

A touch of the Ramadan spirit

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The wider community's reaction to Ramadan can provide an important clue to its claim to understand differing cultures.

Certainly, the UAE presents the newcomer with extremes of materialism on the one hand and a devout spirituality on the other, which although possibly disorienting, is also instructive.

No doubt, it is the material side that attracts business-people here in the first place and subsequently the sheer pace of life will keep them focused on this competitive and profitable aspect, possibly impatient with anything that 'gets in the way'.

And unfortunately, in that mindset, the time of Ramadan may look superficially as something that 'gets in the way', with its interrupted work-schedule and fasting employees. But if we do possibly find ourselves thinking like that, it is time to take stock and examine our own mindset.

Arab peoples have traditionally lived hard, while acknowledging a need for spiritual nourishment, unlike the modern, transient, business community who may feel cushioned from such needs. Of course, visitors should defer to the host-country's customs with understanding and obviously show suitable respect to them. Any idea of Ramadan 'getting in the way' of life or business schedules would show a lack of understanding.

But it is more than that. It ignores the possibility that these devout and observant people in their centuries-old faith, may know a few things that others may fail to appreciate.

Change of rhythm

As a professional stress consultant, I noticed this rhythm change early on, and as I observed this annual ritual of purification and self-denial, I began to see certain parallels with the methodology of stress-management intervention in which I specialise.

In particular, it coincided with my philosophy of time management, which encourages us to look closely at how we spend a typical hour, and tries to counteract the disastrous restricted focus that discourages adequate thought and meditation but instead contributes towards the prolonged and dangerous, excessive pressures that can eventually harden into destructive stress.

For many years, I have been counselling business executives who find themselves incapable of switching off, and who cannot stop taking work home, even if it's only in their minds. For these people, it is the office that is 'getting in the way' of a sensible lifestyle. In other words, a 'touch of the Ramadan spirit' might do them a power of good.

We don't have to be deeply spiritual to see the value of stepping away from excessive business pressures, and dumping the out-of-date idea of trying to look and sound 'busy-busy' in order to be indispensable and important.

I've written before in this column about the concept of time management because it is an increasingly important way of handling business pressures. And if we can absorb a few of the lessons of Ramadan, we may

find ourselves making better use, not only of each hour, but of our entire lives. As well as earning respect as accepted members of the Emirates community.

- The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years' experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.