ROBERTA SAFFELS
Leading for positive impact

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Positive Leadership in Qatar

What Qatari leaders teach us about purpose, mattering and the next step in leadership development

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Based on a qualitative study conducted for the Master of Applied Positive Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, 2023.

IN BRIEF

Qatari leaders, in their own words

Most of what is written about leading in Qatar was written somewhere else and carried in. I wanted to know what leaders here actually do, in their own words, before anyone decided what they should do.

So I sat down at length with Qatari leaders from nine industries, women and men, from team leaders to chief executives, and asked how they make difficult decisions, how they seize opportunity, and how they understand loyalty. I listened first. Then I read what they said through positive leadership, mattering and optimism, and scored the strength of the evidence for each theme out of 60.

What I found

1. **Purpose points to the nation**
   These leaders connect their roles with their national identity and a duty to contribute to Qatar's development. National pride and contribution, and service orientation, each scored 51.

2. **Mattering is the strongest result in the study**
   Adding value scored 54 and feeling valued 50. Service seemed to matter more to these leaders than recognition.

3. **Optimism comes with a plan**
   A positive outlook (49) and confidence in their abilities (48) sat beside strategic thinking and risk management (47).

4. **Decisions are consultative**
   Consultation (45) led every other decision theme. These leaders seek several perspectives before they decide.

5. **The next step lives inside the team**
   Consultation flowed mostly to peers and outside advisors. Collaborative decision-making within the team (14), recognition of others (15) and values communication (10) were where the evidence was thinnest.

For leadership development

Build from the purpose that is already there, then bring it into the team.

For the world

Mattering that reaches a nation, optimism with a plan, and leadership that serves beyond the organization.

For working in Qatar

Connect the work to what it gives the country, earn trust over time, and honor the consultation.

Understand before you prescribe.

Understanding leadership here before deciding what it should become

When I began the study, little published evidence on leadership in Qatar existed. A review of the literature found very few studies, and none that used qualitative analysis or looked for positive traits.

That gap matters. Qatar has grown from fishing villages and pearl diving to one of the richest nations in the world, and it is now preparing to move from a hydrocarbon economy to a knowledge economy. Few places have asked so much of their leaders, so quickly.

Leaders shape the wellbeing of the people around them (Sonnentag, 2015), and robust evidence links positive leadership practices to wellbeing and organizational success (Spreitzer & Cameron, 2011). So I went looking for what is already working.

I went in as a learner rather than as someone with a model to confirm. The interviews were long and the questions were open.

It is one study, and I describe it as one. It does not tell anyone what Qatari leaders are like. It tells me, in detail, what these leaders value, how they carry responsibility, and what they are building.

> Creating the conditions for all of Qatar's inhabitants to thrive requires identifying, strengthening and leveraging the Qatari leadership practices that already contribute to wellbeing at work.
>
> From the study's introduction

What I looked for: positive leadership

Positive leadership asks what helps people and organizations perform at their best. I read every conversation for evidence of the five practices Cameron (2008) describes.

Positive climate	Positive relationships	Positive communication	Positive meaning	Positive energy
Contribution, empowerment, living by values, and Everest goals	High quality connections and empathy	Active listening, affirming others, deciding together	Values, profound meaning and vision	Seeing what is strong, inspiring others, unselfishness

To these I added two more: mattering, the sense of feeling valued and adding value (Prilleltensky, 2020), and optimism (Seligman, 2006). These leaders work in a country where Qatari nationals are about 12 percent of the population (Planning & Statistics Authority, 2022), so leading well also means leading across many cultures at once.

Long conversations, read twice

9	60 to 90	2	28 to 65	4 to 30+	0 to 5
INDUSTRIES	MINUTES EACH	READINGS OF EACH TRANSCRIPT	YEARS OF AGE	YEARS LEADING	EVIDENCE SCALE

Aviation, transportation, healthcare, entrepreneurship, telecommunications, technology, education, banking, and oil and gas. Roles ranged from team leader to chief executive. Every participant was previously unknown to me.

Each conversation was a semi-structured interview, recorded with consent. The structure kept the inquiry consistent; the openness let each leader tell their own story, with the examples and anecdotes that show how a trait lives in practice.

A linguistic expert reviewed every transcript, so that accent, jargon or language did not stand between what a leader said and what they meant.

I then read the transcripts twice, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis.

Transcripts were generated with Otter.ai, and GPT-4 assisted with initial pattern recognition. The initial codes were generated by a human coder, with the AI tools used for comprehensive coverage.

First reading: inductive

Themes were allowed to emerge from the transcripts, without fitting them into a preexisting set of codes. This is where decisions, opportunity and loyalty came from.

Second reading: deductive

The same transcripts, read through positive leadership (Cameron, 2008): positive climate, relationships, communication, meaning and energy; and through mattering (Prilleltensky, 2020) and optimism (Seligman, 2006).

The evidence scale

Each leader was scored from 0 to 5 on every theme, and the scores were added across the group, so a theme can reach 60. Every figure in this paper is on that scale.

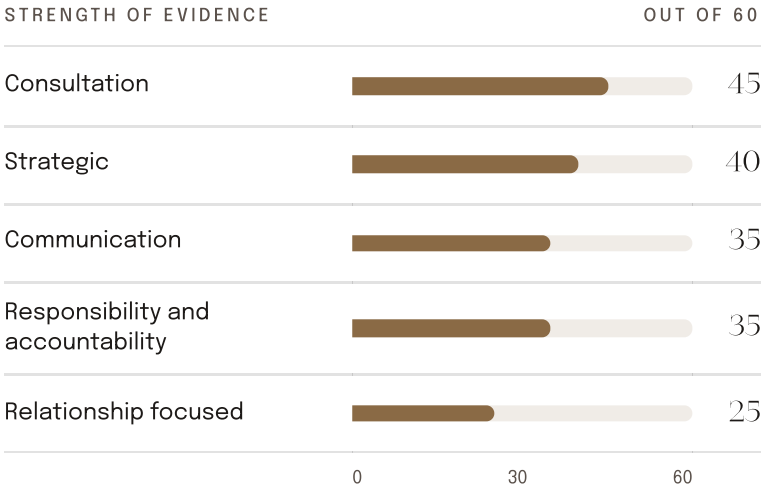
0	1	2	3	4	5
No evidence	Implicit but inconsistent	Explicit but inconsistent	Implicit but consistent	Explicit and consistent	Explicit, consistent and deliberate

Three themes from the leaders' own stories

THEME ONE

Dealing with difficult decisions

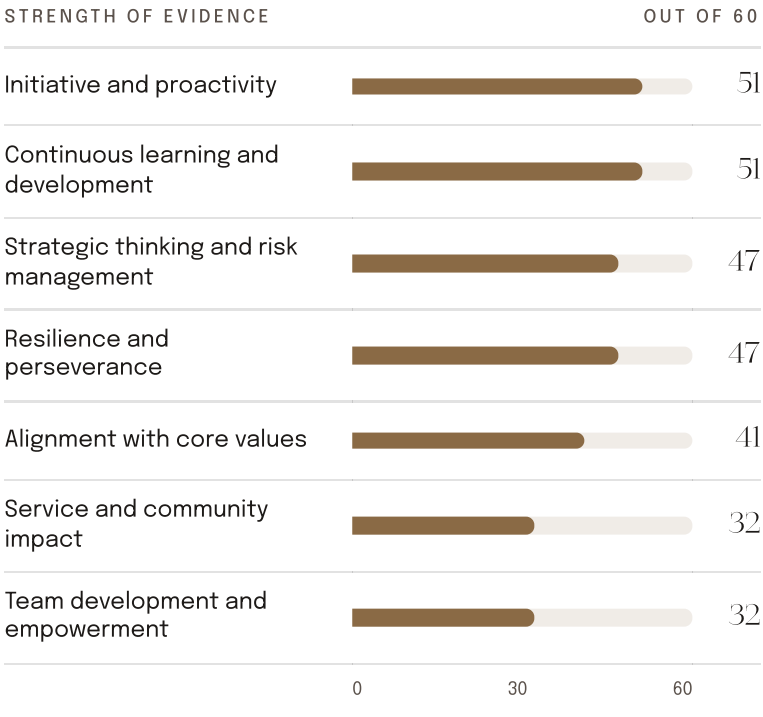
Leaders described a decision-making style built on consultation, strategic thinking, clear communication, and a strong sense of responsibility and accountability. Most said they consult others and value different perspectives before a difficult decision.



THEME TWO

Seizing opportunities

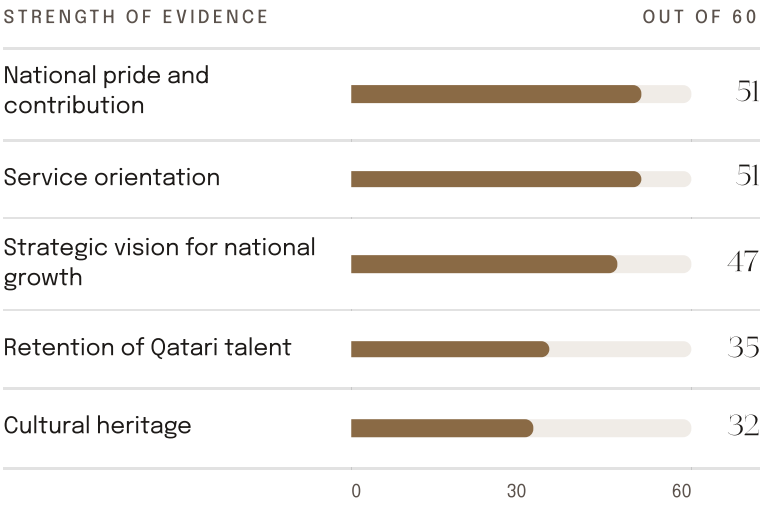
Leaders showed a proactive mindset in finding and acting on opportunity: anticipating trends, innovating, taking calculated risks and starting new initiatives. Their optimism was balanced by realism and strategic foresight.



THEME THREE

Loyalty

These leaders hold a profound sense of loyalty that joins their professional roles to their national identity, and to a duty to contribute to the development and prosperity of their country.



4 · MATTERING AND OPTIMISM

People need to matter twice

Mattering is a combined sense of feeling valued and adding value (Prilleltensky, 2020). It carried the strongest evidence in the whole study.

These leaders found it in the pride and responsibility of being Qatari and part of an inspiring national vision, and in a strong belief that they can make a difference to Qatar's success. Loyalty and mattering strengthen each other.

Optimism ran just as high. Confidence and a positive outlook seemed to fuel the leaders' readiness to anticipate opportunities, prepare strategically and help others contribute.

A country that set itself audacious goals and met many of them may give its leaders a shared sense of what is possible.

54 /60
ADDING VALUE

50 /60
FEELING VALUED

49 /60
POSITIVE OUTLOOK

48 /60
CONFIDENCE IN ABILITIES

> Service seems to hold greater significance than recognition for these leaders' sense of mattering.

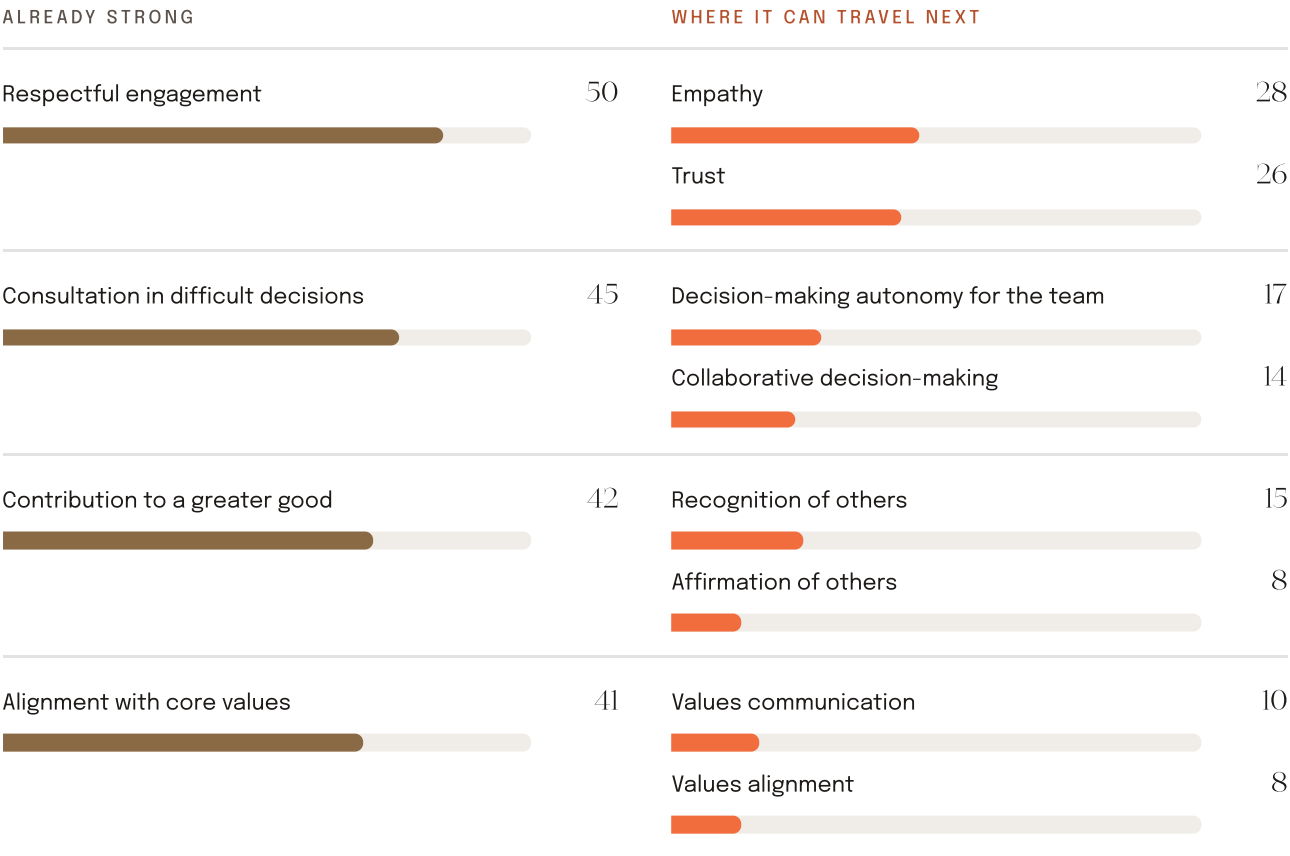
From the nation to the team

Every strength in this study has a next step, and in almost every case the next step is closer to home. These leaders feel they matter to their country. There was less evidence of mattering at the level of their own team.

Respect for others was strong. So was a willingness to help. Those are the foundations. What was thinner were the deeper relational practices that grow on top of them: trust, empathy, and decisions made with the team.

None of these is a fault. Each is a preference with a logic behind it. A leader who consults trusted peers who already share their values has less need to say those values out loud. In a workplace where many senior colleagues come and go, trust can take months to rebuild with each new arrival.

A respectful room protects something real, and it is not always an honest room. My work is the bridge between the two.



Strength of evidence out of 60 across the leaders interviewed, from the study's positive leadership and inductive measures.

A finding I hold more loosely

Women leaders scored lower than men on benefit finding and on learning from experience. The group was small, so I would not stretch this further than it can go. It may reflect how recently women have stepped into senior roles in Qatar. It does point to something worth building: spaces where reflection is modeled as a normal part of growth.

For leadership development

Many programs elsewhere spend their energy building purpose. Here, purpose is already the strongest asset. Development can start from it.

Start from what is already strong
Purpose, optimism and mattering carried the strongest evidence. Use that energy as the engine of a program rather than trying to create it.

Bring the national purpose into the team
Help leaders name, specifically, what each person's work makes possible for the larger goal, so the mattering they feel toward Qatar reaches their own people. It fits their values of service and generosity, so it reads as an extension of who they already are.

Extend consultation inward
Consultation is already a strength. The development move is to consult the team the way they already consult trusted peers, and to give the team room to decide.

Say the values out loud
In teams drawn from many countries, values that stay unspoken do not travel. Practice naming them, and linking decisions to them.

Build trust on top of respect
Respect is already there. Trust and empathy grow from it with time, continuity and small, kept promises.

Design reflection in
Make learning from experience a visible, ordinary part of leading, especially for women stepping into senior roles.

Change the method, too
Work in Arabic where possible, and bring in the views of teams, peers and superiors, so development rests on more than self-perception.

For the world

Mattering that reaches a nation
Most engagement models rest on individual recognition. These leaders draw meaning from what their work gives their country, which Prilleltensky (2020) describes as mattering at the level of a community.

Optimism with a plan
High optimism sat beside strategic thinking and careful management of risk.

Leadership that serves beyond the organization
A commitment not only to individual and organizational success, but to the wellbeing of the wider society.

Heritage and speed together
Tradition and rapid change held at once. And evidence the field needs: positive leadership has been studied mostly in Western settings, and these leaders extend it to a different cultural context.

For anyone working in Qatar, with Qataris

These are principles these leaders suggest, to be tested in every room, never a profile of a people.

Connect your work to what it gives the country
Contribution to the nation and service were among the strongest themes. Show how the work serves Qatar's growth and its people, including the development and retention of Qatari talent.

Earn trust over time, and stay
Where senior colleagues come and go, continuity and kept commitments carry real weight.

Honor the consultation
Decisions pass through trusted advisors before they are made. Allow the time, and learn who is asked.

Make room for candor
Respect is a real currency. A private conversation, or a question asked ahead of the meeting, often brings out what the meeting itself will not.

Lead with possibility
Bold ambition with a realistic plan is heard before a diagnosis of what is broken.

Name the contribution
When service matters more than recognition, appreciation that says what someone's work made possible lands better than praise alone.

QUESTIONS TO TAKE INTO YOUR NEXT WEEK

Before my last difficult decision, who did I consult? Was anyone from my own team in the room?

When did I last tell someone on my team what their work made possible?

Which of our values have I said out loud this month, and linked to a decision?

Where is my team waiting for me to trust them to decide?

What is already working here, and what would it take for more people to carry it?

What this study can and cannot tell us

Its strength is the appreciative lens. Prevailing narratives about Qatar and the wider Arab world rarely start from what is working, as the coverage of the 2022 FIFA World Cup showed. This study did, and it read leadership together with history and heritage rather than as isolated traits.

Its limits are real. The sample was small, recruited through networks and LinkedIn. The interviews were held in English with highly educated leaders, which narrowed the range of voices in a country where a large portion of Qatari nationals are fluent only in Arabic. And these are leaders describing themselves; their teams, peers and superiors may see them differently.

The study also cannot say how often these traits show up in daily practice, here or across Qatar more widely. Its focus on success stories may even understate how unselfish these leaders are.

Where research should go next

Gender differences, explored in depth. The relationship between optimism, decision-making and performance. The role of trust inside Qatari organizations. A broader sample, in Arabic, with the views of the people these leaders lead.

THE STUDY

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Leadership strategist, researcher and founder of the Positive Impact Hub, Doha.

I work with senior leaders and organizations across Qatar and the Gulf to strengthen the leadership conditions behind ownership, capability, culture, and sustainable performance.

This study is the evidence beneath my keynotes and my program design, and the reason my work starts from the strengths already present in how a leader leads, rather than from an imported model with a local example added.

KEYNOTE

Positive Leadership in Qatar

What Qatari leaders taught me about decisions, opportunity and loyalty, and why leadership in this region must begin with the strengths already here.

START A CONVERSATION
Book a conversation

FOLLOW THE WORK
linkedin.com/in/robertasaffels

FOR ORGANIZATIONS
positiveimpacthub.net

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