**Lessons of Morality in Leadership**

On **Aug 22, 2022** [Iqran Arshad](https://nation.com.pk/authorpost/columnist/iqran-arshad/)

Nearly a month ago, Airlift, the blitz scale poster-child startup of Pakistan closed its doors due to the global recession. Since Airlift’s dawn, it has been a leader in Pakistan’s startup ecosystem. From raising large rounds to rapid expansion and downsizing, I observed that we were in a position to set direction and our actions were replicated across the industry.

From the get-go Airlift has challenged the status quo, promoted first principles thinking and doing things the ‘right way’. This stands true even today for our liquidation operations. Unlike an overnight poof, Airlift announced that they’re shutting down operations alongside a clear stance for the stakeholders that we will settle all our liabilities. This means clearing dues for all riders that used to deliver orders, on-ground staff that used to prepare orders, landlords that leased their properties, suppliers that sold inventory, team severance and more.

The process is still on-going and may span another few months as it requires collection, organization and sale of assets and inventory before we pay off our liabilities; alongside managing cash flow. It is much more complex than it may sound like. While this is not the most fun, progressive phase of working at Airlift, it definitely is a moral one. While some of our stakeholders are already, understandably frustrated, this highly unique phase has been a mixed learning experience for myself. In this environment I have been honing skills like patience, tolerance, listening and supportiveness. On the flip side, I am also learning more on how to cleverly manage loss and pilferage.

Sheheryar Iqbal, a member of the core team at Airlift, consolidated his biggest learnings during the liquidation phase as follows:

“(i) Always doing the right thing — The decision to shutdown operations could have been extended but at the cost of; a) Not being able to pay off creditors, b) Not being able to pay off severance to our teammates.

(ii) Living up to airlift values — The motivation behind paying off creditors is not because we have something to gain from this deal, it is because we do not want to harm the “ecosystem” that is developing and is truly in its nascent stages. This responsibility gives motivation to every employee coming into the airlift office every day.

(iii) Applying what we have learned — Even today, we see our teams running this exercise successfully because we are applying the operating principles that we have learned during our time at Airlift.

We do not know what is coming up next/tomorrow for us but we know that today, there is a responsibility upon us that is greater than us and that is what we are going to the office every day for.”

I wanted to share this experience with a broader audience to emphasize the importance of morality. Throughout history we’ve seen empires, states and nations rise and fall. These belonged to different religions, regions and leaders. Digging deeper into the traits of all rising, stable and prosperous nations I’ve found morality to be a constant and defining characteristic. The prime example of this can be found in the seventh century during the establishment of State of Medina – the early Muslims united under the banner of Islam which preached peace and morality above all, and in a matter of around three decades the state became the biggest superpower in the Arabian Peninsula and defeated the other two biggest empires of their time (Romans & Persians). Around 1400 years later, today countries like Finland, Sweden and others that rank highest on the happiness index are also the ones having the highest standards of morality.

On the flip side, in the 1960s a justice of the Supreme Court of the United States said that it was impossible to define character. This meant a radical departure from what previous generations have believed in (knowing what character is). Morality in its simplest form is preferring right over wrong while being honest to your conscience. In society it means things like honoring your parents, not murdering, not stealing, not lying, not coveting and not committing adultery. In the years ahead the US had to face issues like family breakdown, homosexual revolution and more. In 1967 Herbert Armstrong, founder of Plain Truth magazine said: “We have polluted our own minds and those of our children—teaching the anti-moral fable of evolution.”

Being in any position of leadership is extremely crucial as it bestows a responsibility much larger than the self. You may steer the course of masses towards the right or the wrong direction. For instance, at the end of the thirteenth century, when Muslims were in a position of power, they conquered land like Indonesia with their character. On the other hand, US policies and movements starting in the 1960s spread across other countries which followed the same fate.

As Airlift had been blessed with a leadership position, I have personally found many business decisions to be highly moral (during and after operations closed down). Since nations are built through institutions, organizations and individuals – each of us plays a role in defining our national morality. In a speech in May 2022, in the National Assembly of Pakistan, ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan said that moral decline of our society is the actual root cause of the current state of the country; the problems we’re facing are all symptoms.

It is only during the toughest of times that bring forth the true test of our character. Moral decisions are often hard to pursue but that may be the only way we may be able to become a nation that serves the true meaning of Pakistan. Let us all gather under the banner of morality and turn the ship around.

The writer works at Airlift Technolo-gies, and he can be reached @iqranbin-arshad on Twitter.

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