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NAKHODA – THE TIMELESS AND HOLISTIC LEADER

by Wan Ainun Zarina Wan Ahmad Radzi



Organisations and institutions constantly look for levers that drive performance, culture, change and transformation. Although leadership is one of the most researched topics, the prevailing approaches largely draw on Western perspectives. While these perspectives are useful, the importance of leadership warrants a multi-perspective view. For Muslims, the pristine and perfect leader to model after is Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Between these perspectives, there is a dearth of leadership perspectives that can bring a strong sense of connectedness and identity, both strategic and wholesome.

NAKHODA - The Pioneering Global Leader

Looking back, one finds the collective wisdom from the magnificent nations of the Malay Archipelago. This vast maritime world formed an extensive network through which people, goods, ideas, cultures and religions travelled. In this realm, the NAKHODA led voyages that spanned the maritime routes of Nusantara, connecting present-day China, India, and the Middle East. The NAKHODA leadership was nurtured and shaped among the seafaring leaders of that era.

The leader of successful voyages needed a comprehensive arsenal of skills. The NAKHODA were men and women who combined the capabilities of navigators, traders, diplomats, an advocate of the laws governing seafaring, a war commander, a guardian of the people onboard and with deep knowledge of the natural elements.

NAKHODA Leadership Today – Traversing the 7 ‘Cs’

Leaders now face unprecedentedly turbulent seas of technological disruption, uncertainty, competition and increasingly complex human challenges. The tools may have changed, but the fundamental leadership capacities remain remarkably similar. Leaders who can sail the 7 ‘Cs’ stand a better chance of success. The core of NAKHODA Leadership is Competence, Curiosity, Communication, Collaboration, Courage, Character and Compass.

The ***Competent*** NAKHODA takes his ship safely to its destination and understands the ship, changing weather, tides, star navigation, and routes whilst dealing with the different diplomatic relations across the vast oceans. Leaders who display *competence* and master their 'craft' such as formulating critical public policies with high impact or drive business strategies are successful in their endeavours.

A NAKHODA's ***Curiosity*** requires anticipating what may lie on the horizon. The curious leader today needs to be open to innovation, and not be afraid to engage on a global platform. Leading with curiosity means approaching leadership with openness, inquiry, and continuous learning. Instead of assuming they have all the answers, curious leaders ask powerful questions, seek diverse perspectives, and remain constantly eager to learn.

The success of a voyage also depends on the NAKHODA's ***Communication*** skills with the owner of the ship, his crew, and the people of lands where the ship was anchored. One communication challenge for leaders in the digital age is the need for technological understanding, adaptability, and cultural sensitivity. With information overload, leaders need to communicate with even more clarity and conciseness.

The practice of ***Collaboration*** enables the NAKHODA to navigate complex situations and skillful cooperation to achieve shared aspirations. The present metaleadership approach recognises that success requires intentionally linking and galvanising efforts of the many entities within and outside of the organisation.

Good leaders are not only defined by their vision or strategy but also by their ability to make bold decisions, confront uncertainty, and take responsibility in the face of fear or risk. Whether in corporate boardrooms, government institutions, or digital networks, leadership with ***Courage*** drives progress, much like the NAKHODA guiding his ship through uncharted waters to new lands.

The NAKHODA role models ethical leadership and conducts himself not just by authority, but by unflinching moral grounding in his voyage. Leaders today who display good ***Character*** build trust, foster a positive culture, and combat corrupt practices.

Leaders who cement belief and credibility in leadership are those that withstand the test of principles in their decision-making and actions.

The factor that brings together the other 6 leadership characteristics is the leadership ***Compass***, without which a leader can become aimless, pulled to where the tides take him. The NAKHODA was clear about his seafaring mission. So are visionary leaders. They inspire by providing clarity of direction and strategy that act as beacons of light, especially in uncertain times.

The ***Internal compass*** is just as critical as it provides the higher purpose in Leadership. Leaders with an internal compass are highly introspective with a high sense of self-awareness and reflection, sometimes acknowledging their own shortcomings, moving forward all the wiser. An internal compass is key to authentic and sustainable leadership. For Muslim leaders, the internal compass is being spiritually centred, anchored by absolute reliance on the Creator.

Rethinking leadership that is more holistic in a world detached from a moral compass and cultural roots is imperative. The NAKHODA leadership can serve as a timeless source of inspiration for successful leadership that is grounded in heritage, refined conduct and spiritual-centredness.

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FROM AI AWARENESS TO ACTION: BUILDING LEADERSHIP FOR A DIGITAL FUTURE



In RSOG Bytes No. 2, we explored how public - private collaboration could strengthen AI leadership in government. With two cohorts now completed, the focus turns to the results: what did senior officers learn, what support do they need, and how can that learning translate into action within their ministries?

As artificial intelligence becomes more accessible, a pressing question confronts public sector leaders: how can ministries turn AI's potential into better decisions and public services while safeguarding trust? The challenge extends beyond choosing the right tools. It requires leaders who can identify meaningful applications, manage risks and guide their organisations from experimentation towards responsible implementation. This leadership challenge shaped **RSOG's AI Leadership Programme.**

For 106 senior public service officers, RSOG's AI Leadership Programme brought the opportunities and responsibilities of AI adoption into sharper focus. Delivered across two cohorts on **25–26 July and 27–28 September 2026,** the programme combined industry perspectives, faculty-led modules and practical exercises to connect leadership decisions with real-world applications. A visit to **TM's Klang Valley Data Centre** gave participants a firsthand look at the infrastructure supporting cloud services.



Learning with a Practical Purpose

For public sector leaders, understanding AI involves both recognising opportunities and asking the right questions. Where could it improve a process? What risks need attention? Do staff have the skills, resources and guidance to use it effectively?

The programme connected foundational AI literacy with use-case identification, prompt engineering, governance and risk, and organisational capacity. Ethics and data privacy formed part of the discussion, helping participants consider the conditions needed for responsible adoption alongside the possibilities offered by AI tools.

Pre- and post-programme assessments recorded improvements across all five assessed areas in both cohorts. **Prompt engineering showed the greatest learning impact,** with scores increasing from **2.11** before the programme **to 3.84 in Cohort 1** and from **2.15 to 4.02 in Cohort 2.** The findings suggest that practical instruction can help participants become more confident in framing requests and interacting with AI.



Encouraging Results, Clear Next Steps

The programme received an overall evaluation score of **3.64 out of 4.00.** Among the **70 participants who provided feedback,** all indicated an intention to apply their learning, while **69 of them said they would recommend the programme.**

Participants expressed interest in using AI in daily work, developing their prompting skills and exploring specific tools. Feedback also highlighted demand for more hands-on time, deeper learning and examples tailored to government responsibilities.

In addition, ***79% of respondents indicated a need for follow-up programmes*** *to support officers and staff in their ministries or departments.*

As one participant shared: “We are keen to apply AI in our daily work and would welcome more hands-on practice and training tailored to government needs”.

These responses show enthusiasm and a willingness to act. They also underline an important distinction: intending to use AI is an encouraging starting point, while successful implementation requires continued practice, organisational support and measurable outcomes.

Three Lessons for Public Sector Leaders

1. Practical experience builds confidence.

The gains in prompt engineering reinforce the value of learning by doing. Opportunities to practise, review outputs and refine instructions help officers connect new knowledge with familiar tasks.

2. Responsible adoption needs clear foundations.

Governance, risk, ethics and data privacy must accompany conversations about productivity. Leaders need to establish appropriate boundaries, clarify accountability and ensure that human judgement remains part of the process.

3. Awareness needs a route into implementation.

Identifying a promising application is only the beginning. Ministries also need to consider ownership, staff capability, resources, timelines and how progress will be measured.





Continuing the Journey with Ministries

Building on these findings, RSOG has proposed post-programme ministry engagement through three complementary areas.

Training can cover AI literacy, prompt engineering, responsible use and leadership for AI adoption. Hands-on workshops can focus on everyday tasks such as research, drafting, reporting and analysis.

Project support can help teams identify a workplace problem, select a suitable AI application and develop a pilot project. RSOG can bring together relevant expertise to guide project planning, staff capability development and evaluation, with clear responsibilities, data safeguards and measurable outcomes.

Continued learning through clinics and knowledge-sharing sessions can help teams address implementation challenges and exchange lessons from their projects.



Together, these proposed pathways offer a practical continuation of the programme: helping leaders turn growing confidence into carefully planned action, with better decision-making and public service delivery as the intended outcomes.

Ready to take the next step? Contact RSOG to explore practical AI learning and proposed implementation support tailored to your ministry or agency.



1. RSOG Open Programme 'Kursus Protokol, Etiket Sosial dan Pengurusan Majlis' (7–8 October 2026): RSOG supported INTAN in the delivery of this open programme at Wyndham Grand Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur, bringing together public sector leaders, division heads, and senior executives. Facilitated by senior INTAN trainers and media personality Encik Ahmad Fedtri Yahya, the two-day course focused on protocol theory, social etiquette, and professional hosting techniques to enhance participants' leadership delivery and public service execution.



2. RSOG Customised Programme 'ELITE' (12–13 October 2026): RSOG delivered a specialised leadership programme in Kuala Lumpur in collaboration with the Akademi Perkhidmatan Tadbir Negeri Johor (APTNJ) and the British Council. Featuring insights from international relations experts, the programme focused on practical communication strategies, structured clarity, and professional relationship-building to empower participants in their administrative roles.



3. Institutional Engagement with Uzbekistan's Academy of Public Policy and Administration (APPA) (12 October 2026): RSOG welcomed esteemed leadership and faculty members from APPA Uzbekistan to INTAN Bukit Kiara for an intensive exchange on public administration reform. Drawing parallels between Malaysia's digital government frameworks and Uzbekistan's reform targets, the engagement explored collaborative pathways across executive education, digital governance, and applied policy research to advance public leadership excellence.



4. RSOG Customised Programme 'The Art of Leadership' (20–22 October 2026): RSOG delivered a targeted three-day leadership development programme for Pegawai Perkhidmatan Hal Ehwal Islam (Grades S13 and 14) of Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) at Masjid Negara Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur. Led by experienced industry leaders and certified coaches, the programme enhanced participants' leadership acumen, strategic thinking, and organisational behaviour to navigate modern governance challenges.



5. RSOG Customised Programme 'Reimagining Governance for the Future' (22 October 2026): RSOG delivered a customised accelerated learning programme for leaders from Federal Statutory Bodies under the Implementation Coordination Unit, Prime Minister's Department (ICU JPM) at Putrajaya. Officiated by the Director General of ICU JPM and led by the CEO of RSOG alongside expert facilitators, the session equipped leaders with integrated governance perspectives, digital transformation insights, and human capital strategies.

OUR UPCOMING PROGRAMMES

- RSOG CUSTOMISED PROGRAMME - MAKING THE TEAM WORK (4-5 NOVEMBER 2026)
- RSOG CUSTOMISED PROGRAMME - THE LEADER IN YOU (10-14 NOVEMBER 2026)
- RSOG EXECUTIVE EDUCATION - HARMONY IN DIVERSITY: MANAGING MULTI-GENERATIONAL WORKFORCE (17-20 NOVEMBER 2026)
- RSOG EXECUTIVE EDUCATION - GOVTECH & DIGITAL ECOSYSTEMS : NAVIGATING AGILE & DIGITAL PUBLIC SERVICES (23-27 NOVEMBER 2026)

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