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Article

Differences in how leaders and employees view organizational changes: Lessons from an international multicultural context

Cogent Business & Management

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Suggested Citation: Al-Abdallah, Ghaith; Helal, Reda; Dandis, Ala' Omar; Wright, Len Tiu (2023) : Differences in how leaders and employees view organizational changes: Lessons from an international multicultural context, Cogent Business & Management, ISSN 2331-1975, Taylor & Francis, Abingdon, Vol. 10, Iss. 2, pp. 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2023.2228028>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/294510>

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To cite this article: Ghaith Al-Abdallah, Reda Helal, Ala' Omar Dandis & Len Tiu Wright (2023) Differences in how leaders and employees view organizational changes: Lessons from an international multicultural context, Cogent Business & Management, 10:2, 2228028, DOI: [10.1080/23311975.2023.2228028](https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2023.2228028)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2023.2228028>



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Published online: 20 Jul 2023.



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Received: 23 December 2022
Accepted: 02 May 2023

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MANAGEMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Differences in how leaders and employees view organizational changes: Lessons from an international multicultural context

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Abstract: The research aims to provide actionable insights to a Dubai-based digital payment company following a leadership-driven organizational transformation. Semi-structured interviews with executives and staff were supplemented by observations and field notes. The study found that foreign employees experienced confusion due to a lack of clear communication or information. Hierarchical work environments and legacy problems hindered employee change. Fear and distrust prevented employees from voicing their concerns. Employees and executives shared similar opinions on the work environment and organizational culture. Leaders did not place enough importance on early worker involvement, communication, and information flow, which hindered their vision and evaluation of employees' conduct. Earlier discussion and resolution of these issues may narrow the gap between the CEO and employees.



Ghaith Al-Abdallah

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Have you ever wondered how employees in the Middle East respond to organizational change? Our research conducted in Dubai, a developing country, sheds light on this issue. The study aimed to provide actionable insights for a Dubai-based digital payment company after a leadership-driven organizational transformation. Our findings suggest that foreign employees' lack of clear communication or information caused confusion, while hierarchical work environments and legacy problems slowed employee change. Fear and distrust prevented employees from voicing concerns. Interestingly, both employees and executives had similar opinions on the work environment and organizational culture. Our research highlights the importance of early worker involvement, communication, and information flow for successful organizational change. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on how employees in different parts of the world respond to organizational change.

Subjects: Business, Management and Accounting; School Leadership, Management & Administration; Public Administration & Management

Keywords: leadership change; expat workforce; employees' resistance; employees' fear; employees' engagement; emerging markets

1. Introduction

Change is a phenomenon that impacts every company, regardless of size, age, or industry (Bouckenoghe et al., 2009). To be successful, organizations must be adaptable (Lee, 2011), and according to İkinci (2014), this is one of the most important aspects of their financial and social structures. Due to market dynamics, organizations are continually evolving in the present day (Petrou et al., 2018, Al-Qudah et al., 2020), and the role of leaders becomes vital in ensuring organizational success (Judeh et al., 2022). However, the American Management Association (AMA) found that fewer than one-quarter of organizations boosted their productivity (Davos et al., 2002, G. M. Al Abdallah, 2021). In other words, many firms failed to obtain the expected results from their transformation processes. Additionally, 70% of business process reengineering efforts resulted in either minimal or no results. One of the reasons for the poor success rate is that many change leaders secretly believe that change occurs in the same manner in all contexts (Ybema et al., 2018). Furthermore, this poor success rate may be attributable to the absence of a viable framework for driving and implementing change, given the abundance of scholarly materials that sometimes contradict one another (Burnes, 2009). Some of these published frameworks may be based on current organizational transformation assumptions that have not been questioned (Doyle, 2002). While all academic and practitioner conceptualizations acknowledge the obvious importance of people and their influence on the change process, it is not always analyzed in-depth or factored into the change process from its early stages. Employees, as a key asset to any organization, react to the way they are managed or led.

However, the question of how to involve employees during the change process remains unanswered, as many factors are involved, and numerous barriers can be detected. It is argued, however, that small-sized organizations with fewer employees are easier to change as they function in a more efficient way (Seemann and Seemann, 2015), and employee responses are better managed at that scale. However, we would argue that with globalization, cross-cultural work environments, and shifts in socio-economic trends, leading organizational change is increasingly challenging. Therefore, the importance of managing diverse employees and how they respond to changes is amplified, even in small-sized organizations.

Context is often overlooked in studies of organizational behaviors, despite the substantial impact it can have on the results (Johns, 2006). Canterino et al. (2018) suggests focusing on the collective context—"the who, where, when, and why of the research" - as opposed to the discrete context—"the task, social, physical, or studying events and processes" - in order to account for context. For example, in reference to our study, the examined company focuses on offering payment technology and solutions to banks, financial institutions, fintech companies, and governments. The company operates in a highly competitive environment. A few years ago, the UAE's digital payment landscape was in its infancy. Now, Dubai is one of the leading financial technology hubs in the region and home to more than eighty fintech startups. Twenty percent of the world's fintech businesses are located in a single city (Chishti, 2022). Dubai ranked first among fintech hubs worldwide in terms of innovation, market size, and growth potential. This sector is a significant component of the country's economy, and its growth is anticipated to accelerate in the coming years as the UAE is currently home to over 134 fintech companies employing over 2,000 people! Between 2021 and 2031, BCG (2022) predicts that revenues will grow at a compound annual rate of 7.7 percent. Due to the tech-savvy population of the second-largest economy in the UAE, the payments industry revenue is projected to reach \$18.7 billion by 2031.

Because of the rapid growth of the market and changes in the landscape, there were a number of management changes. In 2017, seven new leaders (out of eleven) were appointed, demonstrating one of the elements that drive organizational transformation (Beer & Nohria, 2000). Changes in the leadership structure resulted in several transformation projects that represent the new leadership's vision for the organization's management. While the new executives came from large international corporations operating in diverse regions of the world, this was their first experience of running an organization or working in the Middle East. The majority of the new leaders came from Western Europe. They had never worked for a Middle Eastern corporation. Fresh leaders bring new ideas and methods, which may have an effect on personnel and the way they do their duties. Ideally, employees must support these changes for them to be beneficial and effective. Due to the complex configuration of cultural patterns within the organization, leading a successful transformational process may necessitate dynamic coordination between various subject matter experts. Organizational development and change, systems theory, and organizational culture can provide additional insights into the contextualization of leadership in change initiatives (e.g., Organ, 2014; Lai et al., 2020). A fundamental assumption of systems theory is that an organization can be viewed as a system composed of different elements that interact with one another, and that organizational performance is dependent on the compatibility between various elements, such as leadership, organizational culture, structure, management practices, tasks, and people (Errida and Lotfi, 2021, Azeem et al., 2021). Nevertheless, according to Paais and Pattiruhu (2020), organizational culture has a positive and significant effect on performance but not on employee job satisfaction, whereas leadership has a significant effect on employee job satisfaction but no effect on performance.

During these leadership transitions, employees experienced periods of uncertainty as a result of a lack of clarity, resulting in ambiguity over job security and fear of redundancy, with various sorts of reactions and (particularly) resistance emphasized by certain leaders. Eighty percent of the organization's personnel is comprised of expatriates from more than 30 nations.

However, they were consistent with six major origins: Indian, Pakistani, Asian (Philippines), Westerners, non-Emirati Arabs, and Emiratis. Each group possesses values and beliefs that reflect their national culture and history. Moreover, because they have varied characteristics and preferences, they demand adaptable methods of interaction. Compared to Western nations, the power distance in cultures such as India, Pakistan, or Asia is far greater. Additionally, masculinity and femininity vary from culture to culture. Dubai is a business hub for the Middle East and one of the world's most active rising markets; therefore, its workforce and statistics reflect the city's general condition. Nonetheless, it has its own regulations that control the labor markets and residency simultaneously, in which the expat workforce is only permitted to dwell in Dubai if they have a work visa that can only be gained via employment. This is the situation in many other Gulf Cooperation Council nations (GCC). The GCC represents the strongest rising economies in the region, highlighting the significance of understanding change management in this region. Moreover, much of the past research focused on transformation from the perspective of leaders and neglected employees. Nonetheless, both sides are necessary for a thorough understanding of this behavior's real composition, and this is what this article demonstrates.

2. Conceptual and literature review

2.1. Change management and organizational change

Modern scientific knowledge of change is derived from the fundamental methodologies of the natural sciences, as shown by the idea of "survival" in evolutionary theory. Change means making big differences or moving from one state to another. However, it is necessary for long-term success, especially in the current global market environment (Conceicao and Altman, 2011).

3. Employees' responses to change

There are numerous debates regarding employees' responses to organizational change, ranging from the classical view that any act against organizational change constitutes resistance (Bovey & Hede, 2001, Hollander and Einwohner, 2004, Giangreco and Peccei, 2005) to the contemporary view that not all acts of opposition constitute resistance (Shang, 2012, Ybema and Horvers, 2017, G. Al Abdallah et al., 2018, Ybema et al., 2018).

Individuals resist change due to imagined uncertainty, fear of new arrangements, and fear of possible incapability to carry out tasks under such changes (Mansour et al., 2022). Therefore, multiple factors, including fear, a lack of trust, ambiguity, uncertainty, and improper communication, may trigger the responses of employees to change, including their resistance. In this instance, environmental variables, such as Dubai's labor legislation, the number of expat workers, and the multicultural nature of the workplace, may be possible causes.

According to traditional literature, dread of the unknown typically accompanies any type of change. However, Dubai's labor rules exacerbate this anxiety and have a significant impact on how employees react. Several studies examined the impact of organizational change on employees (Mathieu, Gilson, and Ruddy, 2006, Arvey et al., 2007, Muhammad, Bal, and Long, 2016); and how it could affect the organization (Appelbaum et al., 2007), particularly in a complex context with a large expat workforce, such as Dubai (Mathieu, Gilson, and Ruddy, 2006; Arvey et al., 2007; Muhammad, Bal, Raina, Rose, and Thomas, 2018).

Change is impossible without good communication and other preconditions (Aladwani, 2001). Furthermore, it is suggested that the amount of trust affects how employees react to change (Smollan and Schiavone, 2013). This method, however, cannot be assumed to work equally well for all businesses and individuals (Kraimer et al., 2011). Involving workers in the early phases of trip planning might boost their commitment and direct their efforts toward corporate objectives, thus facilitating better communication (Whelan-Berry and Somerville, 2010, Alasadi & Askary, 2014). Moreover, it might increase their level of participation (Yousef, 2000). A lack of information raises the likelihood that the change is failing or that no progress is being made (Kreitner and Somerville, 2004). Despite the fact that workers are increasingly viewed as change agents (Bhatti et al., 2008), executives do not often consider them at an early stage (Appelbaum et al., 2007). Some researchers (Al-Khrabsheh et al., 2018, Aldulaimi, 2019, G. Al Abdallah & Chew, 2020) have also said that a company can't change without the help of its employees.

According to experts, the debates in this field are not about change versus resistance but rather the coexistence of change and resistance (Oreg, 2003, Oreg et al., 2011, Ybema and Horvers, 2017, Ybema et al., 2018). Resistance to change has been the topic of some research, yet there is no general definition of the idea. Rather, the phrase is vague and takes an explicit or implicit shape, leaving it to the reader's comprehension to derive the definition (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004). Change activities occur at several organizational levels, and these scattered, independent efforts may be a source of disruption (Lechner and Floyd, 2012; Friesl and Kwon, 2017). However, workers may respond to these actions with support, neutrality, or opposition. Typically, resistance refers to a sense of disagreement in an organizational environment (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004) or a broad sense of dissent (Giangreco and Peccei, 2005). It is also stated that resistance is the result of employees' worries, constituting their "natural survival strategy" in response to the potential harm posed by the new organizational shift (Ford et al., 2008).

The inherent conflicts that accompany the change process and the scattered, independent actions of the organization's members may be one of the primary sources of resistance (Hisrich and Kearney, 2012, O'Reilly and Tushman, 2013, Aboumoghli & Al Abdallah, 2018). In this regard, nine reasons for resistance have been found based on empirical research conducted by A. Anderson (2011), as detailed in Table 1 below. When comparing newer research, such as A. Anderson's (2011), to earlier ones, such as Fine's (1986) and Baker's (1989), one can observe

Table 1. Reasons for employees' resistance

Reasons	Reasons for Employees'	Resistance
	A. Anderson (2011)	Sara Fine (1986)
	Inertia: established culture of previous leadership	Uncertainty about the effect of change
	Reluctance in taking on new work on top of existing one without proper rewards	Unclarity of what is required from employees
	Status quo protection and preference to existing rituals	Not engaging employees in the process
	Implicit indications that current system is broken and employees' performance and their personal traits is the reason (criticism)	Fear of social consequences of the change process
	Culture clash between leaders and employees	Failure to prove that change is needed
	Fear: from job-loss or uncertainty	Failure to commit enough resources
	Legitimate concerns initial indications shows that change is not working, whether due to change leaders or change process	Failure to tie value to change
	Unfair behavior of change leaders/agents	Failure to create positive environment/culture
	Damaged relationship or personality clash between leaders and employees	

Sources: based on the work of Fine (1986) and A. Anderson (2011).

how the subject has evolved through time and how beliefs that were formerly predominantly negative have shifted as a result of discoveries.

The causes of resistance described above are not exhaustive, but they provide a substantial portion of the spectrum and give insight into what might ignite employees' resistance to change, which remains a significant challenge in the change process (Janas, 1998). The issue has been susceptible to inconsistent interpretations, with some researchers viewing resistance as damaging, while others consider it beneficial, depending on their perspective. Recently, there has been a new trend among researchers who replace the physics metaphor with a more organic or biological interpretation (L. Anderson, 2010). They view resistance as a normal and useful part of the transformation process (Burke et al., 2009). According to these ideas, resistance can be a good companion to the change process or, at least, a barrier to the change process that leaders should not inherently perceive as negative. Leaders may miss some aspects of the transformation process without the opposition of their employees (Paren, 2015). However, it is essential to note that not all actions of resistance are motivated by the reasons that are currently believed.

4. The context of the Middle East and this study

The Middle East is considered to be one of the world's most lucrative developing markets (Caiazza, 2018). The GCC nations, particularly Dubai, serve as gateways to the international and multiethnic environments of most enterprises (Salas et al., 2018). While diversity is supported as one of the market's benefits in the present environment, it might contribute to the difficulty of implementing change (Leavitt, 2014). People from various cultures and backgrounds may interpret activities differently and respond to a change in a variety of ways. Diversity is not only connected to employees' backgrounds, values, and views but also the corporate culture and sub-cultures (i.e., the "clan"), which might impact employees' responses and affect their engagement (Belias & Koustelios, 2014) and methods of doing things (Kotzian, 2009).

In the organization under study, the obstacles connected with the change process are a combination of several elements. On the one hand, to manage a diverse workforce, new leaders with new operational models and methods were formed and perfected in organizational cultures with distinct predominant cultural backgrounds. On the other hand, the majority of the

organization's employees are expatriates who are impacted by Dubai's labour legislation, which instils an extreme dread of job security. These factors have persuaded executives that employees are not always engaged or supportive of the reforms.

In the Middle East, where communication openness between leaders and employees is lacking, resistance to change is often linked (Al Dossari, 2016). While researchers often adopt either a sociological or psychological approach to resistance, a combination of the two gives a more thorough and accurate explanation of the phenomenon in some cases. This is especially pertinent to concerns about whether every act of resistance constitutes resistance. The literature reveals that few studies have focused on the Middle East. Understanding what motivates workers to behave as they do in the Middle East can enable firms to devise effective solutions to these issues.

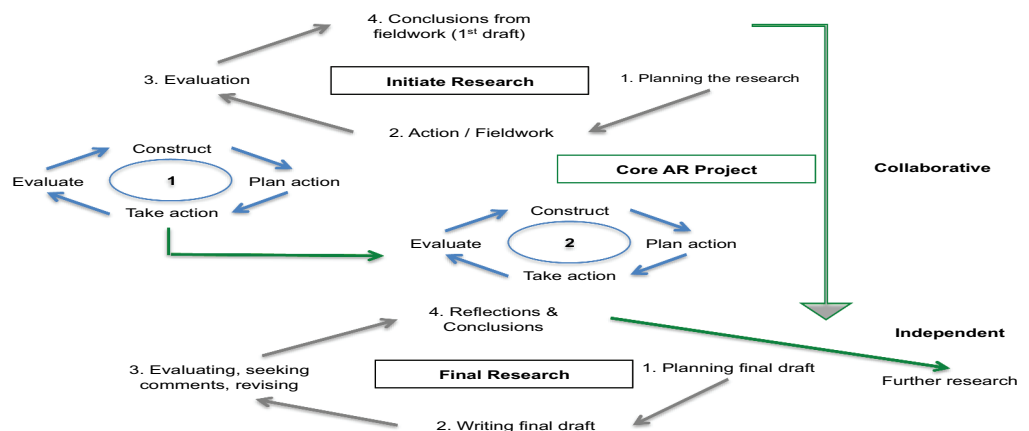
5. Research methodology

Utilizing the qualitative method, the ontological position acknowledges that employees and leaders construct alternative realities based on their understanding of the change process (Secker et al., 1995). The epistemological position takes a subjective perspective on reality. This study employed the qualitative research approach and interpretivist and constructivist frameworks. The action research in this study was based on Coghlan and Brannick's (2014) conceptual framework, with context-specific modifications. The action cycles occurred in two key dimensions: first, by involving participants (leaders and workers) at the start of the project to identify and confirm the research subject and objectives of the study; and second, by implementing interventions based on the findings to address the issue. These two action cycles constituted the main AR project in this study and allowed us to create the final draft shown in Figure 1.

This research focused on around 60 percent of the leadership team and a smaller sample of employees: Group A (leaders: $N=6$) and Group B (employees: $N=20$). This population was calibrated to provide the necessary data and give sufficient content for the investigation. Participants were all situated in the UAE, and the sample procedure was focused on two crucial factors: representation and accuracy. Maximum variety sampling as a method for conducting intentional sampling enabled us to include as many variants as possible, such as employees and leaders, locals and expats, and male and female participants. We were not, however, especially interested in collecting demographic information, as such factors are not the focus of our investigation. The approach of intentional sampling relies on the experience of participants as well as our own in the investigated field. The observations were acquired mostly through participation in a monthly session between the GCEO and selected workers, as we participated in six monthly meetings where observations were documented and converged in the analysis, as opposed to being treated individually. Due to the nature of this study, its objective, and the phenomena under investigation, in-depth semi-structured interviews were undertaken to determine how the perspectives of each

Figure 1. Action research in this study.

Source: Based on Coghlan and Brannick (2014, p. 164).



participant group connected to resistance to the change process. A. Anderson's (2011) research on "engaging resistance," as well as Booth et al. (2016). The primary sources used to develop the interview questions and protocol included Coghlan and Brannick's (2014) general empirical method in action research, as well as Creswell and Poth's (2018) and Coghlan and Brannick's (2014, 2019). In addition, Schein's (2013) journal-keeping model (Observation, Reaction, Judgment, and Intervention) is used as a tool for the interview process as well as for establishing and maintaining observations and field notes. The questions were created in English, the organization's common and official language.

6. Research settings and coding

In the theme analysis, the datasets from both groups (leaders and employees) were kept distinct for reference purposes. The thoughts of the participants were extracted from their transcriptions using direct and indirect quotations. The divergent perspectives of these two groups were also emphasized. The semi-structured in-depth interviews transcriptions provided around 100 pages of data, which served as the foundation for the study and subsequent conclusions. Observations and field notes were also cross-referenced with interview transcriptions. Due to the limited sample size, manual thematic analysis was performed to gain a deeper engagement with and immersion in the data. This was accomplished by carefully reading the texts and coding them based on their relevance to the research, rather than relying on software-driven keywords. Additionally, reading the transcribed data numerous times allowed the researchers to grasp in-depth what each participant said, increasing their understanding of the given data. To provide participant experiences, non-overlapping and non-repetitive meaning units were generated and textually expressed (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Each participant group was assigned a random code, with leaders having codes ranging from A101 to A106 and staff having codes ranging from E201 to E220. Any additional material provided by employees or leaders was accompanied by an explanation and placed within the context of the primary themes or sub-themes. The themes addressed in each group corresponded to the study's aims. For comparison purposes, the sub-themes or questions under each subject were tailored to the makeup of each group, as presented in Table 2 below.

7. Findings from employees

Table 3 below summarizes the key findings from the employees' responses.

8. Work environment

The majority of participants reported that their current work environment is better than before. However, when faced with challenges, sportsmanship was seen to decline among team members. Most participants viewed their workplace as collaborative but with a clear hierarchy. Many felt that while their work environment was demanding, they had access to their superiors or leaders and could hypothetically discuss any issues with them. For example, one E216 participant commented:

It's a little bit of both (hierarchical and collaborative)... depending on your grade, who supports you, and other factors, cross-functional collaboration with other teams might be highly bureaucratic and hierarchical. However, in general, there is now a greater opportunity for individuals to be heard.

At first, the staff were concerned about how this process would impact their daily work and job security.

9. Organizational culture

In this regard, the study indicated that the company maintains a culture of ambiguity, lack of clarity, and fear. The majority of employees reported that the current work atmosphere is unsupportive, bureaucratic, and hierarchical. Some individuals felt excluded from cliques within the company, hindering their ability to perform their duties as effectively as others who belonged to these groups. Although the responses were divided, many individuals felt that the organization's

Table 2. Key themes and sub-themes for employees and leaders

S.N.	Themes	Employees	Leaders
1	Work environment	Positive & Accessible	Hierarchical
		Bureaucracy & Challenging	Progressing
2	Change process	Legacy problems	Good but complex
		Lack of clear direction	Time consuming
			unstructured
3	Work culture	Hierarchy Dependent	Diverse
		Diversity is not really embraced	
		Culture of Fear Lack of trust	Underlying similarity
4	Response to change – resistance	People don't voice their concerns	Covert resistance
5	Overall experience and recommendations	Cultural shift	Communication
		Communication	Engagement
		Fear factors	Fear

Source: Authors.

culture was hierarchical. Additionally, some participants discussed specific ethnic and cultural issues within the organization, such as participant E-203, who stated:

The culture is lacking in the sense that while we talk a lot about transference and openness in communication, communicating the real concerns is different from communicating what I believe to be the right thing to say.

10. Change process

Many employees may not be accustomed to such change, so there may be a gap between the leadership's desired direction and the staff's ability to go in that direction. They may be resistant to change and believe that the leadership team does not know how to cope with the diversity within the workplace or how to utilize the various skills that many staff members may possess to their full potential. There are challenges at both the top and bottom of the distribution. It's not so much that the leadership team cannot manage the team, but we believe that there are issues linked with the leaders' perceptions of employee behavior and their adaptability. As participant E-217 said:

Although it was also evident that some of the short-term changes occurred in a rather incremental, ongoing type of process, we can view this as having rich potential. It facilitates the implementation of improvement and change activities, particularly in complex systems. However, it was not a simple or easy procedure.

Several employees have emphasized that leaders should devote as much time as possible to their subordinates during the transformation process. There is a clear perception inside the firm that many executives are not discussing or communicating choices to workers, which leads to uncertainty, anxiety, and negative feelings among employees, both individually and collectively. It also gives employees the impression that the business lacks direction and is "clueless" about the transformation agenda and process. As participant E211 stated:

... The transition process was perceived as confusing, and the majority of employees had no sense of direction. Moreover, despite the fact that everyone has a role to play and is an integral part of the process, we were occasionally left in the dark.

Table 3. Summary and key findings from employees' responses

S.N.	Themes	Key findings
1	Work environment	Hierarchical
		Challenging
		Improving: moving towards accessible and collaborative
2	Change process	Massive change
		Legacy problems
		Many frequent changes
		Lack of clear direction
3	Work culture	Not acceptable by most
		Hierarchical
		Dependent
4	Response to Change -resistance	People do not voice their concerns
		Lack of trust
		Unadaptable to changes
		Time -consuming
		Fear factors
5	Overall experience and recommendations	Communication challenges - Communication at different levels - Information not flowing
		Bureaucracy and hierarchical work culture
		Organizational culture is not very relatable to all employees
		Fears of job loss -job insecurity
		Culture shift needs to be considered.

Source: Authors.

11. Response to change

Certain participants noted that some executives have set goals that are difficult for some staff to adapt to. When an employee behaves in a manner that contradicts organizational direction, especially during a transitional period, executives tend to interpret it as an act of resistance, even if it is not. Others have suggested that new employees joining the business or the region should be open to learning about how things were done in the past and whether any valuable lessons can be applied in the future. Due to the hierarchical structure, some believed that the potential contributions of more experienced employees were not being recognized. For instance, Respondent E201 stated:

They are attempting to modify, as are all newcomers, who are all attempting to make things their own, and not everyone can sustain this path.

Since change is frequently difficult and associated with negative emotions, some employees begin to resist as a defence strategy because they do not comprehend what is occurring or lack clarity. Participant E213 stated that this is because some individuals act as if they are saying, "You don't know what you're doing; therefore, I'm here to alter and correct things." In addition, the majority of employees, including managers and supervisors, supported any new process or procedure once they saw its benefit to them and the team. However, participant replies revealed that employees are reluctant to communicate their worries regarding the change. Participant E214 elaborated:

People are unlikely to express their worries about the shift... Fear of job loss prevents them from voicing their concerns about the transformation process, despite their want to do so.

Additionally, employees believe that certain bosses do not intend to communicate with those below them in the hierarchy. According to participant E219, this might potentially make employees less likely to adapt to changing circumstances:

Some individuals do not wish to communicate with the lower ranks. Okay, here it is all about mentality. Allow me to inform you that I have encountered a few individuals who will not communicate with you unless you are a senior executive or above.

The majority of employees have cited the fear factor as an explanation for certain passive responses to change. The following examples provide an overview of employee responses to the fear factor. It was highlighted that the unique characteristics of Dubai and its predominantly expat community have a direct bearing on how terror manifests itself. Participants highlighted that employees who may not feel competent in completing their new responsibilities experience great discomfort and anxiety about losing their jobs, especially if they are working with a new supervisor whose vision is unclear or has not been articulated. Participant E-208 has emphasized:

There is much dread throughout the organization. This is a result of the market in which we exist. Therefore, everyone here is on a work-related visa, and we are really afraid about losing our jobs, which is a greater level of fear than probably exists in other global markets.

If employees identify with the organization, their fear of job insecurity diminishes because they feel confident in their contributions. However, when there is a change in leadership, employees generally fear losing their jobs if they express their opinions more frequently. Participant E210 stated:

Generally, employees fear that if they speak up, it may backfire on them. I am aware that some individuals have valuable insights to share during meetings, and their opinions can be helpful. However, they often refrain from sharing their concerns due to fear of potential repercussions or backlash from their superiors or other colleagues if their ideas differ from theirs.

12. Findings from leaders

Table 4 summarizes the key findings gathered from the leaders' responses, which follow a similar structure to the one used for the employees.

13. Work environment

The majority of interviewed executives acknowledged that the workplace is highly hierarchical but also progressive and improving. They attributed the hierarchical structure to legacy systems and operating processes, but noted that it is becoming more accountable. Furthermore, they emphasized that they view change from a company-wide perspective rather than solely from their departments. While acknowledging that there is still progress to be made, they expressed commitment to the ongoing improvement of the workplace, as evidenced by their positive perception of the company as a whole. Despite recognizing recent significant changes, they understand that there is still room for improvement. As participant A101 stated:

The organization was therefore quite hierarchical. It is still highly hierarchical, albeit maybe less so than before. In the organization, there were several artefacts or symbols of higher authority and hierarchy. Some of the executive offices were off-limits to the rest of the staff, who were unable to enter the area since their credentials did not function. That has changed now. Other basic items have gone, shifted, or been relocated.

Table 4. Summary and key findings from leaders' responses

S. N.	Themes	Key findings
1	Work environment	Hierarchical but progressive
		Collaborative yet siloed
		Innovative but imperfect
2	Change process	Complex
		Time -consuming
		Increases doubt
		Departmentally unstructured
3	Work culture	Diverse, but similar throughout the organization
		Sub -culture pockets throughout the organization
		Mixed
		Improving
4	Response to change -resistance	Prefer to deal with overt resistance than covert resistance
5	Overall experience and Recommendations	Disagreement, passive and silent resistant
		Unwilling, unquestioning but mainly inexpressive
		Communication, engaging, and harmonizing people
		Managing People &inclusiveness
		More cooperation is needed.
		Fear &insecurity should be tackled.

Source: Authors.

14. Organizational culture

Leaders highlighted that the underlying culture within the organization is highly diverse, with no single dominant national culture that could be promoted. Despite operating in Dubai, which has its cultural norms, they do not believe that the organization is heavily influenced by them. Instead, leaders believe that the work culture adheres to the principles enforced by individual leaders, leading to a more fragmented organization. Each department follows the beliefs of its respective leader, resulting in a mere semblance of corporate and clan ideals. Participant A101 provided the following comment:

The underlying organizational culture is comprised of Indians, Pakistanis, Filipinos, and a small number of Britons. Also, there isn't a strong, clear, overwhelming national culture that the organization could adopt.

15. Change process

Leaders believe that the majority of change procedures are time-consuming to implement and often met with scepticism from employees. They feel that the process cannot be prolonged any further and attempt to proceed with implementation as quickly as possible, even if this means excluding some employees from participation. Additionally, the completed changes lack departmental organization. However, the nature of change is complex, and in an organization like this one, it can be even more challenging due to the company's composition and the nature of its operations, which cannot tolerate interruptions. As the company provides digital payment solutions, the service must be available at all times, or customers may not be able to withdraw cash or use payment instruments such as credit or debit cards. Therefore, it is crucial to consider these details when evaluating the change process. Participant A105 commented:

Table 5. Areas for improvement based on employees' and leaders' findings

Area	Areas for improvement	
	Based on employees' findings	Based on leaders' findings
Change process	Have a good communication channel that goes both ways top to bottom and bottom up.	Improve the quality of communication channels
	To have other mediums for communications other than emails: more face -to -face forums and informal interactions.	Solve the bottle necks related to flow of information
	Improve the flow of information to know what is happening in the organization and to reduce the noise and gossips.	Encourage employees to be more engaged
Work environment & culture	To have a healthy work environment	Create a positive work environment
	Ensure that leaders include them in the process -Inclusiveness	Find a way to build bridges between different departments and people and eliminate silo - Harmonizing people
	Organizations needs to have a relatable culture to its employees with their different backgrounds	Improve on employees 'access to leaders
	Build a culture of trust	Have a culture of empowerment and hold people account for their actions -true empowerment and accountability
Response to change	Employees need to get more sense of security regarding their job and not to be threatened that they might lose their job anytime	Find a way to manage employees 'fear and job insecurity, given the magnitude of this factor for expatriates (majority of the workforce)
	To have a safe environment to disagree without fear of risking their job or their progress in their career	Improve the sense of belonging, which will positively impact employees 'level of engagement and satisfaction
	To engage employees from an early stage in the process	Encourage employees to voice their concerns

Source: Authors.

These transformation procedures were simply aligning things, since we always had a plan or multiple perspectives, but they were not properly organized under a certain department.” Some of the departments had not existed previously, thus there was a great deal of work to accomplish, although it was not always related or properly structured.

16. Response to change

Leaders emphasized that the majority of employees do not value the adjustments that have been made for their good (according to their assertions) since they have not realized significant advantages from them. Leaders feel that because people do not question the changes, they cannot address or assist them with their change-related difficulties. Leaders acknowledged that the communication gap and the need for staff engagement were the most important areas for development. Leaders emphasize the importance of communication flow to the success of the process. Participant A104 saw this as a way to change the traditional task-based, top-down role of the CEO into a more active role that would help build a more welcoming company culture through better communication:

... a route to expand the role of the CEO from the traditional approaches to a more engaged role in fostering an inclusive organizational culture via improved communications.

Leaders recognize that people are not always sufficiently motivated to welcome change, particularly when goals are being pushed. They stated that employees must also understand why their performance standards must be increased, why they must “sweat more for the sake of change,” or why new leaders have been installed. It does not make sense to them, and if it is not adequately explained, they will not buy into the process, and “you begin to observe some unusual behaviors.” In this adjustment, it is assumed that employees “are capable of enhancing their actions” and “will enhance their actions further if supplied with the required training, tools, and motivation.” In hierarchical companies, employees have a tendency to be docile and pleasant; hence the majority of leaders’ perspectives on this topic are based on this phenomenon.

It was observed that the majority of leaders preferred to deal with overt resistance as opposed to hidden resistance. In addition, it was emphasized that “quiet opposition” was widespread among employees. Additionally, it was shown that passive resistance was most frequently seen. However, the majority of leaders expected this sort of resistance because they were well aware that change might result in opposition. Participant A103 said:

People don’t ask as many questions as I would imagine... and they probably don’t ask because they don’t feel comfortable, for whatever reason. At least when they disagree with me, they should not simply nod and disregard my instructions. They should inform me of their disagreement with me, we might then engage in discourse or dispute to persuade them.

Leaders also rated the fear factor expressed by employees as crucial; they assessed it as the most critical element influencing employees’ response to change. A-102 participant stated:

We are aware of it. It is more prevalent here than anywhere else where I have worked. Is it because of the country’s character or its labour laws? Perhaps, but the reality remains that fear exists, and we must be aware of it.

The majority of leaders give it the attention it deserves, although some believe it should be dealt with appropriately and others believe nothing can be done due to the market’s structure and the laws and regulations that regulate it.

Participant A-106 confirmed:

We are aware of this element, and we are aware that its weight in this setting may be greater than in other contexts. We are aware of this, and we endeavor to keep it in mind despite the numerous official and informal contacts we send to the organization attempting to handle this aspect of the process.

Moreover, respondent A-104 added:

Fear exists, and we are aware of it, but there is nothing we can do about it. Certain individuals will continue to experience this form of dread despite your efforts. This is their nature, as well as the nature of the expats that work in this location.

17. Observations and field notes

The results of observations and field notes mostly corroborate the ideas that emerged from the discussions with employees and executives. During the discussions, employees implied that the work environment did not assist the transformation process, particularly due to bureaucracy and organizational silos. Nonetheless, they have emphasized the minor improvement and how progressive the new leadership team desires the firm to be as a result of these adjustments. Still, it is not quite realized. On the other hand, we have seen that the leaders’ perspectives (particularly the new ones) were not dissimilar and that they were aware of the pockets they were attempting to escape. However, the difficulties stem from the legacy leadership paradigm that favored

a bureaucratic work environment and which the current leadership has been attempting to alter. We have also seen that some leaders, especially those who were in charge for a long time under the last government, are still very bureaucratic.

One of the most important discoveries about organizational culture is that both sets of participants are aware of the informal hierarchical character of the organization but view the level of hierarchy differently than they did in the past. While executives believe they have accomplished a great deal in transforming the company from a very hierarchical to more of a flat structure, employees believe it is still highly hierarchical, particularly in certain pockets. We have also noted that the character of certain departments has amplified this factor, since they have prioritized a clan culture above a holistic organizational culture, which is one of the causes of the silos. One of the main distinctions is the importance of varied cultures to both groups. As predicted, employees cherish their background, but they have pointed out the lack of consideration given to the formation of the leadership team in order to celebrate the varied workforce. Generally, personnel from the same background or nation tended to remain together. This could mean that the organization didn't break down silos and connect different working groups well enough.

Change initiatives were significant; nevertheless, communication was not always clear, resulting in the increasing uncertainty and a lack of understanding among personnel. In addition, we have seen that it influenced employees' responses and leaders' impressions of it as though they were unwilling to engage in the changes, as opposed to not understanding what to do or how to accomplish it. We observed that staff were generally unaware of the majority of projects. Furthermore, we have seen that staff frequently discuss efforts that were not explicitly stated, causing confusion and irritation. In addition, it raised the inclination to believe that they are excluded from these transformation activities and are not necessary to a significant degree. In such a circumstance, the amount of worry and uncertainty grows.

Three important observations about employee responses to change were: fear, a lack of trust, and a submissive attitude. Most employees are expatriates, so they place a high value on job stability because it affects their lives and the lives of their families. In this regard, the organization's setting, with its largely expatriate staff, and Dubai's labor legislation have prompted employees to exercise heightened caution before taking any action that may imperil their employment. Fearing the repercussions of voicing their concerns, they exhibited a predominately passive attitude and a lack of enthusiasm for most projects. This has produced a great deal of dissatisfaction among the leadership, as they cannot understand why staff are so disengaged. Even though they were aware of what Dubai was like and how terrified the expat community was, they had no clue how large it would be.

While complaining about employees' lack of involvement, bosses made little effort to comprehend the fundamental causes (at least at the beginning). We believe this is due to their emphasis on accomplishing their financial goals. Leaders were perplexed by the lack of participation and lack of expression they observed. As with every previous change they have experienced, they anticipated initial resistance from employees, followed by engagement. However, they have observed in the company that workers have vastly different calculations, and they would prefer to remain silent and secure in their jobs than be more vocal and risk endangering their positions. A number of unfavorable measures have been taken against people who have stated unpopular opinions opposing progressive change. This could not be generalized, but it left employees with a bad taste in their mouths.

18. Discussion and managerial implications

18.1. Bringing about change in the organization

New leaders brought different methods to the table than their predecessors, particularly an autonomous and independent work style, which caused some confusion and heightened concern

among employees, particularly at the outset of the process. The setting of Dubai, with its labour regulations and proportion of expatriate employees, follows. These two factors have had a significant impact on how employees react to the changes. Nonetheless, we utilized Hayes' (2022) integrative model of organizational dynamics to develop the Dubai-specific illustrative framework [Figure 2] shown below. Leaders need to think about both internal and external factors that could affect how employees react to the change.

In this environment, factors such as the expatriate workforce ratio and Dubai's labor legislation, which affect employees' perceptions of job security, are crucial, and everything revolves around them since they enhance employees' concern. The new framework provided a simplified picture of a complicated process, but more crucially, it enlightened leaders as to what they should consider for future adjustments. Although the majority of leaders had anticipated some form of resistance to the reforms, they emphasized that this level of passivity was not anticipated. Due to the fact that employees do not ask as many questions as planned due to what turned out to be fear, leaders claim they are unable to manage or assist them in the event of a problem. The findings revealed that executives saw their personnel as uncommunicative, disengaged, and exhibiting hidden opposition. Employees say they require improved communication and that information should flow more freely without blockages. In addition, they feel that developing bridges across departments would boost their experience during the transformation process by creating a workplace that is more collaborative and less characterized by silos. Another intriguing observation is that employees might greatly benefit from training and learning sessions to enhance their abilities, particularly those necessary to effectively manage change. On the other hand, leaders were more concerned with what was expected of people than with what they could do for them. We have seen that executives typically discuss how employees should be more involved, take the lead throughout changes, and be more outspoken and vocal about their concerns. However, they have not really considered how this may occur, and we dare say they expect people to adjust their perspective on change without any assistance or effort from them! For the reasons stated above, leaders stated that they would prefer to deal with overt opposition rather than covert resistance. If they knew about it, they would deal with it; if they didn't know, they would assume it didn't exist.

Figure 2. Application of organizational dynamics in bringing about change.

Source: Authors.



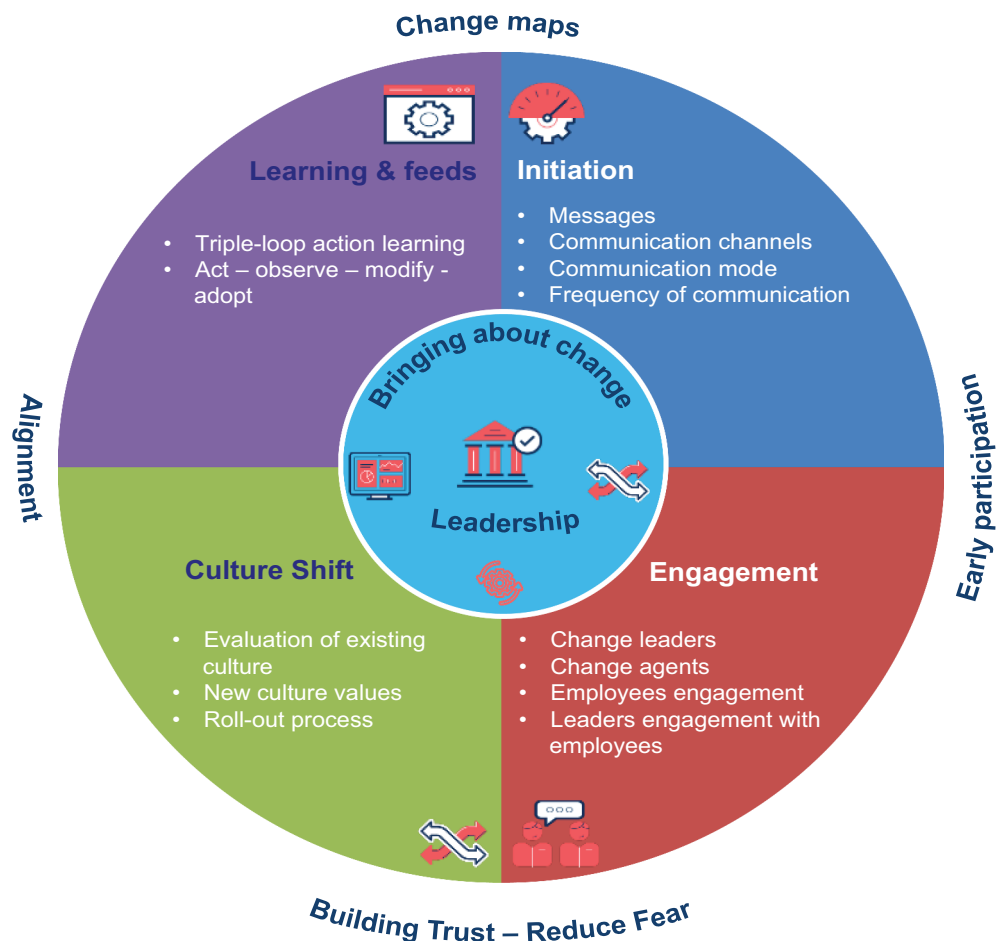
The entire experience of the employees is consistent with the scholarly idea that people's perceptions of the change process might result in the paradoxical transformation of success into failure (Burnes, 2011, Saks and Burke, 2012). Based on this data, the graph that summarizes how workers would want to be handled was created. It displays the repeated themes that emerged from the data sources. Before deciding on this final version, the visualization itself was discussed with staff to ensure its accuracy. Despite comments by leaders that workers are vital to the process, which are also emphasized by researchers (Bhatti et al., 2008), the organization's research demonstrates that employees were not regarded as crucial to the change process from the outset. Using the information and results we've discussed so far, as well as our own expertise, we created the table below (Table 5), which displays improvement areas based on the findings of both employees and leaders. This gives a balanced view instead of the unbalanced views that only look at the leaders' points of view.

19. Leading for change

The findings revealed that leaders ignored several of the change management-related topics depicted on this map [Figure 3], particularly learning and engagement. The change map takes into account the crucial points emphasized by both groups. Messages suited for cascading the process's objectives are determined at the beginning of the change process, followed by different kinds of communication, including face-to-face, and the frequency of these contacts. Engaging staff from the outset is likewise considered and stressed, as is making it obvious who is leading, who is assisting, and who must be informed. Ideally, all employees should be notified of every facet of a change, as appropriate. Engagement and participation of employees strengthen their

Figure 3. Change map.

Source: Authors.



commitment and can finally diminish the crucial impact of anxiety in this setting. The cultural transition must be appropriately evaluated and handled, especially with new leaders who are unfamiliar with the region and its culture. In addition, as action research is an iterative process that involves numerous cycles (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014), the fourth section of this map is the learning and modification, in which the feeds are gathered after the execution of each cycle to adapt and adjust as necessary. The map illustrates the various factors that must be addressed while managing change within a company. Rowland and Higgs (2009) and Valleala et al. (2015) agree that these components must cooperate to form a whole. This can only occur if the behaviors of the employees are guided and influenced by effective leadership.

Regarding organizational culture, both sets of participants were adamant that it must be enhanced. Both groups agreed that a flat structure, as opposed to a hierarchical one, would increase communication and information flow. One of the additional areas for development is empowerment, which occurs when employees are entrusted with decision-making authority but are also mentored by leaders. In addition to inclusion and diversity appreciation, there is a need to enhance the culture of trust among employees and between employees and leadership. Some of these elements were emphasized by researchers (Nicolescu and Verboncu, 2006; Tomlinson and Mayer, 2009; Lanz and Tomei, 2016) owing to their direct influence on enhancing corporate culture and employee responses to change. Nonetheless, this paper adds value by basing these ideas on a case study with a Dubai-specific setting.

20. Action for functional and behavioral change

Given that this is an action research-based study, we have produced a matrix that translates the results into suggested actions to solve some of the most significant difficulties related to the process for the company under investigation. While firms can do little to change national policies (e.g., nativist labour legislation), they can improve communication, acknowledge such fear and share with employees their pain, engage them early in the process, and provide a learning platform to share and improve the overall organizational capacity to deal with high levels of uncertainty and lack of clarity. The matrix (Table 6) outlines the most important structural, functional, and behavioral considerations for managing the change process in this environment. It categorizes them into two primary categories: functional/structural and behavioral and highlights the areas that require the greatest attention and what can be done to overcome the obstacles identified in this study. The emphasis in the functional/structural domain is on communication, engagement, and leadership. The focus in the behavioral domain is on trust and fear. Each category contains recommended activities and areas of concentration.

20. Study limitations and future research orientations

Although the study produced valuable findings, there were some limitations in its scope and context. The sample size was relatively small, consisting of only 20 employees and six leaders. However, the qualitative case study design justified this sample size, and the results were analyzed in-depth to produce meaningful insights. Therefore, future research could complement these findings with quantitative data. For instance, a survey could be administered to a larger sample of employees and leaders to assess the prevalence of the issues identified in this study. In addition, while this study provides important insights into the challenges of implementing a new leadership and structural paradigm in a Middle Eastern organization, further research is needed to broaden the scope and context and to account for cultural differences. Future research could also investigate the impact of different cultural factors on the adoption of new leadership and structural paradigms. For instance, a comparative study of organizations operating in different cultural contexts could shed light on the role of cultural values, norms, and expectations in shaping leadership and organizational practices. Such research could use mixed-methods approaches to triangulate findings from both quantitative and qualitative data sources. Future studies could investigate a broader range of organizations across various industries and contexts to examine

Table 6. Action for functional and behavioural change

Aspect	Functional/Structure			Behavioral	
	Communication	Engagement	Leadership	Trist	Fear
Recommended Action	Band different types and modes of communication together face - to - face, informal alongside emails. That will ensure that the message is clear, understood and employees get the chance to voice their concerns in such engagement if any	Get employees from different departments together to work on a particular change aspect where they will facilitate the interaction between the group and their departments. That will also help in breaking the silos exist some pockets across the organization. on a particular change aspect where they will facilitate the interaction between the group and their departments. That will also help in breaking the silos exist some pockets across the organization.	Strengthen the existing leadership practices in managing change process and assign specific leaders to drive specific initiatives. This type of transformational leadership would enhance the ability to influence employees positively through the process.	Leaders should be truthful to employees in all cases, and employees should not find out that the information provided was not accurate, or in some instances, the information is not shared at all. The focus here is on information that could be shared and not the sensitive ones. Employees should be treated equally, and this message should be repeatedly conveyed to enforce it and ensure that they are trusted being an employee of NL	HR should share some statistics in terms of Employees' retention programs and the percentage of turn-over and how it is compared to other markets than Dubai. That will inform employees and create some basis to build level of understanding that the turn-over is much better than other companies in other regions to compensate the dynamics of Dubai labor law and the nature of expertise workforce. Also, HR should share with employees how many employees were made redundant each year for the past 3 years or so (few cases) and why they were made redundant.

(Continued)

Table 6. (Continued)

Aspect	Functional/Structure			Behavioral	
	Communication	Engagement	Leadership	Trist	Fear
Area of Focus	Increase the frequency d face - b - face meetings between leaders and employees - like town halls	Engage employees from across the board.	Clear definition of the roles and responsibilities of Leaders in the change process	Understand employees ' perception offenders.	Understand the real drivers for employee's fear.
	Reduce the dependent on email communication and replace it with other means	Engage employees early in any change initiative.	improve collaborationbetween the leadership team.	Understand how employees perceive the action of the leadership team.	Support employees with high fear and understand their underlying drivers
	Ensure that information flows by assigning a communication lead in each department	Encourage employees to participate in different change initiatives and compensate them (not financially).	Improve collective decision-making process.	Enforce culture of inclusion	Create a safe environment in the organization by embracing collaboration and eliminating untrustworthy behaviors
	Create reverse communication channel (downwards to upwards).	Build more bridges between the leadership team and employees.	Enhance the leadership coaching program and link specific objectives with employees.	Create patches of employees to be coached in group by each leader.	Communicate the acceptable margins of areas to be done by employees.
	Enhance the frequency of communication and its time.	Create change management sessions where employees are directly engaged with leaders of change.	improve the communication between the leadershipteam.	Delegation of authority and rotation of this delegation between highly engaged employee.	Support employees who genuinely trying to innovate, even they were vulnerable to more errors (In non-critical areas)

Source: Authors.

the applicability of the findings. In conclusion, this study has provided valuable insights into the challenges of implementing a Western, less hierarchical leadership and structural paradigm in a Middle Eastern organization. However, more research is needed to further explore the complexities of this phenomenon and identify strategies for overcoming the obstacles to change. Researchers could employ the action research approach used in this study to collaboratively engage with practitioners and develop interventions to facilitate change in similar contexts.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Citation information

Cite this article as: Differences in how leaders and employees view organizational changes: Lessons from an international multicultural context, Ghaith Al-Abdallah, Reda Helal, Ala' Omar Dandis & Len Tiu Wright, *Cogent Business & Management* (2023), 10: 2228028.

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