



EXECUTIVE COMPASS: CROSS-CULTURAL LEADERSHIP IN THE GULF

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Introduction

Stepping into a senior leadership role in the Gulf is both an achievement and a test of adaptability. You arrive with a track record of success, honed skills, and leadership instincts that have served you well throughout your career in the UK and beyond. Yet, almost immediately, you may sense that the playbook you've relied upon for decades does not yield the same results here.

Meetings move at a different pace. Messages you believe are clear are received differently from how they were intended. Warmth and hospitality abound, yet decision-making appears opaque. You may find yourself questioning not your competence, but the "rules of the game" you thought were universal.

The reality is this: much of your leadership behaviour is guided not by conscious choice, but by mental shortcuts, what psychologists call schemas. These schemas work seamlessly in familiar environments but can misfire when applied uncritically in new cultural contexts. In the Gulf, where traditions, values, and work practices differ fundamentally from those in the West, recalibrating your schemas is crucial.

This playbook explores what schemas are, why they matter for leadership, and how they interact with cultural differences. Most importantly, it provides structured guidance, rooted in real-world Gulf examples, on how to identify, unlearn, and rebuild schemas so that you can thrive as a leader in this unique environment.

Understanding Schemas

What Are Schemas?

Schemas are mental templates; shortcuts our brains create to help us quickly interpret situations and decide how to act. From early childhood, we build these patterns through experience: by observing others, listening to stories, watching films, and, of course, by living through events ourselves.

Imagine facing a tiger for the first time. Even if you've never seen one in real life, your brain already holds a "schema" of what to do. That schema might come from documentaries, books, or warnings you've absorbed over time. Instinctively, your body prepares for one of three responses: fight, flight, or freeze.

Schemas are not limited to life-and-death moments. They govern the way you greet a colleague, lead a meeting, give feedback, or negotiate a contract. They save energy by allowing you to act without analysing every situation from scratch.

Why Schemas Exist

From a psychological and neurological perspective, schemas exist to enhance efficiency and promote survival. They allow the brain to process vast amounts of information quickly, filtering out what seems irrelevant and triggering responses that have "worked" before.

Efficiency: Without schemas, daily life would be overwhelming. You'd need to relearn how to drive every time you got into a car or renegotiate basic etiquette in every conversation.

Safety: In uncertain situations, schemas provide immediate guidance, even if imperfect. They are your brain's way of saying: "Here's the best guess based on what we know."

In leadership, this efficiency is usually beneficial. Schemas enable you to manage complexity, make quick decisions, and maintain authority without constantly second-guessing yourself.

The Shadow Side of Schemas

But schemas can also mislead. Because they are built from experience, they may not fit new or unfamiliar contexts. What feels like “common sense” to you may not be shared by others. What you interpret as professional behaviour may be viewed as disrespectful or ineffective.

This is the challenge for Western executives in the Gulf: schemas that served you well in your home country and environment may not map neatly onto Riyadh, Dubai, or Doha.

Culture & Schemas

Schemas Are Culturally Constructed

While some schemas, such as fight, flight, or freeze, are universal, most are shaped by the cultural environment. Growing up and working in the UK, you will have developed schemas around punctuality, communication, hierarchy, and leadership that feel “natural.” But they are not universal truths; they are culturally specific responses.

In the West, a schema for meetings may be arrive five minutes early, stick to the agenda, contribute directly, and leave on time.

In the Gulf, a schema for meetings may be start with extended greetings, allow time for hospitality, build rapport, then gradually transition to business.

Neither is right nor wrong; both are adaptive to their cultural context. Problems arise when schemas are applied automatically across cultures without recalibration.

When Schemas Misfire

Consider the executive who emails detailed action points to his team, expecting swift responses. In the West, this schema of communication, direct, written, task-focused, works. In the Gulf, it may land as cold, overly formal, or even disrespectful compared to relational, conversational communication. The result? Delays, confusion, or disengagement.

Or take the executive who invites open debate in a management meeting. In the West, this schema reflects inclusivity and healthy challenge. In the Gulf, it may clash with hierarchical norms where open contradiction in public settings risks loss of face. The result? Silence, discomfort, or reputational harm.

The Pressure Factor

The difficulty is heightened under pressure. When deadlines loom or decisions must be made quickly, executives fall back on automatic schemas. Without conscious awareness, they default to “what has always worked.” In a new cultural environment, this can exacerbate problems.

The Opportunity of New Schemas

The good news is that schemas are not fixed. They can be updated, expanded, and adapted to meet changing needs. The task for Western executives in the Gulf is not to abandon their leadership identity but to consciously develop new schemas, templates informed by cultural awareness and real-world practice.

Belief Systems Behind Behaviour

When we enter a new culture, it is tempting to focus only on surface behaviours: how people speak, how meetings are run, how decisions are made. But these visible

behaviours are driven by deeper, often invisible, belief systems. To lead effectively in the Gulf, executives must go beyond noticing differences to understanding why those differences exist.

Western Belief Systems	Gulf Arab Belief Systems
Individualism: Achievement and identity are personal. Success belongs to the individual, and responsibility is clearly assigned.	Collectivism: Identity and responsibility are shared. Loyalty to family, tribe, and organisation is prioritised over individual ambition.
Meritocracy: Effort and results justify position; hierarchy is flatter and more easily challenged.	Respect for Hierarchy: Authority is both formal (titles, roles) and informal (age, connections). Deference signals respect, not weakness.
Efficiency: Time is money, and progress is measured by speed and output.	Relationship-Centred: Trust precedes business; without trust, transactions stall.
Directness: Clarity in communication is valued; being blunt is not considered rude if it gets results.	Religion & Honour: Islam shapes values of hospitality, dignity, and reciprocity. Behaviour reflects not just personal preference but alignment with shared principles.

Why This Matters for Schemas

Schemas don't arise in a vacuum; they are reflections of these belief systems. A British leader's schema for feedback may be "direct, honest, constructive," rooted in individual accountability. A Gulf Arab leader's schema may be "face-saving, private, respectful," rooted in harmony and honour.

Understanding the underlying "why" allows Western executives to interpret behaviour less as puzzling quirks and more as logical, coherent responses to deeply held values

Domain	Western Schema	Gulf Schema:	Coaching Insight
Communication	Direct, explicit, and written. Emails dominate; clarity and speed are prized.	High-context, relational, layered with courtesy. Preference for in-person, WhatsApp, or phone; indirect phrasing preserves dignity.	Calibrate directness. Pair written clarity with relational channels, and phrase disagreement in ways that maintain respect.
Trust & Relationships	Task- and contract-centred. Trust follows delivery	Relationship-centred. Trust precedes business; hospitality and personal rapport are essential.	Learn to build social capital (wasta) ethically, credibility through relationships and introductions.

Domain	Western Schema	Gulf Schema:	Coaching Insight
			Recognise that in the Gulf, trust is the foundation, not the outcome.
Hierarchy & Authority	Flatter, consultative, and challenge is healthy.	Clear hierarchy; authority respected; public challenge discouraged.	Respect hierarchy while enabling voice. Use private channels to surface ideas and align with senior sponsors.
Time & Pace	Monochronic: punctuality, deadlines, efficiency	Polychronic: flexibility for relationships, prayer, and hospitality.	Hold standards without disrespect. Balance urgency with empathy, signalling patience while maintaining accountability.
Feedback & Performance	Candid, frequent, written.	Indirect, face-saving, private.	Use feedback that preserves dignity. Pair honesty with face-saving strategies.
Meetings	Agenda-driven, time-boxed, efficiency-focused.	Fluid, relational, hospitality-first.	Master meeting choreography, understand seating, order of speaking, and the social rhythm.
Negotiation	Transactional, speed-valued, terms early.	Relational, deliberate pace, reciprocal concessions.	Play the long game. Learn to distinguish between “no” and “not yet.”
Religion & Observance	Religion shapes personal life, rarely daily business	Religion shapes personal life, rarely daily business	Respect and adapt. Use religious observance as an opportunity to strengthen inclusion and trust.

Domain	Western Schema	Gulf Schema:	Coaching Insight
Governance & Policy	Policy-driven, uniform application	Principle-driven, with exceptions at senior discretion.	Balance rigour with discretion. Anticipate exceptions and work through alliances.
Friendliness vs. Friendship	Friendliness is often read as a step toward personal trust and intimacy	Friendliness is expected and extended to most visitors. Genuine friendship, carrying trust and influence, takes far longer to build.	Enjoy friendliness but pace trust. Learn to read signals of genuine deepening relationships before assuming full alliance.

Building New Schemas & The Role of Coaching

Stepping into a senior leadership role in the GCC is more than a change of job title; it is a change of context. Leadership behaviours that have been instinctive and effective for years may suddenly produce outcomes that feel unfamiliar, or even counterproductive. This is not a failure of competence. Instead, it is the natural result of operating with a set of *schemas*, mental shortcuts that were shaped in one culture, in an entirely different cultural environment.

The good news is that schemas are not fixed. They can be consciously expanded and recalibrated to align with the cultural codes of the GCC, enabling executives to lead with confidence while remaining authentic to their own leadership identity. This expansion follows a five-stage process: awareness, observation, experimentation, reflection, and integration.

Awareness: Recognising Schema Misfires

The first step is simply noticing when an instinctive behaviour doesn't land as intended. Perhaps a frank piece of feedback is met with silence instead of improvement. Or a push for deadlines results in strained relationships rather than faster delivery.

In these moments, the executive's schema is "misfiring", the automatic response is mismatched with the cultural expectations of colleagues. Awareness is about catching these misfires early, without judgment, and recognising them as valuable signals for recalibration.

Observation: Learning from Local Practice

Observation is one of the most powerful, yet underused, tools available to leaders in a new cultural context. It involves paying close attention to how trusted local colleagues handle the very situations that feel challenging.

For example, how does a respected Emirati leader open a meeting? How is criticism conveyed in a way that preserves dignity? How is hierarchy managed without eroding trust? These observations provide living case studies, offering clues for building new schemas that align with local norms and values.

Experimentation: Testing New Behaviours Safely

Once leaders are aware of misfires and have observed alternatives, the next step is to try out new behaviours. This might mean delivering constructive feedback privately rather than in public or allowing more time for hospitality before beginning a negotiation.

Experimentation is most effective when done in low-stakes environments. Coaching sessions, role-play scenarios, and informal interactions all provide safe spaces to test new approaches before applying them in high-stakes boardrooms or negotiations.

Reflection: Cementing Learning

Reflection transforms experience into growth. Through journaling, coaching debriefs, or structured self-reflection, leaders make sense of what worked, what felt uncomfortable, and what outcomes shifted.

Reflection also creates a “feedback loop”, reinforcing successful experiments and recalibrating unsuccessful ones. Over time, this practice sharpens cultural agility and accelerates the formation of new schemas.

Integration: Making New Behaviours Instinctive

The final stage is integration, when new behaviours no longer feel awkward or forced, but become instinctive. At this point, a leader doesn’t have to consciously think about whether to adjust their feedback style or how to balance deadlines with relationships; the recalibrated schema activates automatically.

Integration marks the point where executives are no longer merely “adapting.” They are leading authentically, with a broadened repertoire that works seamlessly across contexts.

The Role of Coaching

Expanding schemas is rarely a smooth, linear process. It requires honest feedback, psychological safety, and guided reflection. Coaching provides this environment.

Through structured coaching, leaders gain:

Understanding of why behaviours that once worked may now misfire.

Immersion in the cultural codes of the GCC, interpreted through lived experience.

Strategies for experimenting with new behaviours in ways that feel safe and practical.

Reflection through guided debriefs and structured self-awareness practices.

At Thryve Strategies, we combine these elements into a coaching journey that helps executives recalibrate without losing their sense of direction. We don’t ask leaders to abandon what makes them effective; we help them expand their leadership range.

Leadership Risks & Opportunities

Stepping into senior leadership in the GCC presents both risks and opportunities. The risks arise when established leadership behaviours are transferred wholesale from a Western context into a Gulf environment without adaptation. Opportunities emerge when leaders consciously expand their approach, utilising cultural agility to unlock new levels of trust, influence, and sustainable success.

Risks

Credibility Loss Through Missteps

Credibility is hard won and easily lost. A single misstep, such as dismissing a local protocol, overlooking hierarchy, or giving blunt feedback in public, can erode confidence in a leader's judgment.

Once credibility is in question, every subsequent action is filtered through that doubt. Executives need to understand that in the GCC, credibility is not only technical but also cultural; it is earned through respect for norms and an awareness of the local context.

Damaged Trust via Misjudged Relationships

Relationships in the GCC sit at the heart of business. Trust often precedes delivery. Executives who mistake initial warmth for deep trust risk oversharing, misaligning, or unintentionally offending.

Equally, bypassing the relational stage and focusing purely on transactions can cause long-term damage. Misjudged relationships don't just limit influence; they can actively close doors.

Ineffective Delivery from Rigid Schema Application

Leadership schemas that work seamlessly in London or New York can become stumbling blocks in Dubai, Doha, or Riyadh. Insisting on rigid deadlines without space for relationship-building, applying overly direct communication, or overlooking the symbolic importance of senior approval can stall projects rather than accelerate them.

Ineffective delivery often stems not from capability gaps but from schema inflexibility, applying yesterday's tools in today's different environment.

Opportunities

Cultural Agility as a Differentiator

Leaders who invest in understanding and adapting to the GCC context immediately distinguish themselves. Cultural agility becomes a competitive edge, signalling respect, broadening influence, and accelerating integration into the executive community. Few Western leaders cultivate this capability with intention, those who do are remembered and respected.

Deeper Influence Through Trust

When leaders carefully pace trust, show cultural respect, and invest in relationships, their influence deepens. Decisions are supported more readily, difficult conversations are approached with goodwill, and reputational capital grows.

Influence in the GCC is not transactional; it is relational. Executives who master this dynamic can move initiatives forward with far less resistance.

Sustainable Success Across the Gulf

The most significant opportunity lies in sustainability. Leaders who recalibrate their schemas don't just succeed in one organisation; they build a transferable skillset that applies across the diverse landscapes of the GCC. Whether in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, or beyond, the ability to adapt respectfully and consistently creates long-term success, resilience, and career mobility.

Conclusion: From Awareness to Agility

Stepping into senior leadership in the GCC is both a privilege and a test of adaptability. For Western executives, it quickly becomes clear that the leadership instincts and schemas that worked seamlessly at home do not always translate in the Gulf.

Throughout this book, we have explored the core dynamics of this transition:

- **Schemas and their misfires**, recognising that instinctive behaviours may be mismatched with cultural expectations.
- **The process of recalibration**, building new schemas through awareness, observation, experimentation, reflection, and integration.
- **The risks of inattention**, from credibility loss to damaged trust and stalled delivery.
- **The opportunities for those who adapt**, cultural agility as a differentiator, more profound influence through trust, and sustainable success across the region.

The message is simple: what made you a great leader in one context is not enough in another. Success in the GCC requires more than technical competence or operational excellence. It requires cultural agility, the ability to notice, adjust, and expand leadership schemas without losing authenticity.

This is not about abandoning who you are. It is about expanding your leadership repertoire so that you can operate with both the confidence that comes from your experience and the credibility that results from cultural attunement.

Why Coaching Matters

Recalibrating schemas is not a purely intellectual exercise. It takes courage to recognise misfires, humility to observe others, and discipline to reflect. Most importantly, it requires a safe space to test, rehearse, and embed new behaviours before applying them in high-stakes settings.

That is where coaching makes the difference. Coaching provides a structured environment in which leaders can translate insight into action, reflection into growth, and cultural awareness into cultural agility.

The Thryve Approach

At **Thryve Strategies**, we specialise in guiding Western executives through this journey. Our cross-cultural coaching is built around four pillars:

Awareness: identifying the schemas that serve and those that misfire.

Immersion: interpreting the GCC's cultural codes through lived experience.

Strategies: equipping leaders with practical tools and behaviours they can apply immediately.

Reflection: ensuring each experiment is captured, learned from, and integrated.

We don't ask leaders to become someone they're not. We help them to lead authentically, while building credibility and influence in a new cultural context.

Final Word

The GCC is a region of extraordinary opportunity. For those willing to invest in cultural agility, it offers not just career progression but the chance to leave a lasting impact on organisations, people, and communities.

The leaders who succeed here are not those with the loudest voices or the fastest answers. They are the leaders who can listen, adapt, and build trust across cultures. At Thryve Strategies, we exist to equip you for that journey.

Let's Continue the Conversation

Cross-cultural agility is not just a leadership skill; it is the foundation for lasting success in the GCC. Whether you are about to begin your new executive role, are already navigating the transition, or are supporting senior leaders through change, the journey is easier, and far more effective, with the proper guidance.

At Thryve Strategies, we specialise in:

Equipping Western executives with the awareness, strategies, and confidence to lead authentically in GCC contexts.

Providing safe, practical coaching spaces to rehearse, reflect, and integrate new leadership behaviours.

Supporting organisations as they onboard, transition, and empower leaders to thrive across cultures.

We would be delighted to discuss how our Cross-Cultural Coaching Programmes can support you or your leadership teams.

Contact Us

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Cultural agility is the leadership edge. Let us help you make it your own.

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