

**TITLE: A shared corporate vision: staff and senior management collaborate
for market dominance at a large Saudi hotel**

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Abstract

Purpose – The objective of this study was to uncover the essential conditions for establishing a successful collaboration between the Fairmont Hotel (Makkah) staff and the senior management team to prepare for co-creating a future shared corporate vision.

Methodology – This study is an action research project involving senior managers of the Fairmont Hotel (Makkah) and EHL Hospitality Business School (Lausanne, Switzerland). Data were collected from 16 hotel staff members, covering functional/department managers, team leaders, operations supervisors, and operational-level employees.

Findings – We uncovered a series of generic proposals made by the hotel staff, which are prerequisites/conditions for successful collaboration with senior management, to prepare for co-creating a future shared vision.

Practical/Managerial Implications – In response to the staff's generic proposals, the senior management team proposed practical measures to support continued collaboration between hotel staff and the senior management team. These measures aim to maintain a collaborative approach centered on achieving future common goals and a shared vision to promote sustainable innovation in the services of the Fairmont Hotel (Makkah).

Originality – This study is innovative in two respects. First, it demonstrates a strong willingness on the part of senior management and staff to collaborate less vertically, contrary to the cultural norm in Saudi Arabia, known for its strong hierarchical distance. Second, the mutual commitment to more horizontal collaboration is not typical of five-star hotels, which are traditionally vertical and hierarchical.

Keywords – Collaboration, Shared Corporate Vision, Hotel Industry.

Classification – Article

Introduction: The Fairmont Hotel's Organizational Context

The Saudi tourism industry increasingly attracts foreign investors due to its high growth potential. The increase in leisure and religious travel has led to the construction of many hotels in major Saudi cities. In the face of these rapid changes, Saudi policymakers are now focusing on various issues, including improving regulation of the hospitality industry, safeguarding human rights, and strengthening anti-discrimination laws.

The five-star Fairmont Hotel (part of the Accor Hotels Group) inside the Makkah Clock Royal Tower delivers a luxurious experience to its guests, offering them unrivaled views of the Kaaba, Haram, and the City of Makkah. As the Fairmont Hotel (Makkah) expands its operations, its number of employees also increases, allowing senior managers to tap into a new pool of ideas and perspectives at different levels of the organization. However, to remain competitive against other five-star Saudi hotels investing heavily in improving their services, Fairmont (Makkah) must learn how to effectively harness its intellectual resources, i.e., the collective intelligence of its staff, in order to generate enough innovative ideas.

To achieve this, senior executives at Fairmont (Makkah) must abandon their hitherto very "top-down" and "centralized" approach to decision-making and favor more "decentralized" forms of collaboration. By encouraging senior executive leaders and staff to engage in the co-construction of business goals and a shared corporate vision, Fairmont (Makkah) will be able to develop a collaborative organizational culture conducive to sustainable innovation in hotel service excellence, thereby ensuring a long-term competitive advantage.

However, this shift towards a decentralized (and collaborative) approach is not without risk. Saudi companies are traditionally marked by a strong hierarchical power distance between senior managers and staff (Hofstede, 1983). Therefore, Fairmont (Makkah) must prepare its

staff for this new approach and provide sufficient psychological safety for them (staff) to fully engage in close collaborations with senior managers (Edmonson, 2018).

An essential step in establishing effective collaboration is to create a shared long-term corporate vision between Fairmont's (Makkah) senior management and staff. Indeed, a shared vision acts as a cement that unites all organization members around a common direction to follow (Zasa and Buganza, 2022, p.2). However, to achieve successful co-creation of business objectives and a shared vision, the Managing Director of Fairmont (Makkah) and his senior management team must understand in advance the prerequisites and conditions necessary to enable staff to participate effectively. So, in January 2022, senior management at Fairmont (Makkah) initiated a collaborative project with its staff to understand better how to effectively prepare and engage staff and senior management to co-create a shared corporate vision for Fairmont (Makkah) in the future. Therefore, our research question fits into this organizational context: *How can Fairmont (Makkah) senior management and staff effectively collaborate in preparing for the future co-creation of a shared corporate vision?*

Literature Review

Since the 1980s, management literature has emphasized the importance of shared corporate visions for organizations (Kaiser *et al.*, 2021). A shared corporate vision best describes organizational members' common knowledge of the firm's strategic goals and future business orientations (Eldor, 2019). As such, a shared vision is often the result of a collaborative effort between senior management, middle management, and employees within the organization (Kaiser *et al.*, 2021).

Several authors have provided insights on the importance of shared vision and how it can positively impact the organization and its employees (e.g., Choi and Ruona, 2011; Cagnetta *et*

al., 2015; Kim and Kim, 2017; Kotschevar and Tanke, 2016; Van der Voet, 2017). A shared vision is essential for a hotel to achieve its goals and objectives. According to Kotschevar and Tanke (2016), a shared vision can provide a clear direction for the organization, create a sense of unity and purpose, and improve employees' motivation and commitment. Kim and Kim (2017) have put forward the influence of shared vision on employees' organizational commitment in the hotel industry, suggesting the impact of shared vision on employee creativity.

The two main camps in the literature on shared vision are "top-down" and "bottom-up." The bottom-up camp (e.g., Wang and Rafiq, 2009) argues that a vision should be generated bottom-up by the sharing of different perspectives of senior managers and staff within the organization, in contrast to the top-down camp's contention that senior management's vision should be transmitted (and enforced) top-down via authoritarian modes of communication.

The top-down approach

The "top-down" camp contends that a shared vision is comparable to the leader's (e.g., a CEO) unique vision, which is communicated to followers in certain ways. Using this tactic, the leaders' vision is supposed to be taken up by the followers. To build a shared cognition, the emphasis is placed on clearly communicating the vision to followers (e.g., through mental images, vivid descriptions, and genuine emotions) (Carton and Lucas, 2018; Carton *et al.*, 2014).

The bottom-up approach

The "bottom-up" camp, on the other hand, advocates practices that transfer authority to staff by encouraging self-directed and independent decision-making, mentoring, knowledge exchanges, and opinion solicitation (Sharma and Kirkman, 2015). The bottom-up camp strongly emphasizes leadership and follower interaction and redistributes power from the leaders' to the followers' sphere of influence (Kearney *et al.*, 2019).

Balancing top-down and bottom-up approaches

A hotel's senior management team must include staff from different hierarchical levels to co-create a shared corporate vision. To do so, senior management can mitigate a top-down approach with a bottom-up approach by balancing the two. According to Van der Voet (2017), a balanced approach can improve employee engagement, increase job satisfaction, and enhance innovation and organizational performance. The senior management team can achieve a balance by creating a culture of collaboration and communication, encouraging employee participation in decision-making processes, and empowering employees to take ownership of their work.

Creating a culture of collaboration

Creating a culture of collaboration is essential to mitigating a top-down approach with a bottom-up approach. According to Ibarra and Hansen (2011), a culture of collaboration can foster creativity and innovation, improve communication and decision-making, and enhance employee engagement and motivation. The senior management team can create a culture of

collaboration by encouraging teamwork, recognizing and rewarding collective achievements, and creating a sense of community within the organization.

Encouraging Employee Participation

Encouraging employee participation is another critical component of mitigating a top-down approach with a bottom-up approach. According to Cognetta *et al.*, (2015), employee participation can lead to better decision-making, improved job satisfaction, increased idea generation, and increased organizational commitment. The senior management team can encourage employee participation by creating open communication and feedback platforms, such as suggestion boxes, town hall meetings, or anonymous surveys.

Empowering Employees

Empowering employees is another essential component of mitigating a top-down approach with a bottom-up approach. According to Choi and Ruona (2011), empowering employees can improve job satisfaction, increase motivation and commitment, and enhance organizational performance. The senior management team can empower employees by providing training and development opportunities, delegating responsibilities, and recognizing and rewarding good performance.

Use of an action research approach to diagnose the potential of collaboration between senior management and staff

In practice, creating a shared vision requires that senior management conducts a ‘diagnosis’ whose goal is to assess the degree of readiness of staff to engage in a ‘mutual understanding’

and a ‘common mental framework’, both considered collaborative prerequisites/conditions in co-creating a shared vision. To this end, an effective diagnostic method is proposed by Wexler (2011). This method lies at the border between practice and research (i.e., action research). Wexler (2011) proposes six guiding principles that facilitate ‘collaborative discussions’ between senior management and staff. More specifically, these principles are inter-related and labeled as follows: (1) staff’s understanding of the organization’s current vision, (2) opportunities for staff to participate in real-time strategic organizational decisions, (3) authenticity of senior management's willingness to consider staff’s involvement in the co-creation of a shared vision, (4) staff’s aspirations for professional development within the organization, (5) staff’s perceptions of how senior management could improve the way it runs the organization, and (6) senior management’s role (and authentic willingness) in maintaining equal work opportunities amongst staff.

Methodology

Action research and context of the study

Our study is grounded in an action research methodology. Action research (or 'intervention research' or 'research-experimentation') is a research approach and methodology that combines knowledge acquisition with concrete and transformative action in an organization (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000; Lincoln, 2001). This dual objective is often combined with critical reflection (Carr and Kemmis, 2003).

In our context of a research collaboration between the Fairmont Hotel (Makkah) and EHL Hospitality Business School, the purpose was to diagnose the potential collaboration between senior management executives and staff. More specifically, we were interested in assessing the hotel staff’s degree of readiness to engage in a mutual understanding and a shared mental

framework with senior management executives, two prerequisites in co-creating a shared corporate vision for the hotel.

Sample and data collection

Data were collected from 16 respondents, randomly selected from four distinct *staff categories* at the Fairmont Hotel (Mecca), i.e., four *functional/department managers*, four *team leaders*, four *operations supervisors*, and four *operational-level employees*.

Data collection was based on a survey containing eight open-ended questions linked to Wexler's (2011) six guiding principles (see **Appendix 1**) and semi-structured individual interviews conducted between a senior management executive and staff. Respondents had been informed that the survey and interviews were part of an action research project jointly conducted by Fairmont (Makkah) senior management and EHL Hospitality Business School. Moreover, participants were explicitly made aware (through an official letter signed by the hotel's Managing Director) that their identity would remain anonymous in the case of publication of study results.

The choice of individual interviews over focus groups, where peer pressure may have added an unwelcome degree of conformity, was made since the interest was in individual opinions from various internal actors (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). Each interview lasted 45 to 80 minutes and was recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis

We applied the inductive and interpretative data structures methodology by Gioia *et al.* (2013) to our interviews and the eight open-ended questions survey. Our analysis was done in several

stages. To uncover "first-order concepts", we considered verbal (and written) data we gathered from the respondents, which subsequently enabled us to create "first-order categories". Based on the overlaps and interconnections between these categories, "second-order themes" emerged. These second-order themes were then grouped into "holistic "dimensions", i.e., a set of generic proposals made by the hotel staff, aiming to foster the most effective collaboration between staff and the hotel's senior management in preparing for the future co-creation of a shared corporate vision.

Findings

The analysis of our interviews and surveys uncovered a series of 10 generic proposals made by the hotel staff that would allow them to participate most effectively in the co-creation of a shared vision (with senior management). These proposals are displayed in the table below.

Table I: Proposals made by the hotel staff that would allow them to participate most effectively in the co-creation of a shared vision (with senior management)

1. Improve staff's understanding of the organization's vision, mission, and key performance indicators (KPIs).
2. Enhance staff's involvement in decision-making processes.
3. Value and acknowledge staff's opinions and suggestions consistently.
4. Identify staff's strengths and areas for improvement.
5. Provide staff with objectives more aligned with the challenging nature of Fairmont's (Makkah) business environment.
6. Improve cooperation and understanding among the hotel's management levels.
7. Promote macro-management instead of micro-management exerted over staff.
8. Provide continuous encouragement to staff.
9. Increase job-related training to enhance team capabilities.
10. Recognize and appreciate staff's work accomplishments.

These proposals strongly emphasize improving communication, collaboration, and empowerment within Fairmont's (Makkah) organizational structure. Some of these proposals, in particular, appear fundamental to deploying a culture of collaboration. Firstly, the call for

macro-management over micro-management indicates that the staff expects more autonomy and trust from senior management. The underlying reason is that staff seeks a work environment that values their opinions and suggestions consistently and encourages open communication. Secondly, the fact that staff desires to be assigned objectives more aligned with the challenging nature of Fairmont's (Makkah) business environment implies a willingness to grow and develop as individuals and a team.

Managerial Implications

Following the methodological logic of our action research, we then reported to Fairmont's (Makkah) senior management team all the proposals collected from the staff (i.e., our findings). In our posture of action researchers, our role consisted of supporting senior managers in developing practical measures to respond to staff proposals. This is how, after several discussion sessions that we scheduled with Fairmont's (Makkah) senior managers, we devised a list of 15 practical measures to foster a collaborative approach centered on achieving the future co-creation of business objectives and a shared corporate vision.

These measures are listed in the table below.

Table II: Practical measures proposed by senior management to support and facilitate staff participation in co-creating business objectives and a shared vision (with senior management).

1. Hold monthly formal/informal gatherings and retreats with staff from all hierarchical levels of the organization.
2. Use internal communication channels for clear and regular updates on corporate information.
3. Implement an open-door policy to listen to staff's needs and provide them with solutions.
4. Regularly consult with managers, supervisors, and employees from all hierarchical levels to prioritize their interests.
5. Improve timely communication from senior management about strategic decisions and their implications.
6. Share both positive and negative news along with suitable solutions.
7. Deliver clear and concise messages, avoiding lengthy and repetitive content.
8. Make critical decisions, recognize staff accomplishments, and address performance issues to create value and unity among all staff.
9. Conduct awarding events to celebrate exceptional staff achievements.
10. Acknowledge staff's interests, transferrable talents, innovation, and analytical abilities.
11. Recognize individual talents, memory, organizing abilities, and academic competence.
12. Appreciate commitment, willingness, belief, distinctiveness, communication, learning, and time management skills.
13. Set realistic and business-grounded objectives for staff and encourage them to focus on one objective at a time.
14. Provide training and job-related certification and organize team-building events/'healthy peer competitions' for training professional skills.
15. Conduct educational programs to enhance staff's knowledge, skills, and motivation for improved performance.

Still rigorously following the sequential logic of action research and bearing part of the responsibility for concrete and useable solutions emerging from our action research project conducted with/for Fairmont (Makkah), we, i.e., the co-authors of this research, subsequently compared the staff's proposals and senior management's measures to make sure there was a "fit" between what staff requested and what senior management was willing to provide in return. Our comparison revealed that senior management's practical measures responded coherently to the staff's proposals. The table below highlights in what specific areas these agreements, i.e., a fit, were found:

Table III: Specific areas in which agreements between staff and senior management were found:

- 1) **Increase understanding:** Both staff and senior management agree on improving staff's understanding of the company's vision, mission, and key performance indicators (KPIs). Senior management proposes regular communication, an open-door policy, and clear messaging to address this.
- 2) **Staff involvement:** Staff proposed greater involvement in decision-making processes, and senior management responded by suggesting monthly gatherings, consultation sessions, and an open-door policy to listen to staff's requirements and proposals.
- 3) **Valuing opinions:** Staff proposed continuous recognition and value for their opinions, which aligns with senior management's proposals of sharing positive and negative news, recognizing accomplishments, and conducting awarding events.
- 4) **Identifying strengths and shortcomings:** While senior management's proposals do not explicitly mention this, they focus on recognizing individual talents, abilities, and commitment, indirectly acknowledging staff's strengths and areas for improvement.
- 5) **Provide staff with realistic and business-grounded objectives:** Staff proposed to be given objectives more aligned with the challenging nature of Fairmont's (Makkah) business environment, and senior management's emphasis on setting realistic objectives and focusing on one at a time suggests a commitment to support staff grow their professional skills and understanding of the business environment at a reasonable pace.
- 6) **Cooperation and comprehension:** The staff proposed increased management cooperation, and senior management acknowledged the need for regular consultation to preserve the best interests of all staff, indicating a response to the staff's proposal.
- 7) **Macro-management:** Staff proposed promoting macro-management approaches (instead of micro-management), and senior management's proposals for clear and concise communication, avoiding redundancy, and focusing on essential messages align with this idea.
- 8) **Continuous encouragement:** Staff proposed increased encouragement, and senior management's proposals include regular gatherings, retreat sessions, and providing options and solutions to staff requirements, which contribute to a supportive and encouraging job environment.
- 9) **Job-related training:** Staff proposed increased job-related training, and senior management's proposals suggest job-related certifications, team-building events, and educational programs to enhance staff's knowledge, skills, and motivation.
- 10) **Recognition of accomplishments:** Both staff and senior management agree on the importance of recognizing staff's working accomplishments, with senior management proposing awarding events and celebrations.

While a few minor aspects could have been more explicitly addressed, senior management's measures appear to respond coherently to the staff's proposals, demonstrating a willingness to listen, engage, and address the staff's proposals.

Three *additional* managerial implications emerge from our study.

The *first* managerial implication relates to the concept of *psychological safety* (Edmondson, 2018), which, in the case of Fairmont (Makkah), represents what we call a “triple challenge”. The first challenge will be for the Fairmont Hotel’s Managing Director to encourage staff to be as authentic and honest/outspoken as possible in revealing their genuine concerns and proposals to senior management (rather than staff conveying messages they think senior management may want to hear, which is a common practice in high power-distance cultural settings (Hofstede, 1983)). The second challenge lies in the fact that because the staff (in Saudi Arabia) is traditionally used to evolving in a working context of high power distance (Hofstede, 1983), paradoxically, they (staff) may associate psychological safety with a working environment in which they are legitimately entitled to follow instructions passively, rather than challenging senior management proposed measures. Ultimately, the third challenge for the Managing Director (and his senior management team) will be to install and consolidate a natural working environment of psychological safety to enable staff to unfold their total contributions of proposals, (possibly unconventional) ideas, and areas of disagreement with senior management. In the long run, this should contribute to forming and consolidating a culture of collaboration between staff and senior management and will be conducive to helping both parties co-create a shared corporate vision to leverage the potential for service innovation for the Fairmont Hotel (Makkah).

The *second* managerial implication of this (ongoing) action-research project will be to scale up the collaborative effort between staff and senior management. This will involve offering training to all staff to leverage the practice of horizontal cross-silo collaboration, which is a prerequisite to co-construct innovative ideas with colleagues from different hierarchical levels of the organization.

A *third* implication resulting from our action-research project will be to continue conducting dialogues and interviews (between staff and senior management) until we reach saturation regarding collected data/information (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This is to provide senior management with the most relevant and helpful information for setting the first milestones in the co-construction of a shared vision between senior management and staff.

Limitations and future research avenues

Even though the current study provided us (researchers) and Fairmont's senior management team with helpful information, it has its limitations. First, we acknowledge that the data and insights that we collected may be affected, to some extent, by elements such as respondents' traits, social desirability, and impression management. Still, we have tried to reduce these biases by making the answers to our open-ended questionnaire anonymous. Second, examining how social learning and emotional contagion influence group involvement was outside the scope of this study. Nevertheless, we still encourage future research to build on our first set of results in a country and corporate organizational culture known for scoring high in Hofstede's power distance dimension (as we believe that a collaborative and decentralized approach is of significant value in such cultural contexts). Lastly, we conducted this action research using data from one organization only, limiting our findings' application to other organizational settings.

Conclusion

The future success of this cultural change at the Fairmont Hotel (Makkah) strongly relies on the Fairmont Hotel's (Makkah) Managing Director, as, for the moment, he is the official sponsor of this ground-breaking project. This implies he will have to keep receiving the

support/sponsorship of the Fairmont group on a sustainable basis to lead to a long-term sustainable corporate culture change. Then, suppose this experiment turns out to be a success in Saudi Arabia. In that case, it may be a *best practice* of cultural change that could be replicated (using the same practice of action research) in other hotels/properties of the Fairmont group located in other high-power distance countries where there is an urgent need to flatten the organizational structure to stimulate collaboration at all levels of the hotel, thereby tapping into staff's collective intelligence to become more innovative as a hotel group.

Although we have completed the first step of our action research project, there is still a long road to go. This project will have to go on (for how long, we still do not know) to monitor how staff and senior management will concretely and effectively engage in collaborative mechanisms (to be ready to co-create a shared corporate vision ultimately). This may require that we, as action researchers, step in, at some point, to help both parties finetune how they will have agreed to collaborate. However, the story does not end here, as we will also have to remain vigilant as to how the level of staff's psychological safety, i.e., a condition for staff to speak up to the hierarchy without fearing any repercussion/sanction, evolves. To enable psychological safety to blossom, we may have to set up ongoing training sessions for staff (and senior management) for them to learn how to collaborate most effectively before seriously co-creating business objectives and a shared corporate vision.

Ultimately, once the senior management team and the staff at the Fairmont Hotel (Makkah) are fully ready to collaborate, we believe that a well-balanced top-down and bottom-up approach will be conducive to creating a culture of collaboration, encouraging and empowering staff to co-create a shared vision for the company. By patiently pursuing our action-research project step after step, we are confident we will improve staff engagement to leverage the power of a shared corporate vision and support the Fairmont Hotel (Makkah) to ramp up its service innovativeness and excellence.

Our action research was just the beginning of a longer journey, and we cannot predict with certainty what the outcomes of it will be. However, the two things we can claim with certainty are that Saudi Arabia scores very high on Hofstede's power distance dimension, and this power distance is also very prevalent in the hotel industry on a global level. So, this collaboration between senior management and staff is more of an exception than the rule. It was challenging for both sides, but without any doubt, pushed them out of their comfort zone.

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Appendix 1

Survey Open-Ended Questions (based on Wexler's guiding principles, 2011)

Please answer the following open-ended questions.

1. Please explain the level of understanding you have of the organization's vision, mission, and key performance indicators.
2. Can you participate in real-time organizational decisions (e.g., listening to presentations, asking questions, etc.)? If this is the case, please detail any particular event (meeting, seminar, conference, training, team-building event, service launch event, appreciation event, executive programs, trade show, etc.) where you felt actively involved in devising an overall conclusion.
3. How do you think senior management could better involve staff in organizational decisions?
4. What could senior management do to develop a mutual understanding for organizational decisions to be better understood and performed?
5. What could be done better at work to improve your self-management and teamwork capabilities?
6. Does your working environment/atmosphere enable you to be an active and focused worker? If yes, please explain why. If not, please explain why.
7. What is essential for the organization to know about your abilities and match them with your desired career path?
8. To maintain equal work opportunities, how could the leaders at the senior management level interact more effectively (e.g., communicate, share updates, or briefings) with staff at all levels of the organization?