing organizational excellence?
- Why are expatriates initially charmed but often choose to prematurely 'exit' and return to their home countries as this engagement runs its course?
- Where in the stories told by both Emiratis expatriates can be found a more life-giving purpose than the relentless pursuit of excellence?

The paper will conclude by sharing how this line of questions suggested a reframing of 'place-shaping purpose' from 'pursuing excellence' to 'cultivating life-giving quality' in formulating a philosophy to guide the reformulation of vision, mission, and strategy in my school as well as proposing, more generally, the contribution deeper forms of appreciative inquiry can make to the practice of 'place shaping' leadership.

## **THE EMERGENCE OF 'WHY' QUESTIONS AS THE FIELD OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY DEEPENS AND MATURES**

From its small beginnings (Cooperrider and Srivasta, 1987), the field and practice of appreciative inquiry (AI) has burgeoned into a cottage industry of books, articles, and scholarly reviews. These try to locate it within a broader tradition of thought related to organizational development and have generated commoditized courses and training manuals that often recommend the '4-D model,'<sup>1</sup> and other structured approaches to facilitating both large and small-scale appreciative inquiry summits that follow the '8 Ps'<sup>2</sup>. Case and meta-analyses document multiple applications of this approach and consider ongoing critiques and responses to its purported 'bright-sideism'. At the reflective center of this field of theory and practice

stands David Cooperrider, reminding its adherents of its essence or spirit, building connections and assimilating the ideas of related fields such as positive psychology and neuroscience, and responding humbly and thoughtfully to its critics. Concerning its essence, Cooperrider writes.

*AI is about the search for what gives life to people, their organizations, and the opportunity-saturated world around them. ...It involves... the craft of asking questions that elevate a system's cooperative capacity to apprehend strengths and positive potentials, (discovery), unite around greater meanings and shared goals, (dream) and activate the kind of generative designs (design) that serve to open those systems to better and more valued possibilities (Cooperrider and Fry, 2020, 267).*

Far from reacting defensively to critics, Cooperrider acknowledges an intellectual debt to them in prompting thoughtful explorations of the dark side of organizational life. In the harrowing circumstances of a global pandemic, this thought leader poses the following question:

*In terms of the debilitating reverberations of this pandemic—looming bankruptcies, organizations filled with toxic stress and fear, and tough decision-making often behind closed doors—isn't it an oxymoron to be appreciative? (Cooperrider and Fry, 2020, 269).*

Cooperrider has developed a Maslowian-type pyramid model to address this issue to distinguish three dimensions of AI. These three levels correspond to the distinctions between 'what', 'where' and 'how' questions followed in this paper:

- (i) AI into the extraordinary involves 'what'-type questions e.g. 'What practices, styles of leadership' produced the 'positive deviations', the exceptional performance or the superlative level of excellence being observed?
- (ii) AI into the ordinary is driven primarily by 'where'-type questions – 'Where are there signs of life in our apparent mundane reality that can be amplified to infuse it with new life?'
- (iii) AI in the midst of tragedy leads by 'why'-type questions e.g. 'Why do we keep going in the face of an existential threat that causes others to despair or lose hope?'

From this perspective, it would seem the 'what'-type questions included in the interview list were not intended to explore the depth of the subject. However, the power of appreciative inquiry is such that the conversational flow it generates can point to questions arising from deeper 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> levels, particularly when these are implicit in 1<sup>st</sup> level questions. These will now be considered.

## **WHY AND FOR WHOM DO RESPONSIBLE EMIRATI AND EXPATRIATE LEADERS KEEP PURSUING EXCELLENCE?**

An impressive characteristic of all the leaders interviewed was their strong sense of organizational responsibility. It was obvious and unremarkable to them that striving for organizational excellence *is the right thing to do*. Thus, their motivation is deontological rather than instrumental in any narrowly self-interested sense.

On reflection, these 'why' questions seem to be implicit in the first two 'what' questions with which I opened the interview: 'Can you tell something about yourself and the key events in your life and career leading up to your appointment in your current role?' and 'Have you had any crucible experiences (Bennis and Thomas, 2020) in your life and career up to your current appointment?' From an appreciative perspective, these were, in retrospect the best questions of the interview since they were exploratory and disarming rather than blunt and confronting. They drew the interviewees into shedding some light on the cultural and personal roots of their narrative sense of identity and set in motion an appreciative flow that carried the interview through the somewhat safe, first level questions that followed.

## **An Exploration into Emirati Understandings of Finding the Right Thing to Do**

So, in what ways did the stories told by the two Emiratis differ from those told by the three others? For the Emiratis, their stories reflect a cultural rootedness. They have been brought up in a particular place, a home within the local 'home' or 'place' ruled by a family headed by a Sheikh to whom they pay immediate homage. They have been bestowed various honors by their Sheikh, including the gift of an overseas university education leading up to and including their current appointment. They have spent periods away from home in which the challenge of cross-cultural experiences provided them the crucibles that made them the leaders they are today, able to function effectively across cultural boundaries while remaining strongly rooted to where they have come from, where they have now returned and where they expect to belong for the foreseeable future. So what can be said about this culture in which they are rooted and how does it shape the Emirati understanding of the right thing to do?

Emirati culture is essentially patrimonial. It takes as its point of reference the head of the family, the Sheikh, from whom the bestowal of honor flows down to family members below him. The bestowal of honor is typically highly ceremonial and communicates to the bestowed the place they are now trusted to have in the Sheikh's family. A circular flow of honor is thus co-created in which the Sheikh bestows honor on those below him for whom 'bringing honor to the Sheikh' is always the appropriate response and right thing to do.

For the Emiratis – E1 and E2 – such an understanding has also been formed through their upbringing and socialization as subject citizens in the United Arab Emirates. They see themselves both as subjects of the Emirate in which they live and work but also as citizens of a nation formed from seven Emirates in 1971 under the inspiring and unifying leadership of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan (universally revered by Emiratis as 'Father of the Nation') that was peacefully passed on to this ruler's son, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan in 2004 who was, in turn, succeeded by half brother, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan in 2022.

So, what does being an Emirati citizen signify? Firstly, it opens up a distinctive 'voice' in addition to the normal 'exit' and 'loyalty' mechanisms schematically elaborated more than fifty years ago by Hirschman (1970). They do not have the right to vote in the formal democratic sense, but they are honored by being given the 'ear of the Sheikh'. This honoring generally occurs at the local level but may ascend to the national level as various citizens and members of the ruling families are included in the hierarchical layers of - both formal and informal - consultative, advisory, and deliberative fora that ascend to the Federal Supreme Council, comprising the rulers of the seven Emirates, the highest constitutional authority in the United Arab Emirates (UAE Cabinet 2022). At every level, the formal manifestations of these fora mirror the traditional majalis helpfully described in the Abu Dhabi culture website (2022):

*run by elders, chieftains and sheikhs during (which), the host hears complaints, demands and other issues of the people and seeks to resolve them. The atmosphere is one of constructive dialogue, defined by honesty, openness, freedom and ingenuity.*

But majalis are not the only fora where citizens may access the 'ear of the Sheikh'. Making yourself accessible to your people is a strongly held value within Emirati leadership culture. Your sheikh is a welcome guest at weddings and iftars (the evening meal with which Muslims end their daily Ramadan fast at sunset). They mix and mingle, usually surrounded by an entourage of family members. They are interested in listening at least as much as speaking and signify by their comparatively ordinary traditional dress that they are 'one of us' with 'our welfare at heart'.

Critical (non-Emirati) observers should not be quick to conclude that the apparent benevolence of these interactions conceals a potentially darker dynamic involving the distribution of 'wasta'. Within Bedouin Arab culture, a Sheikh would consider it demeaning and insulting to be considered as a distributor of wasta, loosely translated as 'connections' or 'influence' whereby the 'person receiving the favour incurs a debt of gratitude which may have to be repaid in the future' (Feghali 2014). It is important to recognize that this 'person' is typically an intermediary rather than a Sheikh who does not have to 'acquire' prestige but *has* it legitimately by this ruler's own story of rising through the royal family to an internally acknowledged pre-

eminence. Moreover, the Sheikh, may, without diminishing moral authority, take a pragmatic stance toward the practice of *wasta* by intermediaries. It has a time-honored place in the Arab world for ‘managing relations between families, clans or tribes’ in which ‘an individual or group of elders respected by both sides’ could be called upon to resolve conflict ‘through negotiation and compromise while salvaging the honour of the parties involved’ (Fegali 2014).

And so, to be accorded the ‘ear of the Sheikh’ would be viewed by the royal bestower of this honor as enough in itself. But what does this mean for the recipient of such an honor? Put simply, you honor the Sheikh by carrying out the responsibilities the ruler has bestowed upon you in a way that brings this personage honor.

Both E1 and E2 derived this intrinsic, deontological sense of responsibility from the royal decrees that established their organizations and sealed their own current appointments and from the understanding that these roles and the own informal connections they have developed with their ruling Sheikh give them continued ‘access to his ear’. This sense of responsibility gives rise to a sense of purpose that is place-bound in its scope. It actually has an affinity with the ‘place-shaping’ purpose proposed for local authorities in an important recent stream in local governance thinking and practice (see Horlings et.al 2020 for a recent literature review). With the ceremonial bestowal of honor by the Sheikh comes a sense of purpose to bring your sovereign honor in the place given you in the ruling family’s household. But the particular ways in which this is worked out is also shaped by the narrative history of the Emirati leader’s own life and experience.

For example, for E1 the place-shaping purpose of the HEI established through royal decree by the local Sheikh is to locally participate in the national and global pursuit of *excellence* in the field of higher business education. E1’s high aspiration in this regard is reflected in the most recent formulation of the HEI’s vision to ‘set a new standard for student-centered excellence in in the Gulf Region’. However, E1’s understanding of excellence is shaped by the personally transformational effect of overseas educational experiences. The way this is tied up with face-to-face instruction in the beautiful modern campus this President is overseeing the construction of, is elaborated in the interview when the conversation turns on the painful but necessary ‘pause’ in its pursuit during the COVID episode:

*We don’t think online is the best way to go. Education is not only about having the information. ...Education is a process whereby students interact vertically and horizontally with peers, professors and surrounding environment. This was my own experience.*

COVID confronted E1’s leadership team with the challenge of how to make the best of a tragic situation that could not be avoided both because of government mandates and guidelines and the President’s own humane concern for the health of students, faculty, staff and visitors:

*If COVID stops us from getting all, we have to get something. And we have to follow mandates because we are accredited by the ministry. Also, the health of a person is precious. So we have to balance. We have to find what others are doing and divert resources (for example to IT). Students working online are not getting what they are paying for. So hopefully, we can go back as soon as it is safe to our normal face-to-face mode of delivery.*

For E2, the key to achieving excellence in performing the advisory and regulatory functions of his department is to develop excellent teams. E2 described learning this in the course of moving from academia to business to government and went on to say:

*I see myself as a consultant and advisor – not just a leader. Within our teams we encourage open discussion and advice. .... It is also a culture of excellence. Good leaders provide you with resources and support you to achieve goals. They reward achievers.*

E2 sees COVID from a less tragic perspective than E1 and drew attention to some its positive effects:

*We found virtual meetings to be more efficient and convenient. We were able to advise clients on business model changes, process innovations and developing online services. We stayed open to collect license revenue but were still able to keep the rate of infection among staff less than 0.5%*

So despite the common background and similar narrative history of E1 and E2, the differences in their understanding of the place-shaping purpose of the organizations they had been given responsibility for, meant that there were interesting differences in their stories about how they sought to find the right way through the COVID situation.

### **An Exploration Into Expatriate Understandings of Finding the Right Way to Do Things**

What N1, N2 and N3 share in common is the expatriate experience of growing up and being educated somewhere else, advancing in their careers by working in different places where, like their Emirati counterparts, they experienced the crucible-like effect of having to cross-cultural boundaries, before they were welcomed as ‘guests’ into the Sheikh’s ‘place’ where they have been honored by being given executive responsibility in their current organization. Although the interviews did not explore their religious affiliations or sensibilities (or even if they had any), they conveyed a sense of gratitude for the well-paid and comfortable circumstances they now find themselves in. However, while they would feel respect and gratitude to the Sheikh through whom they now enjoy these circumstances, their motivation for doing the right thing does not primarily come from a desire to honor him. It rather comes from a sense that they have generally been luckier or more blessed or privileged than the employees under them or the customers they are called to serve. And so they must act on their behalf, striving to sustain business continuity in their interests. Whether they understand this as a form of *noblesse oblige* – the unwritten obligation of the privileged to act honorably and generously to others – or servant leadership (Greenleaf 1998), their understanding of the right thing to do, takes into account the kind of bottom-up hierarchy of responsibilities encapsulated in Johnson and Johnson’s famous credo (2022) with customers coming first, followed by employees, communities and stockholders.

In interviews, the three expatriate leaders all described how this type of priority ordering shaped their response to COVID. N1 described the importance of priority-setting in finding the right way forward:

*It called for exceptional business continuity planning. Nothing could prepare anyone for this. I sat down with the Board and set clear priorities:*

- 1. Do everything we can to protect health and safety*
- 2. Keep operations running*
- 3. Do everything to make sure banks had sufficient funds*
- 4. Do whatever it takes to help customers*

*Other than that, don’t do anything – just focus on these and nothing else.*

N2 walked me through what was a painful but necessary process of keeping the organization going as a future source of livelihood for the employees it was able to keep:

*We had to make some difficult decisions. There were some redundancies but we needed to communicate that in ways that gave people a sense of dignity, that we were doing it as an absolute last resort. We also had salary cuts for many months. We had to get everyone on board so they understood what we were doing and why we were doing it.*

The first two priorities mentioned by N2 were conflated by N3 who saw the challenge as being to

*keep the operation going and keep people safe so that although most continued working in their offices, the administrative staff split up to keep numbers in limits and the operational side teams were structured to ensure continuity in operation’.*

### **Scope for Finding a Shared Purpose**

On reflection, it may seem that despite cultural and personal differences in the way Emirati and expatriate leaders frame their understanding of the right ways to do things in particular contexts and situations, these are not sufficient to necessarily preclude them from arriving at a shared sense of purpose. The pursuit of student or customer or practitioner excellence would seem to provide both a way to honor the ruler and also exercise servant-style leadership. However, tensions can arise during this quest that can be illuminated through an inquiry into the next three ‘why’ and ‘where-type’ questions’.

## **THE TRAGIC AND HOPEFUL DIMENSIONS OF EMIRATI-EXPATRIATE LEADER STORIES**

A reflective ‘deeper dive’ into the next three questions can shed some light on the potentially, but not inevitably, tragic paths along which the accumulation of disappointments and tensions can come to fray Emirati-expatriate leadership relations even if they initially agree on a common purpose to pursue excellence.

### **Why and How Do Emiratis Seek to Engage Expatriates in Their Pursuit of Excellence?**

What is striking about almost sphere of UAE life is the all-pervasive and unquestioned acceptance and promotion of the pursuit of excellence as a framing organizational purpose. The tangible expression of this ‘quest to be the best’ is perhaps most vividly seen in the hyper-modern city-state of Dubai with its world’s tallest building, the Burj Khalifa, officially opened in 2008, and with the showcasing of the recently concluded ‘best ever’, ‘Expo 2020’. However, it is also reflected in the mission statements of almost every organizational entity in the UAE, most strikingly in the case of federal and local government-linked and monitored organizations such as HEIs. So what implications does this have for the three ‘why questions’ posed in the introduction to this paper?

Firstly, Emiratis do not just engage ‘Westerners’, but anyone, who can help them in their quest to be the become and stay the best. A documentary series on ‘The History of the Emirates:’ (2019) <https://historyoftheemirates.com/en/homepage/> - links the nation’s contemporary quest to engage the best from around the world in its pursuit of excellence to the extraordinary openness to new people and ideas of tribal ancestors who, even in antiquity, kept open ancient land and sea routes to connect and interact with those who could help them flourish in its harsh environment. A charming indication of how potent myths and metaphors about exemplary foreigners could be constructed to communicate what the pursuit of excellence could mean for individual team members was offered to me by N2 in the following excerpt from transcript of our interview:

*I tell my team members to ‘become like Germans’. After the second world war, Germans committed themselves to set aside 2 hours a day free to rebuild Germany. I encourage my people to work after hours to demonstrate their commitment to the UAE. We’re part of nation-building. I like to guide my people with the best stories.*

Of course, the UAE is not alone in its commitment to pursue excellence. But what does give Emirati organizational leaders a comparative advantage in the global talent market is their culturally based understanding of what it means to be a ‘good host’.

## Why Are Expatriates Initially Charmed but Often Choose to Prematurely ‘Exit’ and Return to Their Home Countries as This Engagement Runs Its Course?

With specific reference to the Dubai model of pursuing excellence, Barnes (2013, p.2) writes

*The greatest asset they have had in their quest for a space at the global top table has been their understanding of hospitality, passion, and ability to make guests feel welcome.*

Barnes goes on to draw from Derrida (2000) and Shryock (2004) to explain that, while being a good host involves welcoming and treating a guest as a member of the family, there is a place and time-boundedness to this Bedouin understanding of hospitality:

*For instance, when a host says, 'My house is your house' (Shryock, 2004), (this) does not mean that that extends to the entire house. The invitation to the guest specifically relates to the areas that are meant for guests that are separate from the living quarters of him and his family.*

In being drawn to a place where they can continue the same pursuit of excellence they may have been engaged in elsewhere, while being honored as guests like family members in the places assigned them in their host's house, expatriates may tragically misinterpret and underestimate the significance of these boundaries. This can occur in a number of ways.

First, they may not understand that tied up with the value of hospitality, with being a good host, is the value of mastery understood as being the ‘master of my house’. The subtle power relations implied in the traditional outworking of these values fascinated Derrida (2000). Barnes (2013, p.2) explains:

*Derrida's assertion that there is a need for one to be the 'master' of their home is both strengthened and weakened by the heavy ritualization that bounds Bedouin hospitality and, consequently by the rules that would dictate whether you were a good/bad host/guest.*

When transmuted into the modern and modernizing Emirati-expatriate engagement in the pursuit of excellence, this traditional understanding of place-bound mastery can play out in interesting ways. Typically, the Emirati ‘host-master’ gives the expatriate ‘honored guest’ space to pursue excellence in the best way they deem fit. As an exemplar of best practice, this is usually set out in the job description and performance expectations of a typically limited-term but renewable expatriate employment contract. But within this framework, the host retains the sheikh-like prerogative to intervene to assert mastery when considering the guest needs to be reined in or even put in his or her place. For the host, this is seen as entirely legitimate and is simply a downward expression of the honor and personal trust their own sheik has bestowed on them. The host would not see it as a betrayal of the trust developed with the guest. Rather it would be seen as a redefinition of this trust relationship so that it can be rendered more sustainable. Unfortunately, perhaps due to an overestimation of the limits of hospitality, the guest may see it as an unwarranted and unexpected interference in what they thought the terms of engagement to be.

And so disappointments can accumulate on both sides. In many ways this can follow the cycle of hope and disappointment described by Hirschman (1970 and 1982). Thus, if the costs and risks of exercising voice cause it to be muted, self-censored or even silenced, disappointments can silently accumulate until a hope-based engagement collapses into ‘loyalty’ (the ‘stay and put up with it’ mechanism) or exit (the ‘now its time to move on’ mechanism). It can be easily seen how this somewhat tragic process can work out during the course of an Emirati-expatriate leadership engagement to predispose expatriates to move on before the completion of their contracts.

But there is a second deeper dimension to seemingly banal decisions to leave the UAE before contracts expire that can be generalized to a critique of the pursuit of excellence as the governing purpose of organizational life, not just in the UAE but elsewhere. And this relates to the dominating, unifocal, all-encompassing nature of the pursuit of excellence as a governing principle of organizational life. More than



the pursuit of profit, the pursuit of excellence can be embraced by all type of organizations, public and privately-owned, non-profit and profit-making, or, as is the case in much of the UAE, some hybrid of these types. It is thus more akin to the post-enlightenment pursuit of ‘progress’ or the Greco-Roman classical pursuit of ‘public glory’ in that they similarly require the subordination of values, ideals and people to their exclusive pursuit (Hirschman 1977).

An illuminating explanation of what is at work in a fundamental way here can be drawn from Martin Buber’s classic treatise *Ich und Du*, usually translated as *I and Thou* (1923, 1937). *I and Thou* has been seminal in developing existential philosophy of dialogue. Its point of departure is Buber’s exploration of the meaning of two combined ‘primary words’ *I-It* and *I-Thou*.

From this perspective, these primary words refer to intimate relations rather than signifying things. When we relate through the *I-it* mode we perceive the ‘its’ in our view as objects and treat them as means to the ends we are pursuing. Thus, when we follow a governing purpose such as the pursuit of excellence, we will treat everything and everyone as a means toward its singular end. By contrast when we address another as *Thou* we are signaling our self-surrender to an *I-thou* relationship in which we take a stand concerning and address the one we are encountering not as an object but as a presence.

This more contemplative form of engagement seems to be what Cooperrider is referring to in the statement that appreciative inquiry ‘is about the search for what gives life to people, their organizations, and the opportunity-saturated world around them’ (Cooperrider and Fry 2020, p.267). It can grasp how tragic cycles of hope and disappointment can emerge below the surface of Emirati-expatriate relationships when the mutual pursuit of excellence leads to the mutual objectification of the other so that the relationship becomes less than both sides hoped it would become at the outset. However, rather than dwell on these tragic dimensions, it may be helpful to shift AI, in the Emirati context, to the second dimension, of a ‘where question’ that seeks to ‘discover’ life-giving I-Thou relations.

### **Where in the Stories Told by Expatriates and About Sheikh Zayed, the ‘Founder’ of the UAE, Can Be Found a More Life-Giving Purpose Than the Relentless Pursuit of Excellence?**

The expatriate leaders I interviewed all looked back with a tinge of wonder on the humanizing value of the ‘on-line check-ins’ that occurred during the COVID lockdown. N1 perhaps conveyed this best:

*They were hard times. Our own staff were being infected. Their families were being infected. We tried to keep people going. Our message to them was ‘we’ll get through this together, we’ll make this work’. I sent a blog to staff – ‘I know its tough. The best job you can do for the bank is stay at home’.*

N1 went on to describe how a similar humanizing I-thou spirit came to infuse monthly meetings with Emirati board members:

*COVID created very different dynamics in my interactions with them. I saw a more human side. They started to inquire about they how they could help management.*

And so hopeful life-giving stories about discovering the leadership relations anew emerged from the pause in the relentless pursuit of excellence during COVID.

Another place-specific source of hopeful narratives can be found in the stories of the life of Sheikh Zayed, the ‘founder’ of the new nation, who in dedicating the final chapter of a storied life to the ‘greening’ of Jebel Hafeet, the mountain that rises above the famous ancient oasis in the ruler’s hometown of Al Ain (Wakefield, 2014) pointed to the life-giving I-thou relations that could be formed between the people and the land engaged in cultivational processes?

In addition, the stories many Emirati students have told me about their encounters as children with Sheikh Zayed remind me of the stories South African friends and colleagues tell me about their personal encounters with Nelson Mandela<sup>3</sup>. They typically describe an I-thou encounter along the following lines:

*Mandela/the Sheikh looked into my eyes and saw me, not as I was then but as who I could become. I cannot forget this.*

The interviewees also had interesting responses to the question: ‘Which leader do you most admire and try to model your own leadership on?’ E2 mentioned Sheikh Zayed while N2 referred to Nelson Mandela. The similarities between these two leaders (see Mabrouk (2018) often comes up in conversations between Emiratis and expatriates.

The question of whether the hopeful lessons of such stories and cross-cultural comparisons can be drawn from on as our school leadership team seeks to formulate a credo to frame a place-shaping purpose that embraces cultivating the humanizing potential of higher education will be considered by way of conclusion.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has followed an appreciative inquiry into the deeper ‘why’ and ‘where’ questions raised by the ‘what’ questions posed to five local executive leaders, about how they adapted their organizational leadership to the challenges presented by the COVID pandemic. What started as a community outreach initiative morphed into a reflection on executive leadership practice in a particular context with an eclectic mix of thinkers such as David Cooperrider, Albert Hirschman, Jacques Derrida and Martin Buber serving as guides along the journey.

From my perspective, this journey has come back to where it started with my needing to apply what I learned to the next stage of my journey as Dean of a small business school. A point of departure will be to lead a team in reformulating a mission, vision, and strategy for the School moving forward. Hopefully, we will gain accreditation under the 2013 AACSB Business Standards in 2023 and will move forward to seek reaccreditation in five years under the 2020 standards that place a greater emphasis on the positive social impact of member schools. This will eventually require a reformulation of our vision, mission and strategy but it would be premature to come up with fully articulated statement at this time not least because there will be inevitable changes in the composition of our leadership team.

The most we can do is to affirm our current shared understanding of our purpose and place from which we can articulate our philosophy and suggest some areas where both this credo and the 2020 AACSB business standards can guide the revision of our strategic plan. The word ‘credo’ comes straight from the Latin meaning ‘I believe. It can be to the hierarchy of values, responsibilities and qualities that flow from an understanding of place-shaping purpose.

Our place-shaping purpose could be understood as being to participate in the local cultivation of quality in the field of higher business education as a member of the global AACSB family that envisages transforming business education globally for positive social. Unlike the undifferentiated and unifocal concept of excellence, quality is a unifying field that continuously differentiates itself into a developing hierarchy of different qualities. The highest qualities find expression through our appreciation and pursuit of goodness, beauty, truth, and love. These are sometimes described as transcendent. But I think this misses how they can be brought down to earth and humanized through I-thou relationships. They are potentialities we see in those we encounter in an I-thou manner and we can mutually enrich one another by appreciating and cultivating them in a vision for what we want our people – our students, our faculty, our community - to become. To cultivate them, we must discover and activate pragmatic qualities such as self-awareness, motivational leadership, practical knowledge, academic rigor, and strategic and entrepreneurial thinking. These could be incorporated in what we understand our mission to be. Finally, to support the realization of these qualities, we need to build sustainable institutions and processes with paths toward institutional construction being reflected in the design of ‘life-giving’ organizational structures, physical and IT architectures, strategies, operating plans and performance management systems.

The value of such a place-shaping purpose will be to help us keep our eyes focused on an important life-giving purpose in the face of the urgent pressure of the day. It may help us avoid becoming obsessed

and stressed with failing to achieve KPIs derived from the pursuit of excellence although paradoxically we could flourish even more under its guidance.

This will, of course, be a very localized journey but it is hoped that its ongoing story may be of interest to other practitioners of ‘place shaping’ leadership seeking to align with a life-giving purpose that is enriched by engagement with their cultural context.

## ENDNOTES

1. Once an ‘affirmative topic’ has been presented, practitioners suggest ways to structure summits and other meeting so that there is a transparent flow through the following phases of the ‘4-D cycle’:
  - Discover: ‘What gives life?’, ‘The best of what is’;
  - Dream: ‘What might be?’, ‘What is the world calling for’;
  - Design: “What should be—the ideal?”
2. In a typical training manual (Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros, 2008) these are delineated as follows:
  - Constructionist Principle: ‘Words create worlds’;
  - Simultaneity Principle: ‘Change begins at the moment you ask the question’;
  - Poetic Principle: ‘What we choose to study makes a difference?’
  - Anticipatory Principle: ‘Deep change = change in active images of the future’;
  - Positive Principle: ‘The more positive the question, the greater and longer-lasting the change’;
  - Principle of Wholeness: ‘The whole system can have a voice in the future.’
  - Enactment principle: ‘We must be the change we want to see’;
  - Free Choice Principle: We have the freedom to choose how and what we contribute
3. Mabrouk (2018) also finds similarities in the humanity of these two leaders in a scholarly comparative study.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **Interview Questions**

- Can you tell something about yourself and the key events in your life and career leading up to your current appointment?
- Have you had any crucible experiences in your life and career up to your current appointment? How and what were you able to learn from them?
- Which leader do you most admire and try to model your own leadership on? What specifically do you admire about this leader?
- How do you understand the difference between leadership and management? Leading up to the COVID situation, what were the key areas of your current job where you were challenged to exercise leadership to a greater degree than management?
- Your organization has been engaged in advancing the RAK government economic strategy. Describe the progress made on this strategy before the COVID pandemic. What impact did this crisis have on the trajectory of this change process?
- How did you and your people have to adapt and change as you learned your way through this unfolding crisis?
- Was its impact on the performance of your organization different from what you initially anticipated?
- What capacities have been developed by yourself and your team during this novel situation?
- What are the long term prospects for your organization once the world emerges from the COVID pandemic? How can it be prepared now to take advantage of emerging opportunities?