

Leaders of Change in MENA

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Abstract. The third millennium is marked by ongoing change. Business organizations function in dynamic environments that seem to demand immediate response. Forces for change, at times, appear to be the drivers of adaptation. Contemporary research shows that the third millennium business practice has evolved. Small and medium sized enterprises have successively engaged in change management. Much research holds that the external environment compels business leaders to adapt. Nonetheless, other research studies assert that in the business world, Chief Executive Officers are the drivers of change. Studies have shown that heroic leaders bring about change inside the business context. Small and medium sized enterprises are guided by business leaders who implement planned change management. Such business leaders carefully study their context and move their companies into a new strategy through bureaucratic directives inside rigid static and centralized structures of the industrial age, from the top down. I hold an opposing view. This case study was carried out on 100 business employees in SMEs to evaluate how employees perceived change inside their work context in the Middle East and North Africa. Three research areas were evaluated: (1) in your work context, how is change perceived by employees inside SMEs in the MENA? (2) In your work context, who leads change in SMEs in the MENA? (3) In your work context, which level of management moves change to create structure whereby work falls into place in SMEs in the MENA? The results of the case study reflected an insight on leaders of change in MENA. Many business leaders were perceived to use organizational resources in a novel yet highly productive manner, one that encouraged cooperative team work. The results reflect new-age millennial business leaders who knew that they were only as important as the extent to which they helped others become significant. The results of the study and its main limitations imposed by time indicate that more comprehensive research is required in this area.

Key Words: Change; MENA; Small and Medium Sized Enterprises; Third World Leaders; Leadership Cadre.

1. Introduction

Studies in the developed world assert that business leaders are up to revamping and creating new meaning and structure in their industry, many leading change using Prensky's (2016) world of first principles (Sharma, 2010; Schwarzwald, Koslowsky, & Allouf, 2005). The world of business is rapidly changing as strong compelling forces stimulate it. Change has become fundamental and systematic in a new world where learning to professionally manage change is one of the means to becoming efficient change agents and effective leaders. Today, real accomplishments are when key individuals solve confounding problems. Today, real accomplishments are when that key individual generates an implementation strategy to process the work impregnating values of truth, respect, empathy, honesty, and decency. Today, real accomplishments are when that good and capable key individual collaborates and works with others, step-by-step, day in-day out, to help to rebuild the world, the organization, and the job meaningfully.

Within this new structured system, certain leaders have proven to be willing and able to adapt. Many have rethought professional competency in terms of new strategy, new organizational culture and a new sense of order that they integrate into their work context: a new mode of effective thinking, challenging activities/tasks, collaborative relationships and pragmatic achievements. Is this the case in SMEs in the MENA?

2. Literature Review

In an age of algorithms (Clark, 2016), can leaders recreate meaningful order in a confusing and complex world context? This case study is a descriptive investigation of business leadership in a localized company in the Middle East and North Africa and delves into perceptions of change, leadership, and authority to determine which genre of leadership ensures that work practice falls into place.

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), most business enterprises tend to be small or medium-sized. A small and medium-sized enterprise is an organization that is independently owned, operated, and financed. The main

factors that determine whether an enterprise is a small and medium sized enterprise (SME) is its head count and balance sheet total and/or turnover (European Commission, 2016). SMEs hire fewer than 100 employees and may engage in new innovative practices in the local market. Moreover, small and medium-sized enterprises, like high-end organizations, may be in competition with foreign enterprises and may have adopted new controversial operating systems in the market place driving economic change, and outnumbering large companies by a wide margin (European Commission, 2016; Robbins & Coulter, 2016).

However, in many organizations, key individuals in SMEs may be in fear when their competitors are rallying around, “Change or die!” Key individuals, who may be leaders of organizations or departments, understand that change cannot be perceived as an accidental occurrence. Rather change needs to be understood as an intentional goal-oriented function to improve the organization’s ability to address change and develop employee performance (Kinicki & Fugate, 2015; Bennis & Mische, 1995; Bennis, 1989).

Furthermore, studies have shown that key individuals who are business leaders have been shown to understand change and the impact of common external forces for change (Daniels, Radebaugh, & Sullivan, 2015). Primarily, there is the nature of the workforce who are diverse employees in terms of age, demography, immigration, and outsourcing; Moreover, there is the dynamic information technology in terms of its ongoing geometric improvement that needs to be accounted for; Furthermore, key individuals need to address economic shocks in terms of mergers, joint ventures, acquisition, bankruptcy, elimination of myriad companies, global recession and fierce competition in the local, regional or global branch since any of these may force the adoption of a more flexible and responsive workforce; In addition, key individuals in organization also need to address social trends in terms of connectivity and multi-tasking, increased environmental awareness, liberalization of attitude to sexual orientation and the millennial world politics with new borders, health care, and national leaders. Each of these driving and diverging trends might reshape the external environment and threaten how things currently fall into place inside small and medium sized business enterprises.

Moreover, in managerial terms, key individuals who may also be change agents are seen as responsible for managing change activities that stem from individual employees and organizations that actively resist change. Research holds that individual sources of resistance to change come from multiple sources as habit, security, economic factors, fear of the unknown, and selective

information processing. Moreover, studies hold that not all employees resist in the same manner. Research has shown that many employees may resist in overt, immediate, or deferred ways as implicitly resisting and/or withholding loyalty (Fugate, Kinicki, & Prussis, 2008; Audia & Brion, 2007; Amis, Slack, & Hinings, 2000). Studies noted that individual resistance to change may result in many employees who have intentionally opted to not to think about change at all. Research studies noted that employees who are worried about change may choose to not think about these new procedures given that many employees do not have a strong locus of control and fear failure. Research also notes that some employees may increase their level of absenteeism as a show of resistance while others may decide to leave the company permanently, again fearing loss of face. Furthermore, research holds that change agents need to consider resistance through structural inertia, limited focus of change, group inertia, threats to expertise and threats to established power relationships (Karaevli, 2007).

Key individuals, hereby termed change agents, constitute a professional milieu, innovative-driven to initiate change. They perceive a future for the organization that others have not identified and believe they have the skills to motivate, invent, and implement it to creating a better and more successful organization. As such, change agents act as catalysts for change and may take on the role of business leader, consultants, trainers, research specialists (Thoata, 2012).

A change agent may be an employee working from within the company holding the rank of business manager or business leader; on the other hand, the change agent may be an outsider hired since the organization or Board of Directors is constrained by organizational culture, policy, or tradition and can now challenge the status quo, approaching old problems from a new perspective providing clear goals and a sense of purpose that everyone in the organization believes. External change agents become the backbone of the organization because they guide, direct, employee action, decision, resources, and energies. They may serve as motivators and disciplinarians (Courous, 2016 Furnham, 2009).

As a result, as research notes, change agents engage in certain behavior: they execute innovation (Nochur, 2010) driven by urgency and are “led by soul”; they confront challenges, build real world accomplishments (Lundin, Christensen, & Paul, 2003) and through transient management move on to establish sustainable institutions (Stephens et al. 2008) by reframing (Bolman & Deal, 1997; 1984) organizations with artistry, with choice, and with “leadership

but no title” (Sharma, 2010;). They see the world in their own peculiar way, within their “unique circle of innovation” (Peters, 1999) using humility, “real humility from head to toe” as Pope Francis does (Krames, 2015) creating a new culture (Loehr & Schwartz, 2003; Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, 2003).

Furthermore, studies hold that certain characteristics distinguish change agents. First, change agents are emboldened by a bright future. They lead change as serial visionaries because the organization must be ahead of an approaching discontinuity; second, they are brave and courageous holding a critical attitude towards the external environment, including the government and business elite, in order to define problems correctly (Holland, 2000) and act as an interventionist (Hanitsch 2011); they are patient yet persistent, asking tough questions, and being knowledgeable (Covey, 2003) humbly accepting the consequences (Sharma 2010; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McvKee, 2003; O’Toole , 1995); third, change agents are supported either from deep within the organization or are selected as an external agent to bring about essential changes needed (Lunenberg, 2011; Meyerson, 2003).

A research model that facilitates perception of business leaders as change agents is Kurt Lewin’s Three-Step Change Model (1965). Kurt Lewin’s Three-Step Change Model (See Figure 1 below) argues that successful change in organization’s moves from unfreezing the status quo, movement to a desired end-state, and refreezing the change to make it permanent (Lewin, 1965).



Figure 1: Kurt Lewin’s Three Step Change Model

Unfreezing the status quo requires professional competence since individual and organizational resistance might exist (See Figure 2: Unfreezing the Status Quo). Unfreezing, which is moving from the status quo, may happen in three different ways: (a) increasing the driving force, which is behavior away from the norm, (b) decreasing the restraining force which is behavior away from the norm, or (c) both increasing the driving and decreasing the restraining forces together.

Research studies have cited cases where change agents have engaged in unfreezing. Change agents dealt with individual resistance to change as that of senior level employees who actively opposed change by voicing their concerns or refraining to engage in corrective measures or refusal to attend training

sessions because of seniority within a single organization and power, status, and rank drawn from it or simply because of fear. Research studies have shown groups resisting by coalescing through strikes and other negative measures especially when employees met radical rather than incremental change (Furnham, 2009; Magee & Langer, 2008; Schwarzwald, Koslowsky, & Allouf, 2005).

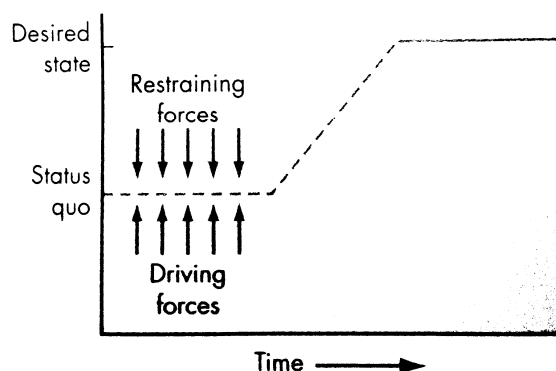


Figure 2: Unfreezing the Status Quo

Source: Based on Robbins, S. R. & Judge, T. (2011). *Organizational Behavior*, p.632

Research shows that to successfully move an organization from a state of equilibrium, Kurt Lewin's movement, change ought to be conducted quickly; moreover, research also notes that once the organization has moved then the organization ought to immediately stabilize this change by balancing the driving and restraining forces in the refreezing step in order for change to be successful established. However, research shows that not all change is conducted quickly; moreover, not all change is sustained over time (Stephen et. al, 2008; Karaevli, 2007; Amos, Slack, & Hining, 2006; Miller, 2001).

Even though the literature reflected that leading change is complex, this case study sets out to determine perceptions of change, change agents, and restructuring SMEs in the MENA.

3. Methodology

This section covers the purpose of the study, research questions, participants,

procedures used in the study, research design, rubric, and analysis of data used.

The case study is a descriptive investigation of leadership in a local setting. The purpose of this case study is three-fold: to determine whether change is perceived, who leads change, and which level of management moves change to create structures for work to fall into place.

Research Questions:

- Research Question One: In your work context, how is change perceived by employees in SMEs in the MENA?
- Research Question Two: In your work context, who leads change in SMEs in the MENA?
- Research Question Three: In your work context, which level of management moves change to create structure whereby work falls into place in SMEs in the MENA?

The participants for this case study were 73 young men and 27 young women attending university courses. The age range is between 19-26. As employees in the business industry and as students in the School of Business they were at a point where they had both pragmatic and theoretical knowledge of the concepts being assessed.

A survey was constructed. Two questions were posed: a close-ended question with a Yes/No response and one open-ended question requiring discussion and reflection.

The survey was handed out in five different classrooms. Participants were given 20 minutes to respond. Given their understanding of the external context, and assured of confidentiality, the 100 participants were asked to be open, honest, and explicit in their discussion. The case study dealt with a localized context. The survey was designed by the researcher and included two parts to better understand the research questions. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data collected and to study the participants' knowledge and awareness of local leadership.

4. Results and Discussion

The survey results were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine if the sample perceived local leaders as being change agents and whether the leaders--once change starts--knew how to sustain change in the local work context.

With respect to the first research question, "In your work context, how is change perceived by employees in SMEs in the MENA?" the results reflected that for 93 % of the sample found change to be part of their work life, flowing

in from the external context rather than down the scalar chain of the organizational hierarchy. Perceptions of change were as follows: uncertain, threatening, an unknown, unstable, turbulent, risky.

With respect to the second research question, “In your work context, which level of management moves change in SMEs in the MENA?” the results are as follows: 49 % of the participants said that their leader was a change agent, 49 % said that their leader was not a change agent while 2 % of the participants did not respond. At face-value, it seems that 50% held that business leaders were change agents while the other 50% said that their leaders were not change agents.

However, the data started to have a different meaning when aligned to the results of the third research question, “In your work context, which level of management moves change to create structure whereby work falls into place in SMEs in the MENA” it was found that 85 % of the participants found their leader not able to sustain change while only 15% of the participants found their leader able to sustain change.

Given that many of the participants found that change is “uncertain,” (RQ 1), it follows that for many leaders in SMEs change might be rightfully avoided. Additional meaning is drawn by reading the participants’ reflection on the local work context drawn from the participants’ assessment of the general environment, the immediate business context, and their nuclear work scenario as is noted below:

- “Business leaders in our country, like Mr. Fattal (the owner of a local export-import business), do not initiate change; they import somebody else’s change.”
- “My cousin is a leader, and she really trains and develops her employees!”
- “Catalysts are innovators like Carlos Ghosn. Why do only a few live here?”
- “Catalysts do not lead.”
- “Local business leaders want to get rich; they want to make money. Not change things”
- “I think the business leader is corrupt.”
- “My mother is a leader, and she initiates change!”
- “The business leader is not a change agent. He is a selfish money hungry man”
- “The local leaders do not really train; only those who are foreign really

train us”

- “My uncle works in a leading local company. He always changes the products the company imports.”
- “The business leader does not do any research. They ONLY do what they have to, ONLY!”
- “Famous restaurants in our country always innovate. But they copy innovations done in America!”
- “Are they (the local business leaders) really initiating change for growth? For us (employee development)? Or for money, for \$?”
- “Why is it that local people only create new ideas when they live overseas?”
- “We do not have real leaders”

When the data is pulled together, it seems to indicate that 49 % of the SME leaders were perceived to be change agents in a marketplace marked by change. Based on the analysis of the data drawn from the survey, it seems that the participants realized that since, by definition, change agents should not only initiate change through the organizational vision but are also responsible to sustain change, their SMEs business leaders’ vision needed more substance. Participants stated that they saw their leaders’ shortcoming at work. When their change agents did not build organizational structure and reinforce structure, change collapsed as participants witnessed in the SME where they worked or in the local marketplace

This gap between perceptions of change, change agents, and business structure is best understood in Kurt Lewin’s Three-Step Model (See Figure One). Interpreting the results based on Kurt Lewin’s Three-Step Model of unfreezing the status quo, movement away from the status quo, and refreezing the new status quo, leads to a new perspective on how change agents process a new status quo inside organizations (See Figure 2).

49 % of the local business leaders were perceived as able to unfreeze the status quo, Step One of the model. This in effect means that 49 % of the SME leaders were perceived as change agents. Conceptually, local business leaders/change agents whether consulting, initiating change or training, were able to initiate and manage change in the SME. Their vision linked them to their participants. However, the other 49% of the leaders were not perceived to be change agents. These leaders were not seen as able to reframe the organization with sufficient artistry to embrace the participants; in effect, with respect to Karl Lewin’s Step Two, the local leaders were able to move only a small fraction of

the status quo. Only 15% built a relationship of trust with the leaders based on the leaders' ability to be knowledgeable, to ask tough questions that bring about accountability, and to be patient and persistent in terms of moving the followers forward towards new company objectives. When employees asked questions and needed answers, dialogue did not work to lessen the restraining force and increase the driving force. It seems that answers were not readily available or did not alleviate nor reduce uncertainty. Change agents may have engaged in dialogue; despite that fact, the business leaders were not transparent. SME leaders may not have clearly or consistently explained why change was necessary for the growth and development of their department or their organization.

Voice provides change agents an opportunity to clarify why they as SME leaders unfreeze, move, and refreeze. When employees chose to openly discuss their fears and engage in debates, resistance to change can move from a negative force to a positive as was reflected in a few local SMEs (see above; Ford, Ford, & Amelio, 2008; Fugate, Kinicki, & Prussia, 2008). Moreover, change agents can learn from a participant's resistance how to modify the change effort employed, and this can help the change agents to better align and manage change as was done by a few local leaders (see above; Holland, 2000). However, when local employees resist passively or use threats rather than a point of discussion, employees may increase dysfunctional conflict. Only 15 % of the local leaders built on trust, moved their participants, and engaged in refreezing the new status quo, Step Three of the Kurt Lewin Three Step Model. 49 % of local leaders were unable to move or refreeze the status quo most probably from leadership failure to address issues of resistance.

In short, the results showed a new level of awareness. Participants realized that a good number of the local leaders were drivers of change the local marketplace in Kurt Lewin's Three Step Model but most were passive managers busy importing change. Participants realized that they had to roll up their sleeves and get down to some "problem solving." New world principles of effective thinking, effective action, and collaborative relationships (Prensky, 2016a) were not localized. Only a few business leaders were change agents who processed unfreezing, moving and refreezing the status quo even though many verbalized a vision of a bright promising future of profitable business goals and objectives.

5. Conclusions

To conclude, let me return to my introduction and confirm that local leaders are change agents and have rethought professional competency in terms of new strategy, new organizational culture and a new sense of order that they integrate into their work context: a new mode of effective thinking, challenging activities/tasks, collaborative relationships and pragmatic achievements. But they are few.

Participants asked, “Is the leader really a catalyst of change or is he just making money?” This case study showed that to be successful and manage change meant that the change agents constructively engaged in what I call teaching-- before, during, and after--to prepare and motivate the participants. When change was shared, in unfreezing, change agents used persuasion and power (Reardon, 2005) to explain why the local company is engaged in change thereby driving change and/or working to eliminate restraint; moreover, since change was new born, during movement –the SMEs state of equilibrium—the change agents/business leaders began to actively train and coach the participants/employees to develop a structure that integrated change; lastly, as change began to settle, during refreezing, the local change agents did their best to reinforce change using managerial tools.

The results showed that millennials perceived that business leaders do in effect initiate change, yet the results also uncovered change agents’ uncertainty avoidance and low levels of masculinity (Hofstede, 2010). These results become more meaningful given the powerful impact of the six critical forces for change that reshaped the work context and influenced participants day-to-day accomplishments (see literature review above). The nature of the local demography had radically shifted with the number of foreign immigrants sizably increasing and the brain drain affecting millennials at home. In the local context, the economy has been state of recession for more than five years since the nation was unable to elect a president; In addition, the government is unable to make significant improvement in line with new elections. In addition, their monthly salary only covers two weeks of their expenses. Even though technology has been integrated into all functional areas of their work life and personal life with social media it is an expensive cultural norm. Moreover, standards of propriety have been liberalized changing the local culture, and the participants live in a world where gender related issues that were taboo 10 years ago are common place. Finally, and potentially most importantly, their world is boundaryless with new countries, new world powers and new health issues that open and close many doors around them, each challenging, each a costly change agent.

Local leaders who were active change agents had immigrated or lived overseas and were being innovative in Japan, Australia, South America, Europe or the United States! Not enough local leaders were filled with pragmatism, asking tough questions, building strong solid relationships with managers and lower level employees and leading by example. Not enough local leaders were creative and driven and actively turning around business in their neighborhood. Local business leaders were smart people but they were passive leaders and change agents at home. The participants who were millennials saw too many leaders doing nothing and many blamed their government.

The results showed that the participants felt life was changing all the time: life was “Hip! Cool! Modern! It was high tech.” Millennials were connected. They shared pictures, videos, and thoughts on Instagram and snap chat; they skyped, texted, and used social media, so they emphatically wanted change--new structure, new applications, and new methodology at work! Life was in fact becoming more and more “modernized” “westernized” “like America!”

However, some looked around and realized that most of their “change” belonged to another country: Change was imported. In this “age of algorithms” (Clark, 2016), only a few local business leaders were recreating meaningful order. Millennials realized that much needed to be done.

The study had a number of limitations starting with the oversimplification of the research design to evaluate the complex issue of leading change in developing countries. The study undertook to take initial steps to better understand perceptions of the change process from the individual perspective rather than organizational. The survey was basic given the nature of the case study. Furthermore, the sample was a convenience one. It was small and not sufficiently representative of the local population in terms of organizational demographics.

So much needs to be done to better understand how local leaders in this part of the Middle East and North Africa can bring about meaningful change. Additional research needs to be undertaken to broaden perceptions of leadership and the Kurt Lewin’s Three Step Model of Change in SMEs in the MENA.

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