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Using Change Management to Redesign Oman's Health Professions Education Sector

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Abstract

Objectives: this study aimed to examine the systems and process needed to enhance the quality of the Ministry of Health educational programs during a period of transition. A reformation is currently taking place to transform all the Ministry of Health educational Institutes to Oman College of Health Sciences.

Method: a descriptive qualitative study took place between December 2012 and November 2013 at the Ministry of Health Educational Institutes, Muscat, Oman. A purposeful sample of 20 participants made up four focus groups, and three semi-structured interviews. A sample of deans, quality assurance focal points who are also teaching faculty at their respective institutes, program faculty, and members from the foundation center made up the four focus groups. Participants from the deans and focal point groups represented the semi-structured interviews.

Results: Four main themes emerged: *the effect of change, management of change, the effect of transition, and management of transition*. Findings indicated that change towards upgrading the current health education institutions to a college had a positive impact on participants, however, the absence of a clear vision and change management strategy resulted in adverse psychological impact on participants in the journey towards implementing this change. Feelings of mistrust due to lack of systematic communication regarding the proposed change was also expressed by all participants.

Conclusion: change management plays a vital role in ensuring the quality of the end product and moving the organization towards the desired goal; specifically, the people side of change is a main driver for successful change management planning.

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Keywords: Change; Change management; Change management strategies; Health professions education

1. Introduction

A main driver for change is the desire to succeed. In higher education, as in other sectors the purpose and rational for existence is undergoing constant change. Changes in higher education are results of broader external factors and not necessarily within the control of the specific institution.¹ According to the literature, people who are part of the change go through

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confusion, anger, and in other times, excitement that leads to personal development.² The literature shows in the field of education, the response of academics, decision and policy makers, and those in the business of education on how to cope with change may differ.³ Therefore, clarity regarding the plans and processes of the change is crucial.

1.1. Organizational change at Oman's Ministry of Health educational institutes

Oman's government shares the same concerns other countries do, specifically in the fields of health and education. Institutions of higher education play a crucial role in building the country's professional and educational culture through outcome oriented research. As a result, change became a common and constant factor in Oman's education environment, when in 2014 the Ministry of Health (MOH) educational institutes upgraded their three year diploma programs to a 4 year baccalaureate degree as an initial step towards having all their institutes under one college, the Oman College of Health Sciences. To help better plan for this change, this study was initiated to explore current practices as well as future needs from the perspective of institute faculty⁴; guided by Dr. William Bridges' framework, *Managing Change during Transition*.⁵

Implications from the literature on change management during transition is a theoretically complex field of study that has been explored, practiced, and adopted by numerous sectors.^{6–9} For example, The Harbor-UCLA Medical Center integrated Bridges' work through a Robert Wood Johnson-funded project by adopting a patient-centered model for system change.¹⁰ Also, in the field of higher education, The University of Adelaide in Australia integrated the framework as a means to provide university staff with an overview of "best practice" change management methods and research.¹¹ Bridges' framework distinguishes between change that occurs as a result of a shift in the external environment, and transitions, the processes people experience to come to terms with the change.¹² Change cannot occur without participants' transit through this period as they move in the direction of expected destiny. To the author's knowledge, this is the first known application of William Bridges' framework within an Arab context, therefore, providing an opportunity to examine the framework's applicability across cultures. While no study can clearly measure the extent of the effect of change on employees, this study provides a synopsis of organizational change based upon investigation of a specific case related to

institutional merger. By knowing how people in the system experience proposed changes, as well as their views on the possible strategies to achieve the desired goals, this study aims to contribute toward developing a better understanding of the effect of change on employees during a period of transition.

The purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of how change can be implemented to enhance the quality of health professions education during a period of transition. Bridges' framework on the principles associated with the theory of managing change during transition formed the basis for this study.¹³ The central research question this study aimed to answer was: *what are the expressed views and recommendations of MOH educators regarding the systems and processes needed to enhance the quality of health professions education in the upcoming college?*

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The study used a descriptive qualitative approach. Approval was obtained by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Villanova University and permission was granted by the Research and Ethical Review and Approval Committee at the (MOH) in Oman. Participants were recruited from four MOH educational institutes representing various health fields and the Foundation Center in Muscat, Oman. A purposive sample of 20 participants was selected based on their ability to provide information significant to the study. The sample encompassed experts in health professions education. All participants were bilingual, native Arabic and English speakers representing different nationalities. Participants equally distributed in gender and nationality, were between 30–60 years old with diverse lengths and types of professional experiences: 40% had less than 5 years of experience in their current position, while the majority had between 5–10 years. About 70% of participants had a master's degree. Fifteen percent each had a Bachelor of Science or Doctorate degree.

2.2. Data collection

Data were obtained through a demographic background questionnaire, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews with selected participants from the focus groups. The questionnaire provided information on demographic differences that may exist between groups, as well as within each group as information about participants' backgrounds, experiences or interests may affect

how one views the issues under study. Four focus groups included: deans, quality assurance focal points QAFP (faculty responsible for all activities related to quality improvement at the institutes); and Foundation Center faculty who teach English and basic science courses. To guard against researcher bias, the focus group discussions were carried out by a moderator external to the MOH educational institutes and the researcher took notes that served as a method of supplementary documentation of the discussions.

The focus groups were followed by three semi-structured interviews with participants from the first two focus groups, the deans and QAFP. The interviews provided in-depth information related to the study and clarification about any areas missed or not fully explored in focus group discussions from the perspective of institute managers and those responsible for the institutes' internal quality management systems. The main question during the semi-structured interviews was: *How can change be adapted to better suit the needs of the MOH educational institutes during this period of transition?*

2.3. Data analysis

Data from interviews were analyzed according to the guidelines of constant comparative analysis by Strauss & Corbin¹⁴, a process used in qualitative research for the purpose of reducing large amount of raw data, and at the same time comparing it to other data during the process of coding. The process involved: multiple examinations of transcribed data for the purpose of describing overall features of the phenomenon under study, emerging themes, categories, and sub-categories were identified and linked together, and overarched to yield a complete presentation of the findings. To enhance the study trustworthiness, all analysis of the data was verified by a second qualitative researcher. Conclusions were made by each researcher independently, and were later compared for common findings.

3. Results

Data analysis resulted in four main themes that included sub-themes within each of the major themes as the data may have fit into more than one thematic category: the effect of change, management of change, the effect of transition, and management of transition.

3.1. The effect versus management of change

According to this study, many participants welcomed change; participants viewed change directed toward a

deliberate focus on quality to have a positive impact in enhancing the quality of health professions education; a sub-theme focused on the awareness of quality in education as a result of change. This change created awareness of the need for self-evaluation, and the importance of meeting international trends of quality in higher education. One Foundation Center participant reported "I am positive that this change will help us improve our education system." Several participants stated that implementation of quality measures has created a sense of accountability and was useful in preparing faculty for the process of institutional self-assessment.

However, all was not positive; the majority cited feelings of uncertainty regarding management of the change, specifically in relation to the College project. Words such as: "stressed", "frustrated", and "worried" were common descriptors. All participants expressed the belief that leaders did not have a clear vision for the future plan of the college. Participants believed commitment should begin from top management, and that educators should be part of the planning process. Some comments that illustrate this include "Leaders work independently from us...they make their own decisions and we just have to implement them"; and "Despite being stakeholders, we are not involved in the planning".

Also, participants believed there was lack of transparency in terms of internal communication. Statements such as, "Faculty is not sure when they will announce the establishment of the College and what is going to happen to them". The same concerns were echoed by managers toward senior leaders at the MOH, as evidenced by more than half of the deans whom said, "We, the deans, are under pressure from our staff but we don't have the full picture".

According to participants, the main factors contributing to delays in change implementation were related to: lack of a known college infrastructure, budgetary matters, bureaucratic processes, and time constraints. Similar challenges were identified in a study on quality assurance in higher education¹⁵; challenges in the area of quality assurance implementation and management were due to limited strategic planning activities, lack of staff participation, limited infrastructure and financial support, as well as the regional political situation impeding the quality assurance processes.

3.2. The effects versus management of transition

Participants felt that dissemination of information about the transition was unsatisfactory; they did not know how this transition would affect them personally or where they would fit in the college structure. The

same was echoed in the semi-structured interviews; participants expressed concerns regarding the move toward one college. Participants stated they were not aware of a formal plan addressing the phases of transition. A common thread that emerged from all three interviews was that the current management of the transition was inadequate.

The majority of participants felt that the transition has not been easy. This led the researcher to ask how those challenges could be overcome to help smooth the process of transition. One participant stated: “The people within those institutes haven’t been involved; so we are saying in five months, we will be a College, but in what format is that going to be? Who is going to be involved in it? What is the transition period required? Are we being consulted?”

Participants’ suggestions considered: making the new college structure known to all, identifying needed resources for the transition phase, determining college requirements, and above all, upgrading the diploma programs policies and bylaws to better suit the needs of a four year college degree.

After the official announcement to establish the Oman College of Health Sciences was confirmed¹⁶, participants still did not have a clear vision of the way forward. Sub-themes identified here were the process of change management and the process of transition management. Participants expressed an urgent need to draw up a transition plan immediately that phases the process of transition according to a priority list. Most importantly, to involve all those that will be part of the College in the transition plan.

4. General discussion

This study aimed to determine from the perspective of faculty members at the MOH educational institutes the systems and process needed to enhance the quality of health professions education during a period of transition. Study findings indicated the effect of change was mainly influenced by management of that change and not in accordance with the change per se. Findings also suggested that readiness for change is influenced by knowledge and clarity regarding the change aim and objectives. The literature defines change management to be an organizational process aimed at empowering employees to envision, and embrace changes in their environment.^{17–20} Change in the system of higher education in Oman reflects some of the drastic alterations in the traditional environment of colleges and universities that are occurring globally.²¹ Most

significantly, the task to meet customer demands and market needs.

Findings indicated that participants perceived not having clear processes for transition in place fostered mistrust and created a negative impact on those involved in the transition. At the same time, participants expressed feelings of happiness and acceptance to end the status quo and transit towards the proposed change; the frustration and resentment was not towards the change, but rather toward its management. Thus, there was psychological and mental acceptance of ending the current status and move towards the proposals of the college.

Bridges said that people have to experience three stages of transition to reach the desired goal.²² The first stage is the “ending stage”; members here end the current status by accepting the idea of moving away from the current situation. In this stage people may experience emotions of: anxiety, frustration, uncertainty, anger, and a sense of loss. However, in this study, participants expressed feelings of excitement and acceptance regarding the change. It is suggested that the reason for this variation of accepting the idea in the first stage, “ending zone” and not towards the third stage; “beginning zone” is due to the fact this change is not only concerned with improving the health professions education system, but is an improvement to the faculty who are part of this change; being a staff member at a college level gives a higher status than being a staff member in a three-year diploma program.

William Bridges’ framework has been adopted in higher education institutions in the Western World. For example, Monash University used the framework to develop a guide for managing change within an organization; specifically designed for members responsible for leading and managing change processes.²³ Charles Sturt University in Sydney, Australia, adopted the framework to help leaders and managers enhance their business knowledge and increase their readiness for change.²⁴

5. Conclusion and recommendations

The concept of change management is useful in understanding individuals’ transition, and in identifying the practices necessary to make the change possible. This study found that Bridges’ framework on the principles associated with the theory of managing change during transition is equally adhered to the Middle Eastern culture.

Organizational change has a significant impact on the identities of people transitioning towards the

change; here is where the significance of change management arises. A critical aspect of change implementation is whether or not the organization and its members are ready for it; a reality check is vital to help control expectations regarding the change. Integrative leadership, understanding the change, and being able to successfully facilitate and thereafter implement change are the principle to build on effective change management. For any organization to successfully implement its goal, it is important establish performance measures that represent accurately what they purport to achieve. Above all, expectations regarding the proposed changes must be realistic in nature.

Future studies should extend the scope of this study to include a comparison between change management implementation in private versus government institutions; external factors as managerial and financial factors have a greater impact on decision-making process between those two entities. The outcomes of the change and transition described here should be re-evaluated after the integration has been completed and the first cohort of students has completed their degree.

Disclosure

Ethical approval: The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Villanova University and permission was granted by the Research and Ethical Review and Approval Committee at the (MOH) in Oman.

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