

Understanding the Organizational Dynamics of Change in Middle Eastern Organizations: Insights from an Explorative Study

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We would like to thank the Abu Dhabi Education Council which has supported this
research.

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As result of increasing globalization and the need to diversify economies, organizations in the Middle East face increasing pressures to implement organizational change. Research has provided practitioners with useful knowledge how to effectively implement organizational change in other parts of the world, but not yet in the Middle East; this lack of knowledge makes it particularly difficult to successfully implement organizational change in that region. With this paper we aim to close this gap and explore the specific dynamics of organizational change in Middle Eastern organizations. Individual and group interviews were conducted with 24 experts in implementing change in organizations based in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and other countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Based on this sample, a set of relevant dynamics on the levels of individuals, influence networks, organizational culture and strategies and interventions were identified and discussed.

Keywords: change management, innovation management, Middle East, explorative study

Methodological area: qualitative, empirical

Introduction

The economies of many Middle Eastern countries are presently dominated by their oil and gas industry. However, oil and gas fields are expected to run dry some day in the future which requires these countries to diversify their economies. To prepare for the post-petroleum era, a number of countries have started a transformation process of their economies in order to increase the competitiveness of their existing industries and develop new industries. To make this transformation reality, organizations – both from the public and private sector – are facing the challenge of implementing changes that require the collective adoption of new behaviors and attitudes by all their members. The Government of Abu Dhabi, for example, has recently started a major change by implementing a new Performance Management System (PMS) in order to increase the transparency and accountability of all of its government entities (Ghazal, 2008).

Change implementation in Middle Eastern organizations is a very challenging task, and the relevant organizational dynamics are rather different from other well studied parts of the world. To successfully implement change in Middle Eastern organizations, change managers need to have the relevant culture-specific skills and competences about change dynamics in Middle Eastern organizations and apply localized change management approaches.

However, the available knowledge in literature about change management in Middle Eastern organizations is very limited: During a literature review in leading Western academic journals we found only few recent articles directly or indirectly studying this topic. An article reviewing the Arab literature (Rees & Althakhri, 2008) referred to master theses, indicating a lack of

academic publications on this topic in the Arab world. To close this research gap, we aim to explore the following question in this article: What are the specific dynamics of change in Middle Eastern organizations that change managers must understand in order to effectively implement change in these organizations?

As there are significant cultural differences across different countries in the Middle East, we target organizations in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and other countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) with this research. To identify the specific dynamics of organizational change, we conducted an explorative study among local and expatriate managers experienced in implementing change in organizations from the private and public sector.

Research framework

To systematically study the specific dynamics of organizational change in Middle Eastern organizations, we use a research framework with the following three elements:

- A model describing the different roles of the key actors involved in the implementation process of change;
- A process model defining different adoption stages of change;
- A heuristic for the classification of different types of organizational dynamics affecting the adoption process of a change.

The first element of our research framework is a model with different roles of the key actors involved in the implementation process of a change. Kanter et al. (1992) developed a useful

model by differentiating between the change strategist, the change implementer (or change agent) and the change recipient.

- Change strategists are concerned about the connection between the organization and its environment, and for the organization's overall direction.
- Change implementers, or change agents, are in charge of the micro-dynamics of development of the change effort, and therefore of its internal organizational structure and coordination.
- Change recipients represent the largest group at the end of a change "sequence" who are strongly affected by the change and its implementation, but often without much opportunity to influence those effects.

The second element of the research framework is the change process. A number of process models have been proposed in the literature, addressing the difficulties to overcome the restraining forces of resistance. For example, Lewin (1951) argued that successful change in organizations should follow three steps: unfreezing the status quo, moving to a desired end state and refreezing the change to make it permanent. In the following we will model change as a progressive evolution of attitudes of individuals. This incremental process has been modeled, relying on Roger's adoption and diffusion studies (Rogers, 1983). In his book "Diffusion of Innovation", Rogers defines the diffusion process as one "which is the spread of a new idea from its source of invention or creation to its ultimate users or adopters". This model by Rogers has been adapted in the following way (see Manzoni & Angehrn, 1998; Angehrn, 2004):

- At the beginning of the proposed change the targeted adopters (“change recipients”) are still “unaware”, so it is the first task of the change agent to help them reach what Rogers calls the “awareness” stage. In the awareness stage “the individual is exposed to the innovation but lacks complete information about it”.
- Once awareness is reached, the “interest stage” is entered. At this stage the “individual becomes interested in the new idea and seeks additional information about it”.
- The next stage is “appraisal / trial”, a phase corresponding to Rogers’ two stages of “evaluation” and “trial”. At this stage the “individual mentally applies the innovation to his present and anticipated future situation, and then decides whether or not to try it”. During the trial stage “the individual makes full use of the innovation”.
- The last stage is “adoption”. At the adoption stage “the individual decides to continue the full use of the innovation”.

A particularly important transition is the one between “interest” and “appraisal / trial”, as here the targeted individuals need to be willing and able to start experimenting with the new change, and therefore also take the risk of failure. As discussed by Angehrn (2004), this transition can be linked to the work of Pfeffer & Sutton (1999) on the so called “Knowing-Doing-Gap”.

The third element of the framework classifies different kinds of organizational dynamics. These are the dynamics that have been used in the design of previous SmallWorld Simulations on organizational change, such as the EIS simulation for large Western organizations

(Manzoni & Angehrn, 1998; Angehrn, 2004, 2006) or the LingHe Simulation for Chinese organizations (Zhao et al., 2008).

- **Individual behavioral dynamics:** to understand the needs of the individual change recipient and his attitudes towards change;
- **Relationship network dynamics:** to identify relevant influence networks affecting the diffusion of attitudes in a group;
- **Organizational cultural dynamics:** to capture specific cultural dynamics with regard to decision making, power, leadership or interaction styles;
- **Change strategies and interventions:** to understand what happens when change agents use different approaches and tactics.

The framework of our research is presented in Figure 1.

Method

To explore the specific dynamics of change in Middle Eastern organizations, we collected data from 26 managers who are experienced change agents in Middle Eastern organizations. These managers were either locals, or expatriates, and had led change projects in private and public sector organizations – mainly in the UAE but also in other GCC countries. Various industries are represented in this study, such as telecommunication, manufacturing, finance, media, food and consulting.

For our data collection we developed and used guides for semi-structured interviews which covered the different kinds of organizational dynamics on the individual level, the network

level, the cultural level and the strategy and intervention level. In total, we conducted eight semi-structured individual interviews and two semi-structured group interviews with twelve participants in the first group and six participants in the second group. The group interviews took place during a specifically designed “knowledge harvesting” workshop which consisted of a “simulation player” session and a “simulation designer” session.

- During the “simulation player” session the workshop participants played the EIS Simulation– a change management simulation specifically designed for leading change in Western organizations (Manzoni & Angehrn, 1998; Angehrn, 2004). The objective of this session was to make the participants familiar with the functioning of our change management simulations. Existing mental models of the players were activated and challenged, such as their assumptions about individual behaviors, group interactions and relationship networks, organizational and cultural contexts and intervention dynamics.
- Subsequently, the players were switched from the simulation player mode to the simulation designer mode. The objective of this session was to extract the knowledge and experiences with regard to the four different levels of organizational dynamics from the players. Through high interaction and involvement, the creativity of the participants was stimulated in order to identify relevant insights and to produce new and useful ideas for the design of the new GulfCom Simulation.

To analyze the transcripts and protocols of the semi-structured individual and group interviews we used qualitative text analysis methods, developing and applying a code plan. In the following section, the most important findings along the four levels of our research framework are presented.

Results

Individual level

As mentioned above, it is very challenging to lead change in the region. The interviewees identified a number of specific types of behavior of the change recipients in Middle Eastern organizations which can explain this observation: Change recipients in Middle Eastern organizations have the tendency to wait very long before they adopt a change because they have a strong preference for continuity and uncertainty avoidance, especially with regard to taking the risk of failure. Also, they can be characterized by a very strong desire for social recognition; this is why they are likely to adopt similar attitudes and behavior as their social group. They especially dislike a change if they cannot freely choose to adopt it, but if it is imposed on them from outside. Finally, active resisters can become very dangerous because they have the potential to destroy the change project if they start mobilizing forces against it.

Strong preference for continuity

According to interviewees experienced in leading change projects in the West and the Middle East, the employees' preference for continuity is stronger in Middle Eastern organizations than in Western organizations. This becomes evident through the fact that many change recipients prefer to stick to their accustomed environments and to their known work routines. Sometimes they would even resist a change that was ultimately for their benefit. There are two explanations for the preference of continuity: Firstly, people prefer to remain in their "comfort zone", avoiding extra work triggered by the change project. The willingness to adopt new behavior, processes, etc. and to make an extra effort to go "beyond their labor con-

tract” largely depends on their commitment to the organization, which is low in some organizations though. Another explanation for the preference of continuity is that employees simply fear change: They are afraid of the future and of learning new things.

High uncertainty avoidance with regard to negative outcomes

Employees in the Middle East often show resistance to change because they expect a negative outcome for themselves. These expectations may be triggered by unsuccessful change projects in the past where the “costs” exceeded the promised benefits, the consolidation and “payoff” periods were too short, or the management did not have the necessary skills and competences. An important reason for resistance in some private organizations was the fear to lose the job. This would not only mean losing family income (and the residency right in the country in the case of expatriates), but also social status in the society. To avoid this, nationals might start filtering information or mobilizing resistance through their network connections (“wasta”). Another reason is that many recent change projects (such as the introduction of a new performance management system) generate more transparency and personal accountability in an organization. Such projects are not beneficial to those employees who are not among the top performers because the performance pressure on them will increase.

Importance of emotional and social needs

Further, we investigated which types of needs should be addressed in order to convince of a change in Middle Eastern organizations. We found that addressing change recipients on the cognitive level by providing good logical arguments (“being right”) is necessary but not sufficient for a successful implementation of change. Rather, change agents must complement

this cognitive level on the emotional and social level: On the emotional level it is important to stimulate feelings such as passion, pride and envy (“feeling good”), while on the social level change agents must help the change recipients to earn social recognition or improve their reputation (“looking good”). These findings are consistent with Hofstede (1991) who has investigated the degree to which people prefer to act as individuals (individualists) or as members of groups (collectivists). For the Arab countries he calculated an individualism score that is well below the average of all the other countries he included in his study, indicating that individuals have a tendency of adapting their behaviors and attitudes to the group.

According to our interviewees, the social dimension of change is not only responsible for pushing ahead the ones lagging behind the group but also for pulling back the ones ahead of the group:

- Pulling back the ones ahead of the group: A change recipient has a low tendency to adopt a change before everyone else in his group does. The reason is that he does not have the support of his group, cannot earn social recognition and even risks losing his face if the change fails;
- Pushing ahead the ones behind the group: A change recipient will carefully observe his environment and jump on the bandwagon, just at the moment when the change becomes “inevitable”. Otherwise he risks getting a negative reputation of being a resister.

These two behavioral patterns observed in our study are also consistent with the findings from collaboration experiments by Herrmann et al. (2008). These experiments were conducted in 16 different locations across the globe and investigated the tendency of the participants

to incur costs for punishing others whose behavior was different from theirs. In all countries there was a strong tendency to incur costs for punishing free riding, i.e., contributing less than the punisher (corresponding to the “pushing ahead” effect). But only the participants from a few – mainly Arab – countries were also heavily punishing others for contributing *more* than they themselves did (corresponding to the “pulling back” effect).

Reluctance against imposition of change

A further important reason for resistances to change is the way how the change is sold to the change recipients. If employees in Middle Eastern organizations perceive a change as not being voluntary, but being imposed upon them, resistance is likely to emerge. Implementing a change is particularly difficult for change agents from outside and abroad, as consulting firms, because they often do not sufficiently adapt their approaches and ways of communication to the organizational culture and, thus, are perceived as culturally insensitive and imposing. The respondents have identified three ways to avoid such resistance:

- Firstly, like in Western organizations change recipients need to be made understand the reasons, consequences and outcomes of the change for the individual and the organization as a whole, which requires a very good explanation. However, it has been emphasized that in Middle Eastern organizations a substantial amount of effort must be made by the top leadership to communicate a vision of the planned change within the organization.
- Secondly, like in Western organizations it is important to involve members from the organization in the task force from the very beginning. Only if they are part of the change campaign, they will support it.

- Thirdly, people in the Middle Eastern culture have a natural tendency to be leaders rather than followers. Therefore, change agents should stay in the background and allow and help locals lead the change or even to become its “ambassadors”, and to make them the owners of the change process.

Active resisters fighting the change

According to Rogers (1983) resisters are those change recipients who have a negative attitude to change and, thus, are the last ones to adopt it. According to our interviews it is very difficult to deal with resisters in Middle Eastern organization. In particular, they get dangerous for the success of the whole change project if they start fighting it actively. However, active resisters are difficult to identify because it is not common in the Middle Eastern culture to express resistance in the public; as one interviewee pointed out, they are more likely to fight the change “secretly under the table” and make obstacles emerge somewhere. Although it is difficult to identify active resisters, change agents cannot ignore them either. Change agents therefore must apply a strategy from the very beginning on how to deal with those resisters. The participants of the interviews recommended that change agents should closely observe them. If they cannot make them an ally they should work towards getting them moved to a different position or project.

Influence networks

Another important level of the research framework is the one of formal and informal influence networks. In the following paragraph, three findings from our interviews are analyzed in depth: the strong vertical influence within the organization, the strong influence of family and

tribal networks and specific characteristics of the so called “tipping point” in Middle Eastern organizations.

Strong top-down influence pattern

According to our interviewees the change recipients at the top of the organization chart have a very strong influence on those who report to them. This observation is consistent with the findings of Hofstede (1991): He defined “power distance” as the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. Arab countries score very high in power distance compared to other countries.

Our research showed that the willingness of employees to follow their leadership is strongly moderated by the leaders’ quality and credibility. Good leaders don’t just impose a change on their employees but provide a common vision, give them an example to follow, strive to maintain good relationships with them and communicate intensively. In the Bedouin culture it was common to hold “majlis” (place of sitting) or “jalsa” (“session, meeting or gathering”) for consultations. This format of meeting is still used nowadays by leaders in the region for consultation with the members of their organization. The interviewees often perceived the quality of leadership at the top level as often quite good. However, middle managers sometimes lack leadership competences if they define their roles solely in giving orders to their employees.

It was also observed that the amount of information flowing bottom-up is often very limited. Using the words of Fliaster (2004), this phenomenon can be described as “cross-hierarchical disconnectivity”. The interviewees explained this in the following way: Being respectful to

superiors and the leadership is highly valued in Middle Eastern organizations. For example, the incentive to provide new ideas or criticism to the leadership - especially in public – is low because this can be regarded as disrespectful. Also, bypassing one's direct supervisor with an idea usually does not take place because this is culturally not accepted.

Dominance of family and tribal influence networks

Influence takes place not only through formal, but also informal relationships. Our interviewees indicated that informal connections (“wasta”) matter a lot, for example in hiring or promotion decisions. In particular, the influence of family and tribal networks is considered very strong. Unlike in Europe, this influence is not limited to family enterprises but extends also to large enterprises and public organizations. These family and tribal ties help bridge hierarchies by connecting employees across hierarchies and different organizational departments. In small communities such as Abu Dhabi it can happen that the members from more than one important local family work in the same organization. In this case they do not only see themselves as managers but also as representatives of their families and, thus, must act with responsibility towards their families as opposed to solely to the company.

While in Western organizations an employee usually maintains different networks inside and outside of the workplace, in Middle Eastern organizations those networks usually overlap. Thereby, influence processes typically do not so much take place within the organization during working time but rather outside, for example during the so called “majlis” sessions or family functions.

During our study we also explored the role of women in organizational change projects. In the Arab society, women usually do not mingle with men but form networks among themselves. If men and women do not dispose of a common family tie, their interaction is mainly limited to the work place and formal interaction. From a researcher studying women and leadership in the Middle East we learned that the level of segregation between men and women is still very high, in particular in Saudi Arabia: Work-related communication between men and women often cannot take place face-by-face; instead, electronic communication media are used, such as phone or instant messaging. Other interviewees stated that recently the number of examples of influential women in Middle Eastern organizations is increasing. Usually, women can act more independently from their social group compared to men. Consequently, change agents need to approach them differently as men: as influential, but more independent individuals.

A significant number of the managers in Middle Eastern organizations come from abroad. These expatriates have a strong tendency to form networks with people from the same origin but usually stay disconnected from the locals' networks. This has a number of implications: The interaction between expatriates and locals is usually confined to the work place. Expatriates can only indirectly gain access to the networks of locals by closely collaborating with one of its local members. Very often, even the structure of these networks remains invisible for expatriates. Sometimes very surprising network connections exist in Middle Eastern organizations; this is why change agents always must speak and act with caution.

Slow and unstable tipping point dynamics

Social influence or contagion models assume that opinions and attitudes of actors in a social system only partly depend on individual characteristics but are also shaped by social influence. The concept of tipping point has recently been popularized by Gladwell (2000): A tipping point is reached when the momentum of change becomes inevitable because a critical mass adopts the change and the change starts spreading throughout the organization like a fire. The usual progression of the tipping point curve is presented in Figure 2. However, we found evidences in our study that the progression of the tipping point curve in Middle Eastern organizations varies from this usual progression.

The first variation comes from the fact that members of Middle Eastern organizations have a tendency to block each other to adopt a change. This mutual blocking pattern emerges not only between the leaders and their followers but also within influence networks of locals.

Cross-hierarchical blocks are generated by the following mechanisms:

- On one hand, employees have a strong tendency not to adopt a change until their leaders show sufficient support for it;
- On the other hand, leaders will not simply impose a change on their subordinates. Rather, they will show their support when they believe that a critical mass of their subordinates is ready to adopt the change.

Blocks in networks of locals emerge because its members have a very strong tendency to adapt their attitudes and behaviors of their peers.

The consequence of this mutual blocking pattern is the following one: It takes a significant amount of time in Middle Eastern organizations to make progress at the beginning and eventually to reach the tipping point. Individuals were described by one interviewee as “Teflon coded” because the change does not “stick on them”. But as soon as the tipping point is reached, more and more employees “smell blood”; suddenly the change starts gaining a lot of momentum. Compared to the usual progression of the tipping point curve, in Middle Eastern organizations the tipping point seems to come later but once it is reached, the progression is faster (see Figure 3).

Interviewees observed that sometimes two tipping points exist in Middle Eastern organizations: They called the first one the “knowing” tipping point at which all the change recipients have become aware and also interested in the change. At this point also, the top leadership is interested in the change and has publicly expressed its support. Usually, a formal launch event of the change project takes place around this “knowing” tipping point. While the knowing tipping point is relatively easy to reach, it takes a lot of time and effort to come to the “doing” tipping point. People don’t want to risk their face in case they try out or adopt a change that finally does not succeed. The progression of the double “knowing – doing” tipping point curve is illustrated in Figure 4.

At the beginning a change project usually progresses in small and unsteady steps. This pattern was described as “rush and wait”: An episode of stagnation (“wait”) where nothing happens is suddenly followed by a short episode of high activity (“rush”), before another episode of stagnation (“wait”) takes place. A number of sequences of “rush” and “wait” episodes eventually sums up the change project’s progress (see Figure 5).

Sometimes, when an individual or a group of people communicate a strong commitment for a change, this commitment might not be long lasting: after a successful event the change recipients show real commitment to take the change ahead, but in the follow-up nothing will happen. We call this pattern a “flash in the pan” (see Figure 6).

Finally, the interviewees pointed out that change projects sometime suddenly lose their momentum. This phenomenon can be explained by the length of the “interest span” which has been described by the interviewees as shorter in Middle Eastern organizations compared to the West (see Figure 7). Even the top management might suddenly revise priorities and withdraw support for the change. To prevent this from happening, the interviewees recommended continuous and repeated communication about the change within the organization.

Organizational culture

Scholars mainly from intercultural management have developed a number of typologies to classify and compare different cultures (for example: Hofstede, 1991; Hall, 1959 & 1976; Trompenaars & Wooliams, 2004; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995; Lewis, 2000). In this paper it will not further be discussed how these typologies already have been or could be applied to the Middle Eastern culture. Instead, we will present the following key findings from our expert interviews: Firstly, compared to Western standards decision making processes seem to be less efficient. Secondly, we observed fundamentally different interaction styles, putting relatively more emphasis on the presentation of a message over its content. Finally, key to the change agents’ interventions is the existence of personal relationships with the change recipients.

Weaknesses in decision making

A number of weaknesses in decision making styles of Middle Eastern leaders were identified by the interviewees: Decision making is usually rather centralized, decisions are often based more on intuition than a rational decision-making model, and the decision making processes are thorough and time consuming. If the outcome of a decision is unfavorable, the decision makers are usually not held accountable. We will now describe each of these observations.

Interviewees described the decision making style of leadership as rather centralized and autocratic. To characterize this decision making style, a model developed by Mintzberg (1979) can be used. He distinguished different types of organizational configuration, such as mutual adjustment, direct supervision and standardization of results, processes, skills and norms. The configuration that resembles most the situation in Middle Eastern organizations is direct supervision. This configuration is characterized by one person giving instructions to others as to what is to be done.

Such a decision making style is negatively associated with cross-hierarchical connectivity (Fliaster, 2004): Information that would be relevant for decision making exists in other parts of the organization but is not transferred to the decision makers. In Middle Eastern organizations two kinds of such disconnectivity are frequent: Firstly, information available to lower level employees does not flow freely up the hierarchy because these employees are neither involved in decision making nor do they have to share information with their superiors. The second kind of disconnectivity is across departments. According to the interviewees the extent to which information was exchanged across the boundaries of departments was some-

times very small. While the lack of cross-hierarchical connectivity is a well-known problem in Western organizations, it seems to be more serious in Middle Eastern organizations.

According to our interviewees decision making in Middle Eastern organizations is not always based on rational decision making models and data. Instead, managers prefer intuitive decision making by relying on their “gut feeling”. Also if they wished to apply rational decision making models, they would be less likely to do so because often data is less available and competences how to base decisions on existing data are less developed.

Decision making usually takes very long, much longer than in the West: In case of uncertainty about the positive and sustainable outcome of a change for the organization and for the decision maker, decision makers are reluctant to make a decision in favor of the change. This is in line with the findings by Hofstede (1991) who asserted high “uncertainty avoidance” in the Middle Eastern culture, i.e., feeling threatened by uncertain and ambiguous situations. Decision makers also have a fundamentally different way of using time as an organizing frame for their activities: Monochronic time systems from the West emphasize schedules, segmentation, and promptness. In contrast, the polychronic system from the Middle Eastern culture is characterized by several things happening at the same time. They stress involvement of people and completion of transactions rather than adherence to present schedules (Hall 1959).

This uncertainty avoidance has the following consequences: Firstly, before making a decision, the alternatives are thoroughly investigated in order to avoid unsustainable outcomes that need later corrections. Secondly, extensive consultations often take place during “majlis”-type meetings which ensures the support of the participants of these consultations. Third-

ly, external consultants are often involved in the decision making process in order to delegate the responsibility of failure to them.

Often, it is difficult to hold a decision maker individually accountable for his decisions and their implementation. Therefore, in the past it was not necessary to make big efforts in increasing and monitoring an individual's performance. But recently, several organizations, such as the Abu Dhabi Government, have initiated a cultural transformation towards more transparency and individual accountability and, thus, are currently introducing performance management systems and processes (Ghazal, 2008).

Effective communication depending on the form of a message

To convince people of a change in Middle Eastern organizations, it is not sufficient to deliver strong rational arguments for the sustainable benefit of the change for the organization and also the individual. Instead, change recipients pay attention to these arguments if they are presented in the proper way. Our interviewees gave the following recommendations how to do this:

To start effective communication the change agents should gather information about their communication partners in advance – especially about the receiver's role in the organization and his position with regard to the change.

Change agents should also pay attention to select the right partners and timing for communication depending on the receiver's hierarchy. To avoid that a superior feels bypassed and, thus, becomes a resister against the change, communication should always start with him and not with his subordinate. Leaders also dislike surprises, such as receiving new information

through official communication, during a public event or in front of their employees. They expect that new information to be shared informally with them beforehand.

Our interviewees stated that agents are advised to present messages in a more indirect way than in the West. To describe this further in detail, a typology developed by Hall (1976) can be used. A high-context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. In contrast, a low-context (LC) communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in explicit code (Hall 1976). According to this typology the Middle Eastern culture is a typical high-context culture.

This aspect becomes particularly relevant when negative feedbacks or criticism are provided: In the Middle East this kind of information is usually expressed in an indirect way or by showing specific behaviors (e.g., being evasive, such as not being available or not showing up for meetings, or making obstacles emerge somewhere else). Also, this kind of information is never provided in public. Change agents who break this rule risk destroying the respect and reputation of the communication partner and, thus, undermine their own authority.

Change agents should make themselves understandable when communicating with change recipients in Middle Eastern organizations. This implicates avoidance of complicated language and difficult vocabulary, (e.g., English buzz words or “consulting jargon”). Using such a language creates the impression that the change approach is not sufficiently adapted to the specific cultural dynamics and, therefore, may provoke resistance. Also, English proficiency

among the elder generation or the lower ranks is sometimes poor; this is why leading a change can become very difficult for non-Arabic speaking change agents.

Also, communication in Middle Eastern organizations is not very effective when the content aspect of a message is emphasized too much. Scholars like Watzlawick et al. (1967) pointed out that every communication has not only a content aspect but also a relationship aspect.

According to the interviewees the content aspect is less important compared to the relationship aspect in the Middle East. Therefore, messages should be shaped in a way that they address the receivers' emotions, show appreciation and provide the opportunity of social recognition, e.g. by praising them in the public.

Direct, interactive and informal forms of communication work very effectively in Middle Eastern organizations. The most preferred form of communication in the region is face-to-face – or when this is not possible – the phone. The interviewees agreed that “emails just don't work here”. Responses to requests are expected to be given within a very short period of time. If critical issues need to be discussed, the discussion should be moved out of formal meetings into an informal setting.

High relevance of personal relationships

To be effective, change agents must invest time and effort to build personal relationships with change recipients. In doing so, they build credibility and reputation and, thus, ensure that their actions are likely to show a positive impact in the organization. Making use of personal relationships or “wasta” is critical for the success of a change project, e.g., for lobbying or for protecting the project against attacks from resisters. Without the existence of personal rela-

relationship change agents are unlikely to gain access to “soft” information, such as personal profiles or influence networks, or getting significant attention for their interventions.

In contrast to the West, work and personal relationships are overlapping. A work relationship can effectively be established and maintained through a personal relationship. To establish the first contact, it is helpful to be introduced to the relationship partner by a well respected third party and also to share personal information about oneself. Relationship building usually takes place in a more private context, for example by having a meal or a “shisha” together. It is conducive to understand and address the other’s emotions and feelings: Showing respect, addressing a partner’s pride and helping them to earn recognition in front of their social group are successful examples how to build a relationship. Change agents must always be consistent in their words and deeds: Gaining credibility and reputation takes a lot of time and effort but it is easy to destroy it by only one mistake.

Strategies and interventions

The interviewees provided many recommendations by which strategies and interventions change is implemented successfully in Middle Eastern organizations. In the following we highlight four strategies: Change agents need a strategy to establish authority among the change recipients. In their interventions they must find the right balance between sufficient momentum and not overstraining the change recipients. Implementing change top-down is more successful than bottom-up, but effective communication with all hierarchical levels in the organization can accelerate the change implementation process. It is particularly effective to create a success story around the change and to communicate it in the organization.

Developing the change agents' authority

At the beginning of a change project in Middle Eastern organizations, change agents often have to handle an authority problem. Their authority is particularly low if they are sent to the organization from outside and do not yet have gained reputation and built personal relationships within the organization. As the Middle Eastern culture highly values seniority, change agents face difficulties at the beginning if they are younger than the change recipients.

The respondents of our interviews provided a number of recommendations how to gain authority:

Change agents need the top leadership's support from the very beginning because of the following reasons: Firstly, the top leadership provides the change agents with the necessary resources. These resources are not limited to financial and human resources but also include social resources, i.e., political support to defend the change against attacks from resisters when they mobilize resistance through their family and tribal networks or to not allow bypassing the change agents. Secondly, leadership can be helpful in communicating a vision of change and in providing a credible explanation of why the change is needed. However, it is not sufficient if the leadership only provides statements; moreover, it must also provide a good example to follow.

Top leadership support can be gained by providing convincing arguments on why a change is beneficial for the organization's future and profitability. The change agent's presentation should be simple, realistic and positive and emphasize quick wins, but also sustainability. Further, they must target the top leadership's environment which is their "sounding board"

and they must help them to earn social recognition and “look good” before their key stakeholders.

The respect for the change agents and, thus, the impact of their interventions in the organization is the higher, the better the patronage and support of the top leadership for the change and the change agents is communicated within the organization. This can be achieved in a number of ways: For example, a member of the top leadership can make a public announcement about the support for the change or personally introduce the change agents and the project to the organization. Also, it is helpful when the change agents directly report to a member of the top leadership team. However, the amount of authority that change agents can derive from the organization’s top leadership depends on the authority of the top leadership itself: If this authority is low because of poor leadership skills, change agents cannot rely on the top leadership’s authority but must invest a lot of time and effort to build their own authority by developing reputation and personal relationships with the change recipients.

Change agents who are sent to an organization from outside can effectively build authority within the organization by setting up a task force with members from outside and inside of the organization at the very beginning. External change agents draw their authority from their expertise being acquired in other organizations. Internal change agents are specifically helpful in Middle Eastern organizations to anchor the task force, to translate the change and, thus, to secure the support in the organization.

Balancing between sufficient momentum and not overstraining

In order to unlock the status-quo, change agents must generate a sufficient amount of momentum for the change. However, if the change agents demand too much from the change recipients, they may feel overstrained and respond with resistance. Thus, the challenge of change agents is to find the right balance between generating and maintaining the sufficient momentum but avoiding overstrain of the change recipients at the same time.

The interviewees provided insights on how initial momentum for change can be generated: It is helpful to clearly communicate the launch of the change project throughout the organization, for example by organizing a launch event in a prestigious setting or even use marketing tools, such as a logo for the change. Also, it is advisable to prevent criticisms and discussions at the beginning until the change has been tried out and, thus, sufficient data is available to judge about its potential success. Sometimes it is simply necessary to make the change recipients “jump” and practice the change live without a lengthy preparation.

Change recipients may feel overstrained when they believe that they are forced to adopt a change, or the change is perceived to be dramatic and demanding too much from them, or they feel a potential threat for their status, job security, etc. To prevent this, the following recommendations were provided: At the beginning, adopting a change must not be obligatory but voluntary. Change should always be implemented slowly, and in small steps. It should be avoided to provide too much new information at once as this can result in information overload. Instead, new ideas should be introduced slowly and carefully, for example by first testing them in the organization.

Top-down implementation supported by public opinion building

As described above, Middle Eastern organizations are characterized by centralized decision making. Consequently, the preferred change strategy is to implementing the change top-down, starting by convincing the top leadership and gradually cascading the change down from hierarchical level to hierarchical level. Although the direction of influence is top-down, leaders do not adopt a change and impose it immediately on their subordinates as soon as they are convinced. Instead, they tend to wait until they can be sure of sufficient support among their subordinates. From an outsider's perspective it may look as if nothing is happening, but actually intensive discussions and consultations take place.

To avoid that this process loses its momentum and to accelerate it, change agents in Middle Eastern organizations should invest a significant amount of time and effort in their communication strategy to influence the public opinion about the change. The key messages to be sent out are the following ones: Firstly, the change is inevitable in order to realize the long-term vision of the organization. Secondly, the top-leadership supports the change and the change agents' work. Thirdly, the outcome of the change is beneficial – both for the organization but also for the individual. In the Middle East is very important to show quick wins of the change, e.g. its effect on the amount of bonuses, but also its sustainability, i.e. that change is not provisional because subsequent improvements are not welcome. Forth, others in the organization are likely to start adopting the change very soon and that the tipping point is imminent.

Creating and communicating a success story

As mentioned above, it is not sufficient to use plain logical arguments in order to convince individuals in Middle Eastern organizations. Ali (1995) compared a number of intervention tactics for the implementation of organizational change, such as lecture, group exercises, group problem solving, cases and story telling and found that the acceptability of cases and story telling was particularly high in the Middle Eastern culture.

The great impact of stories was supported by the interviewees, asserting that success stories have a very high power of persuasion in Middle Eastern organizations. The impact of such success stories is the highest if they don't come from outside of the organization (e.g. in the form of case study in another organization) but if they are created internally. A way to produce an internal success story is through a successful pilot project with a small focus group of innovators. If the pilot succeeds, the feasibility of the change in the organization becomes evident and, thus, its reputation is improved. In order to disseminate such success stories in the organization, change agents must build an effective communication strategy around them.

Conclusions for the training for change management competencies

With this explorative study we provided answers to the following research question: What are the specific dynamics of change in Middle Eastern organizations that change managers must understand in order to effectively implement change in these organizations? In our expert interviews we identified a variety of organizational dynamics on the individual level, the network level, the cultural context level and the strategy and intervention level. Understanding these organizational dynamics enables change agents to implement changes more effectively

in Middle Eastern organizations by reducing the necessary time and effort. Thus, with these findings we make an important contribution to close the gap in literature about organizational dynamics of change in Middle Eastern organizations.

The findings from this study form the basis for the development of the GulfCom Simulation. This simulation is a learning experience that has specifically been designed for the training of change management competences in Middle Eastern organizations. We expect that this simulation will become an effective and widely used learning tool for change management competences in Middle Eastern organizations because of the following reasons: Firstly, the learners' needs can be addressed more accurately by a learning solution that is culturally adapted instead of a learning solution containing standardized Western learning contents. Secondly, learners from the Middle East consider it as particularly respectful to their culture if the providers of learning solutions make culture-specific adaptations. Thus, culturally adapted learning solutions are more likely to be accepted by learners from the Middle East than standardized Western learning solutions.

Figures

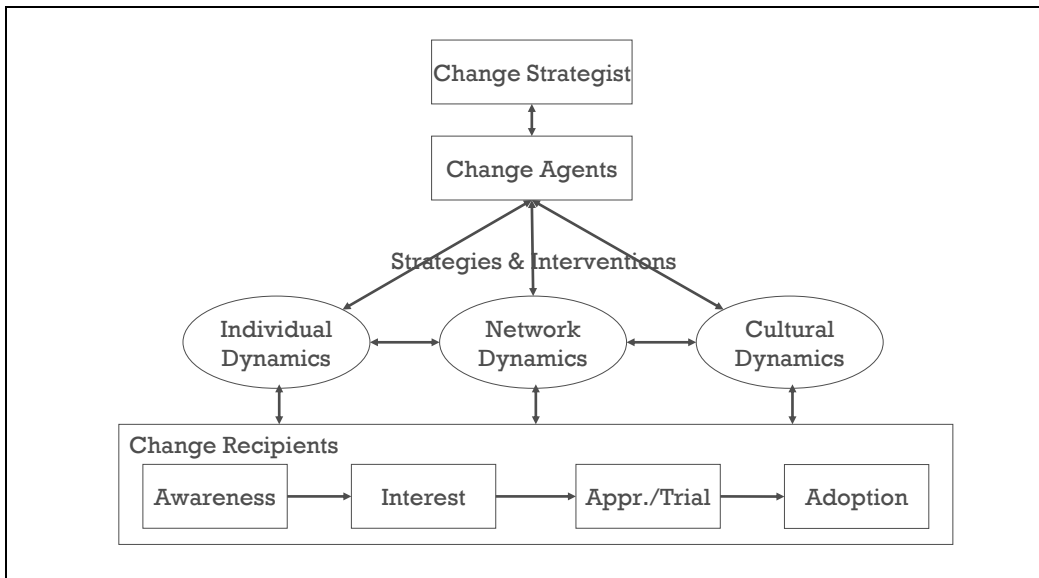


Figure 1: Research framework

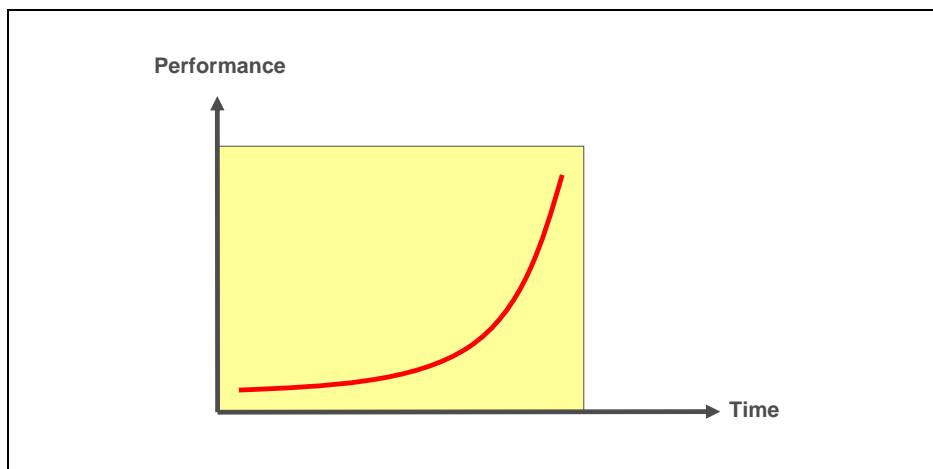


Figure 2: Tipping point dynamics - meeting the target

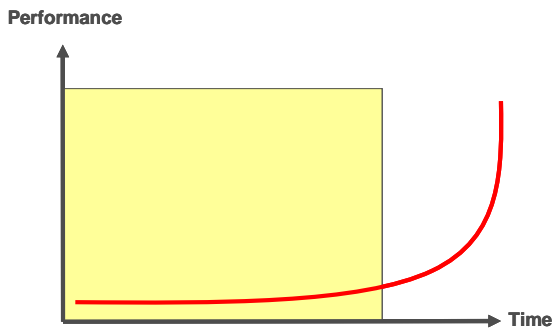


Figure 3: Mutual Blocking

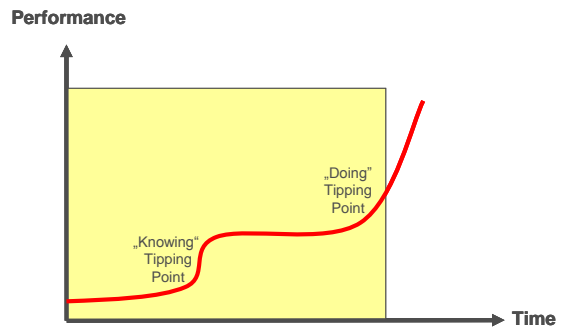


Figure 4: Knowing Doing Tipping Point

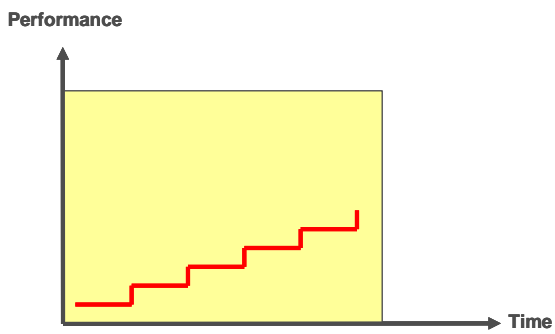


Figure 5: Rush and Wait

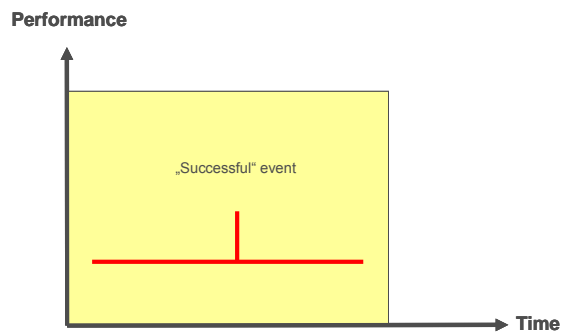


Figure 6: “Flash in the Pan”

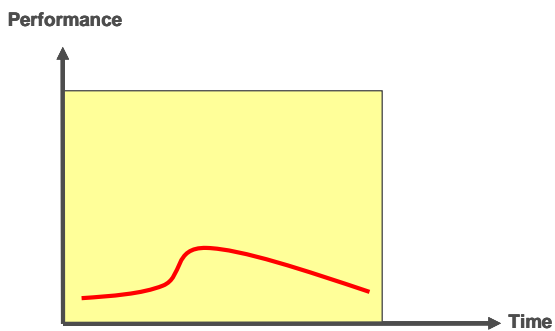


Figure 7: Loosing Momentum

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