Future-Focused Leadership

Eng. Maqbool Al Wahaibi, CEO of Oman Data Park, shares the principles that drive his leadership, his vision for the organisation's role in advancing Oman's tech landscape, and his commitment to nurturing local talent for a digital future

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP SERIES

OMAN DATAPARK

Eng. Maqbool Al Wahaibi
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What key principles drive your vision for the company, and how do you share this vision with your team?
At Oman Data Park (ODP), my vision is deeply rooted in empowerment, a strong company culture, and a sense of shared purpose. For me, a people-centric approach isn't just a strategy; it's the foundation of our success. I want every person on our team to feel that they're an essential part of what we're building together. I make it a priority to hire people who are not only skilled but who bring a genuine drive and enthusiasm to their roles. Once they join, I see my role as providing them with the resources they need, treating them with respect, and giving them the freedom to take ownership of their work. When they feel empowered, they're not just working for ODP; they're working with us, actively contributing to our vision.

Another core part of my vision is creating a culture where fear has no place, as it only hinders creativity and growth. I want my colleagues to feel comfortable taking ownership of their work, knowing that they have my support. This isn't just an abstract idea – we hold quarterly gatherings where we reflect on our goals, progress, and vision, ensuring everyone is aligned and motivated. I believe in the power of recognising people's contributions, which is why we also hold quarterly performance awards to honor exceptional work. Leadership, to me, is about fostering a collaborative environment where each person is respected and valued. In this way, our team isn't just working for ODP; they're a part of its journey and success.

Another key principle that drives my vision for ODP is customer-centricity, which I hold very close to my heart. I genuinely believe that our customers are at the core of everything we do. When I interact with clients, I make it a point to listen closely to their needs and concerns. I find that understanding their perspectives allows us to provide tailored solutions that truly make a difference in their businesses.

To share this vision with my team, I actively encourage them to engage with our clients as well. I often say that each interaction is an opportunity to build a relationship and demonstrate our commitment to their success. It's important for everyone in the organisation to feel that they play a role in delivering exceptional service. I do my best to lead by example, showing my team how vital it is to prioritise our clients in our decision-making processes.

Moreover, I believe in creating a culture where feedback is valued. We regularly seek input from our clients, and I make it a point to share those insights with the team. This not only helps us improve our services but also reinforces the idea that we are all part of a larger mission: to support and empower our clients. When our clients succeed, we succeed.

What strategies do you implement to achieve a healthy work-life balance while leading your organisation?
Achieving a healthy work-life balance is a priority for me and one that I promote within ODP. My approach is grounded in the principle that discipline is vital not only for personal productivity but also for maintaining a healthy equilibrium between work and personal life. I emphasise the importance of being disciplined in our work habits, which allows us to manage our time effectively and avoid the tendency to let work extend into our personal lives.

One of the key strategies I employ is the establishment of clear boundaries between work and personal time. This involves encouraging my team to prioritise their tasks and set boundaries that prevent work from encroaching into their personal hours. By fostering a culture where team members feel empowered to disconnect after work hours, they can recharge and maintain their well-being, which ultimately enhances their productivity during work hours.

Additionally, I believe that physical wellness plays a significant role in achieving this balance. I advocate for regular physical exercise, as it not only improves mental clarity and focus but also contributes to overall well-being.

Thirdly, I endorse focusing on goal setting and planning as strategies. By setting specific, measurable goals, both for myself and my team, we can stay organised and prioritise tasks effectively. This level of clarity helps us to manage our workloads efficiently, ensuring that we are focused on what truly matters and preventing last-minute rushes that can lead to burnout.

To illustrate the impact of discipline on work-life balance, I often refer to the contrast between two types of employees. One employee arrives on time, engages in productive work, and completes tasks efficiently, allowing him to leave work at a reasonable hour. In contrast, another employee may come in late, spend time on personal phone calls, browse the internet, and waste time during work hours. This lack of discipline results in unnecessary stress and often forces him to work late to meet deadlines. This example highlights how effective time management and discipline can lead to a more balanced work-life experience, enabling team members to enjoy their personal lives outside of work.

Another vital aspect of my strategy involves open communication about work-life balance. I encourage my team to express their needs and challenges openly. By creating an environment where discussing work-life balance is normalised, we can collaboratively find solutions that work for everyone. This could involve flexible working arrangements, adjusted deadlines, or support systems that accommodate personal commitments.

What strategies do you employ to identify and nurture talent within your organisation? What are your plans to develop young Omanis, develop their skills, and move up the management ladder?
Talent development is one of my priorities at ODP, and we have put a robust system in place to foster it. One of the initiatives I'm most proud of is the Sahab Programme, a structured training program aimed at upskilling

young Omanis. This programme is specifically designed to equip them with both technical and soft skills that are critical in today's job market. Over a period of 12 months, these young professionals get hands-on training in AI, IoT, and cybersecurity, among other high-demand skills, while also developing essential communication and teamwork abilities.

While I'd love for all Sahab Programme participants to stay with us, the broader aim is to prepare them to contribute to Oman's economy wherever they choose to work. It's a contribution to Oman's economic diversification through In-Country Value (ICV) creation, and a personal commitment of mine.

Developing talent within ODP means we're not just growing the company; we're creating a pipeline of skilled professionals who can take on leadership roles, either with us or in other sectors across the nation. This pathway gives young Omanis a clear

route to rise within the company and into management, ensuring that they have the skills and mindset to lead.

What personal traits or habits do you consider vital for success as a CEO?
Success as a CEO requires a disciplined and balanced approach to personal and professional life. Discipline is the cornerstone of my leadership style, not just in work but in character, thought, and action. Consistency and integrity are crucial in decision-making, as they set an example for the entire team. I draw inspiration from Jim Collins' book 'Good to Great', where the concept of disciplined habits is central – remaining disciplined in all aspects of life leads to sustained growth and excellence.

Another vital trait is humility. I believe a leader should speak less and listen more, especially in meetings. Minimal talk from a leader signals confidence in the team's abilities, empowering them to share their insights and perspectives. For me, humility means

understanding that leadership is about supporting the team, not dominating it, and that success is a team achievement rather than an individual one.

Emotional intelligence and maintaining a positive mindset are also key. I actively avoid what I call "getting in the box," or allowing negative thinking to limit my perspective. Emotional intelligence is vital to stay optimistic and level-headed, especially in situations outside of one's control. This trait will enable a leader to address challenges constructively and focus on finding solutions rather than dwelling on problems.

Continuous learning is a habit I prioritise to stay current and open-minded. I make it a point to read regularly, as I believe diverse perspectives spark innovative thinking. This intellectual growth is balanced by physical exercise, which I find essential to complement mental well-being. Physical wellness enhances cognitive function, helping

me stay focused and resilient.

Finally, goal-setting and focus are integral to my approach. I am intentional about setting specific, measurable goals rather than vague objectives. Clear goals keep me and my team aligned, moving forward with purpose and clarity. Staying focused is crucial to achieving these goals without unnecessary distractions. I also advocate outsourcing or delegating non-essential tasks, which allows me to concentrate on high-priority objectives.

Which emerging technological trends do you think will influence the future of leadership, and how are you preparing for them?
Artificial intelligence is undoubtedly one of the most transformative trends of our time, and I believe it will redefine leadership across industries. AI is becoming as vital today as IT was a few decades ago, and leaders need to understand its potential to stay competitive. At ODP, we're actively integrating AI into our operations, but we're also prioritising the development of AI expertise within our team. The Sahab Programme is also a way of preparing for this future, as it includes AI as a core part of the curriculum. My aim is for my team, and particularly our younger employees, to not only understand AI but to apply it in ways that enhance our work and the solutions we provide.

As a leader, embracing AI means being

ready to evolve – whether it's in decision-making, strategy, or team dynamics. Leaders will need to adapt, learn, and reimagine traditional approaches, as AI shifts the way we interpret data, solve problems, and engage with customers. Preparing for this shift is not just about adopting new tools; it's about fostering a mindset of adaptability and innovation within the team.

Looking ahead, what management insights do you think will be crucial for leaders in the next decade?
In the coming decade, I believe management will require a deeper emphasis on adaptability, collaboration, and technological acumen, especially with the rapid growth of AI – as I'd just stated before. AI will not only transform industries but redefine the skills and mindsets needed in leadership. At ODP, we're already preparing for this by embedding AI into our operations and encouraging our team to build their skills. Leaders who prioritise this will not only enhance their teams' efficiency but also gain a significant edge in anticipating market trends.

Another insight that I find crucial is fostering a people-centric culture. Culture forms the foundation upon which strategy can succeed; as the saying goes, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." Leaders must prioritise a supportive and empowering workplace culture to drive innovation and collaboration. At ODP, this

approach means treating every team member with respect and creating an environment where they can take ownership of their work without fear. Quarterly gatherings and open communication channels are part of this, as they strengthen trust and engagement. A strong, people-centered culture is essential for retaining talent and ensuring sustained organisational growth.

Empowerment is also a key factor for future leadership. Leaders should act as enablers, providing resources and support rather than imposing control. This allows team members to lead in their own areas of expertise, fostering a collaborative, rather than top-down, style of management. This is also crucial for unleashing creativity and enabling each team member to contribute fully to the organisation's goals. This is why, at ODP, we emphasise team autonomy and focus on removing barriers rather than micromanaging.

Lastly, continuous upskilling will be critical. Leaders must facilitate learning, both for themselves and their teams. To stay competitive, organisations need to invest in structured programmes for skills development. As technology and industries evolve, leaders who commit to continuous learning and skill-building will be better positioned to navigate changes and drive innovation effectively.