

Challenges facing Saudi public sector leaders during change



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ABSTRACT

Organization change management has a poor success record and confronts leaders with many challenges, including employee resistance. The Saudi public sector is undergoing widespread changes under the government's reform agenda, Vision 2030. However, there is little research on organizational change in the Arab world; what exists lacks depth and pays little attention to leaders' roles. This paper explores the challenges facing Saudi public sector leaders and the response strategies adopted in two public sector organizations undergoing a recent change. Qualitative data were collected by unstructured interviews with six department leaders and 21 subordinates involved in change implementation. Challenges faced included the hierarchical organizational and sectoral structure, bureaucracy, high power distance, constraints on leaders' autonomy, the gender-sensitive national culture, and employee resistance. Leaders employed a variety of strategies to cope with and mitigate these challenges, to achieve change success, notably, improving communication to explain the change, provide clarity and alleviate concerns. Leaders also become less authoritarian and more employee-focused, applying flexibility, providing opportunities for employee participation, and using various motivational strategies to gain employee commitment and improve productivity. Limitations of the study are the small convergence sample reflecting one project in one sector and the inability to follow change progress over time. The insight afforded by rich qualitative data on experienced challenges and leader behavior enables implications to be drawn for motivational strategies and communication with other public sector organizations involved in change projects.

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1. Introduction

Due to the social and economic pressures of the modern era, including a rapidly growing population, large numbers of expatriate residents, increased pressure on services, and technological developments; the Saudi government is aiming to transform the nation into a vibrant society supported by a diverse, efficient economy that can cope with global change. A major transformation strategy, Vision 2030, constitutes a reference point for government plans and rhetoric, which currently emphasize ambitious aims to transform the nation by creating and leading change across eight sectors,

through a portfolio of critical programs (Al-Kibsi et al., 2015).

In a society traditionally characterized by resistance to change, Vision 2030 brings challenges and problems for organization leaders, especially in the public sector, which has been accused of ineffective management and low performance (Abdul Rahman et al., 2014) exacerbated by bureaucracy and leaders' autocratic behavior towards subordinates. Thus, meeting the demands of Vision 2030 will require effective leadership and highly trained leaders to deal with those challenges and make the change successful. This paper explores the challenges that Saudi leaders in the health sector faced in implementing a specific change initiative and how they dealt with them by answering the following questions:

1. What were the challenges faced by Saudi public sector leaders during the time of change?
2. How did leaders deal with these challenges?

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The research responds to an identified need for empirical investigation of leader behavior during change, especially in the public sector (Kickert, 2014; Kuipers et al., 2014). It provides new insights into changes in leader behavior under the pressure of sectorial changes. Moreover, it has practical implications for the management of future change programs and for leader development.

2. Literature review

Van der Voet (2014) defined change management as the planning, coordinating, organizing, and directing of the processes through which change is implemented. In short, change management is the adaptation to evolution and transformation within an organization. Change is increasingly necessary for today's dynamic environment, yet change initiatives have a poor success rate (Higgs and Rowland, 2011). Increasing attention is thus being focused on the important role of leaders in managing change since their behavior can significantly affect change success (Colville and Murphy, 2006). In particular, success depends on the ability of leaders to deal with challenges, such as resistance to change.

Resistance to change can emanate from several sources: fear of the unknown, lack of adequate knowledge, information, and skills, a threat to the status quo, lack of expected benefit, fear of failure, and uncertainty the outcomes (Ford et al., 2002; Hoag et al., 2002). Change resistance has been interpreted in the literature as a response to feelings of loss and uncertainty. All forms of change invoke fear of loss, for example, loss of control (Eby et al., 2000), status (Bovey and Hede, 2001), routines (Ford et al., 2002), and job security (Ford et al., 2002). There is also uncertainty because change inevitably brings new circumstances (Bailey and Raelin, 2015). Leaders potentially play a key role in dealing with such issues, as well as developing readiness for change and employee commitment (Nordin, 2012).

In addition to the above challenges, change leaders in public sector organizations may face particular difficulties, due to the distinctive context of the public sector, for example, bureaucracy, centralization, a high degree of formalization, procedural constraints, and complexity (Rainey, 2009). Public sector organizations are typically bureaucracies of the type described by Weber (1947), characterized by hierarchical layers and supervision by top officials who allocate tasks down the chain of command. Moreover, since leadership in the public sector is not confined to the organization (s) implementing or affected by the change, successful public sector change involves communication and cooperation between politicians and organization management (Ridder et al., 2005).

In addition, organization leadership is influenced by the wider environmental context (Oc, 2018) including such factors as national culture. For example, in the Arab world, the issues leaders have to deal with are shaped by tribal and religious

heritage. In terms of the cultural framework developed by Hofstede (1984) and supported by subsequent authors (Bjerke and Al-Meer, 1993; Mellahi, 2006) Saudi Arabia is characterized by a high tendency to uncertainty avoidance, with low levels of tolerance for new ideas and change, a reluctance to question conventional thinking, fatalism high reliance on rules and regulations. There is also a tradition of high-power distance, that is, the acceptance of inequalities in power and status. The culture is also described as collectivist, with a strong emphasis on group/social affiliation and cohesion, and masculine, with clearly differentiated social roles and conduct and for men and women.

Comparatively few studies have been conducted on organizational change in the Arab world in general, or Saudi Arabia in particular, despite the importance of the subject for future economic development. Studies of important factors in change, based on attitude surveys among employees, found information availability and effective communications to be associated with effective change (Allozi, 1999) as was flexibility in organizational structure (Rees and Althakhri, 2008). Abdeh (2006) in a survey of managers in various Jordanian ministries, identified the need for delegation, simplified work procedures, and the review of rules and regulations, as prerequisites for organizational development.

However, studies across the Arab world have also found obstacles to successful change. Almuslimani (1999) based on a survey in Jordan, identified obstacles including centralization of authority, rigid rules and regulations, and socio-cultural factors, including tribalism and favoritism as impediments to change. In Saudi Arabia specifically, Alamri and Alfawsan (1997), in a survey of 450 employees in public sector organizations, found resistance to change associated with managers' fear of losing their authority, employees' fears for their jobs, unclear objectives and plans and, above all, weak communications between employees and change agents.

Scholarship in the field, however, suffers from several shortcomings. Many studies are dated; they lack depth; they focus on 'attitudes' or 'obstacles' but neglect leaders and their behaviors. This study helps to meet the need for studies of leader behavior in the context of change in public sector organizations (Kuipers et al., 2014). This is a subject of particular concern, given the changes currently sweeping the Saudi public sector and the need for leaders with the skills and strategies needed to cope with the associated challenges.

3. Methodology

This study was conducted from an interpretive perspective, based on the rationale that leader behaviors are a complex, multidimensional social phenomenon that needs to be understood through the eyes of the social actors concerned, who have different backgrounds and experiences (Creswell,

1998). Therefore, leader behaviors may best be understood by paying close attention to leaders' and employees' rich descriptions of their experiences, feelings, and relationships. A case study strategy was employed enabling investigation within a real-life context of a specific phenomenon during which leader behaviors were manifested, responding to Vohra's (2014) argument that leader behaviors should be studied in context. A case may be an individual, group, community, organization, or event (Yin, 2009). The "case" in question was a specific change affecting Saudi public sector health organizations during 2015-2017. Requests were sent to the top managers of these organizations for permission to conduct narrative-style interviews with the leaders and employees involved, to explore perceptions of leader behaviors in managing the change. A positive response was obtained from the Council of Cooperative Health Insurance (CCHI), the organization established to supervise and regulate the health insurance sector. It had recently undergone a technical change, the design and implementation of a computer program, the Health Insurance Portable Document (HIPD) to connect CCHI and all the insurance companies and hospitals in Saudi Arabia. This change event met the criteria of a bounded system (Creswell et al., 2007) in that it comprised a set of interacting elements: Organizational personnel, resources, and processes at different levels, technology, national policy (Vision 2030), and politics, in a specific location and time. The change was both unique and critical (Yin, 2009) in terms of its importance to government strategy and its impact on other organizations.

CCHI in turn provided an introduction to a second organization, King Fahad Medical City (KFMC), a complex of hospitals and administrative facilities, which had installed the new program as part of the planned mandatory roll-out to the whole health sector. Including this organization provided an opportunity to expand the scope of the study, thereby alleviating to some extent the limitation of a single case study (Yin, 2009). A purposive sampling strategy was adopted for participant recruitment (Etikan et al., 2016). Leaders had to head a department directly involved in the change project. Employees had to have belonged to a department directly involved in the change project and to have been in post for at least six months, to ensure that they had been working there long enough to have a good knowledge of the organization and of the project, and to have had a chance to observe and experience the behavior of the leader concerned.

The two organizations were both hierarchical in structure, with five levels. The departments identified as having been involved in the change were all located at level 3 in the organization hierarchy. There were six such departments: Five in CCHI and one in KFMC. With the aid of the HR departments, contact was made with department leaders and those subordinates who had been involved in the change project. All six leaders and a total of 21 employees, including several from each

department, agreed to participate. In-depth interviews were conducted, in which participants answered, in their own way, a broad question about their experience of the change. Interviews were recorded and transcripts verified by the participants before translation from Arabic to English by the researcher and Nvivo-assisted thematic analysis to identify and categories reported behaviors. The analysis was a recursive process involving three interrelated phases (Saldaña, 2015): Preparation (including transcription, review, and data only), coding using attribute, descriptive, in vivo, and provisional codes; and reduction/categorization by eliminating, combining, or redistributing codes and grouping them into categories and themes. For reporting purposes, department leaders are designated L1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, L1-L5 being in CCHI, L6 in KFMC. Subordinates are designated by their leader's code, followed by E (for employee) and a sequence number, e.g. L1-E2 refers to the second employee interviewed in L1's department.

4. Findings

As noted above, the change investigated in this study was the introduction of a new computer program intended to improve productivity and efficiency in handling health insurance issues. The interviews generated three main themes: Leader behaviors (including planning, organization, communication, motivation, and managing relationships); contextual factors (including resistance, organization structure, and culture), and outcomes (including frustration, employee commitment, and change success). The change had been proposed by L2 in CCHI which, after securing top-level approval, was tasked with designing and implementing the program. Following a decision at the sector level to extend the program to insurance companies and healthcare providers throughout the sector. CCHI had to explain the change to these other organizations and supervise their implementation of the new system. These organizations, including KFMC, were thus required to implement a change they had not themselves proposed or planned. Both organizations reported encountering a number of challenges during the implementation of the project, due to various structural and cultural issues.

A strong theme in the data was the impact of the hierarchical structure of the organizations and their position within the sector, and the resulting prevalence of bureaucracy. This was manifested in several ways: lack of middle management involvement in planning the change, a complex chain of command, delay in decision-making, lack of clarity about the change, a lack of scope for delegation, and rigid rules and regulations that constrained managers' strategies.

Regarding planning and preparation for the change project, only L2 had initially been involved in identifying a need for change and putting proposals to senior managers within the organization. However, complex negotiations up and down the

chain of command were needed before approval was gained. It was only at this stage that other leaders in CCHI (L1, L3, L4, and L5) became involved when an implementation committee was established. Even then, every decision had to go through the same vertical communication process. The following extract illustrates the prolonged process of negotiation and approval between different levels of the organization that were needed to get the change project underway.

"...the Council's structure...is the primary problem.... [A plan] was formed [and] submitted to the top management for approval. It [decision-making] was at the level of top management in terms of priorities and time management, and ... at the level of the sector.... after we showed [top management] the idea of change, they said that time was not adequate.... negotiations took place...In the end, the top management was convinced" (L2).

The limitations imposed by the public sector structure and bureaucracy were highlighted by employees who had previous work experience in the private sector and contrasted the two environments.

"...the change process in the private sector is easier, faster to be applied and is easy to be dealt with... in the public sector...Sometimes, a very small change needs months until it happens" (L3-E3).

"You know how bureaucracy is high in the public sector. They do not communicate horizontally, only vertically ... in the private sector, you can talk to any person about work and you can get approvals through e-mail. Here, ... you have to write letters, refer to another person, get signatures, etc...." (L5-E2).

The complexity of communications up and down the organization hierarchy, moreover, sometimes led to communication gaps, so that employees, and even managers, lacked clarity about the change vision, top management intentions, and the change process, and so were unsure what was required of them. In department 5, for example, an employee suggested that the department leader could not provide clarity because he himself did not have a clear vision:

"The problem is unclarity of vision. Maybe the vision is not clear to him [the leader]. However, there is no clarity in our department" (L5-E2).

L2-E1 making a similar point explained how lack of clarity could impede progress:

"...It is difficult to complete a task when the vision and purposes are not clear...Maybe this problem is caused by the top management that did not clarify what they wanted..... Clarifying goals and vision is very necessary ... and our biggest

challenge in the change was the lack of clarity" (L2-E1).

Even when leaders understood the requirements, there were constraints on their freedom in organizing the work; for example, there was little scope for delegation, the limited endowment of power and authority to employees, enabling them to make decisions, within permitted limits. L5 claimed to delegate and asserted that this was a vital factor for change success. However, what he described was not really delegation, but more consultation:

"As for the second behavior that can contribute to the success of change it is the delegation of powers to the employee.... For example, I have powers but sometimes consult my manager in some sensitive matters as he has better experience than I do" (L5).

Moreover, L5 indicated that his own opinion might still override that of the employee concerned. Thus, "delegation" was very limited and generally, decisions still needed the input or confirmation of the leader.

Interestingly, one employee, who had previously worked in the private sector, suggested that in the Council, as a public sector organization, leaders had less authority and discretion than in the private sector and were hampered by bureaucracy. As he explained:

"The [leader's] authority in the private sector is more than in the public sector. Moreover, the private sector does not have bureaucracy...and there are no complications, contrary to the public sector" (L3-E3).

One area in which department leaders were constrained was in the incentives they could use to motivate employees. In CCHI, participants claimed that no financial incentives were available, and some suggested that this constraint was embedded in the public sector culture. For example, one of L3's employees commented:

"We have to be realistic. Being in the government sector, my manager can not violate the system by offering incentives and promotions, because he is afraid of taking the responsibility for this violation" (L3-E2).

L2 agreed, saying,

"There is a big challenge for leaders to motivate their employees in the public sector, which is the culture of the organization. Many public sector organizations don't believe in the strategy of employee motivation, unlike the private sector, which is based on it" (L2).

Other issues revealed the impact of national culture, which was reflected in organizational

cultures, such as the tradition of authoritarian leadership and high power distance, which had reportedly characterized both organizations in the past. There were also, in KFMC as a mixed-gender organization, problems related to the department leader's lack of experience in dealing with women, which he saw as a source of discomfort and a limitation on his effectiveness in handling his subordinates.

"At the beginning, there was no effectiveness in dealing [with employees], especially with women, due to customs and traditions. In our society, males and females are separated at an early age. Therefore, we do not have enough experience in dealing with females" (L6).

These various challenges combined create doubts and confusion, causing some employees to feel frustrated, and aggravating the resistance to the change, initially encountered in both organizations. Employee frustration and resistance were more apparent in KFMC than CCHI. This may be because the change was imposed on KFMC, so employees did not have a voice in planning and preparing for it, and were pressured by deadlines set outside the organization, leading to frustration with a change that some may have felt did not meet their needs or their perception of their jobs. One described the whole change project as "nonsense". In CCHI, employee resistance was less an issue than in KFMC, perhaps because of CCHI's role in designing the shape of the change. However, leaders in CCHI had to face an additional challenge: Dealing with resistance from other companies forced to implement the new system:

"The resistance was from the insurance companies. In particular, the reason was the fear of losing customers and the need to train employees on the program" (L4-E1).

Faced with the responsibility for timely and efficient delivery of the new program in this challenging environment, leaders in both organizations did their best, within the limits of their authority, to overcome resistance, achieve employee commitment and keep the project on target, by adopting a number of strategies.

One of the main strategies adopted by all six leaders was to improve vertical and horizontal communications, whether by holding formal meetings or by informal chats over coffee and "dropping in" to subordinates' offices and workstations. Their efforts served two purposes: overcoming resistance and providing clarity. In this respect, L4 explained his performance in a liaison role, in which he communicated with colleagues in other departments and explained inter-departmental plans to his department:

"I did not face any resistance or difficulty as I had a meeting with them [the department] before the

beginning of the project in which I explained to them about the change, its aims and heard their opinions. They welcomed it greatly...We talked to all the departments involved in the Council and shared their views and ideas ...in order to reduce resistance so that the change did not happen suddenly..."

His claim that, due to these meetings and explanations, internal resistance was minimized, was supported by his employee, L4-E1, who declared that as a result of such explanation:

"I was committed to the stages of change with my colleagues; we applied the instructions and steps and did our best to make this change successful" (L4-E1).

Discussing internal resistance among members of his organization, L6 emphasized his efforts to meet with those concerned to explain this change, and in particular, highlighting the deficiencies of the 'old' system and the advantages of the new:

"I found that the most appropriate solution was to meet with the employee and explain to him in very exhaustive detail in order to persuade and clarify to him the disadvantages [of the system] before the change and advantages after the change" (L6).

Three of his employees confirmed the success of this strategy in overcoming resistance. For example:

"At first, the employees did not accept the change, but our manager played a key role in persuading us to change when he met with us and explained the goals of the change and its benefits to us as employees" (L6-E4).

External change (from other organizations affected by the change) was dealt with similarly, through extensive meetings,

"The Council formed and organized a team specialized to explain the change process, its aims, and advantages through continuous visits to the companies and by holding workshops and meetings inside the Council" (L3).

Communication efforts, moreover, continued throughout the duration of the project, with the aim of providing clarity to employees about the change plan and its implications.

Employees of L4 made clear that they depended on their leader for information and explanation of top management plans; in turn, any points they wished to make were raised through him. For example:

"Of course, he always attends top management meetings and gets to know what the top management has in mind and their future plans.

After each meeting with the top management, he meets with us and explains to us all the points discussed at the meeting...and lets us participate by sharing our view" (L4-E3).

Another employee in the same department admitted that there had, initially, been a lack of clarity about the change project, which could have caused errors in implementation, but this problem had been resolved through the efforts of the department leader, consultants, and top management. The importance of such efforts, in times of change, is highlighted in these words:

"In fact, in the case of change, one of the most important issues is to remove all obstacles facing employees and to clarify the full vision to them. Clarifying the vision and objectives for the employees contributes to making them comfortable in the change process" (L6-E2).

Indeed, a noticeable feature of leaders' communications strategy was the extent to which they sought to involve employees at every stage of the project. Thus, the second distinctive feature of leaders' approach to change: Was a move away from authoritarianism and hierarchy, and a greater focus on employees, manifested in the provision of opportunities for participation, consideration of their needs, flexibility, where possible, in working arrangements, and a strong emphasis on motivation. Explaining the rationale for this approach, L2 argued that change should start at the bottom of the hierarchy, rather than being imposed from above. He believed that employees have a better understanding of the need and importance of change since they are the ones who work with and are affected by whatever system and procedures are in place. In his words:

"... I personally support change which starts from the pyramid's base.... start from the bottom and work your way up. To be a successful leader, you have to motivate and move the employees in the front lines....because the employees recognize the need and importance of change more than the leaders do. Let the change start there because they know the details, the need and the technicalities" (L2).

On a similar rationale, L1 explained:

"Even if I discussed an idea or initiative, I hold a meeting and discussed it with them. Some might reject the idea, so we use voting and I do not force my opinion on them" (L1).

Leaders also demonstrated concern about employees' psychological welfare and recognized that it may be affected by the work environment or by their personal and social circumstances, so they tried to support them in both these areas. As L1 asserted:

"I care about the work and the employees. Work will not be done without caring about employees, because they are the ones who accomplish it" (L1).

L5 similarly declared his commitment to supporting his employees, for example by allowing some flexibility with regard to work hours and absences, to the extent that he had the authority to do so. Such behavior was highlighted by employees in all six departments, leaders did not mention it. Leaders may not have recognized the importance of flexibility to their employees or may even have preferred not to mention it, in case it was interpreted as weakness. Nevertheless, employees saw leaders' flexibility as behavior that made their work easier and more pleasant and contributed to positive outcomes.

The last strategy or group of strategies, highlighted in interviews was the focus on motivation. In the absence of financial incentives, leaders found a variety of other ways to motivate employees. Moral support and appreciation, which were said to promote employee commitment, were offered through the leaders' kind, encouraging, and fair words and treatment towards members of their teams, and enhanced their commitment:

"He always says nice words to us, and this motivates us a lot.... His attitude makes the employee comfortable and responsible to a point where we became committed to implementing change" (L1-E1).

Other encouraging and morale-boosting behaviors included providing training and development, either by informal mentoring or by identifying employees' training needs and encouraging them to attend relevant courses. In this way, leaders could help employees to improve their position by making them eligible for rewards or promotions. They also used the evaluation process as a means of exerting influence over employees' outcomes. As L5 explained:

"For example,... I do not have the authority to give employees financial rewards, but I have some powers. For example, there is a monthly assessment in which I record all the achievements of the employee during the month and at the end of the year ... assess the employee on that basis" (L5).

With the supporting evidence of these evaluations, leaders could recommend distinguished employees to senior managers, who had the authority to award incentives and promotions.

Above all, leaders adopted a "hands-on" approach, setting aside the traditional power distance to work alongside employees a part of the term, directly involving themselves in daily tasks and challenges and solving problems.

As a result of these strategies, both organizations reported high levels of employee commitment and successful implementation of the change (defined as timely completion, efficient running of the new program, and improvement in work routines and data management for program users). This success, in turn, enhanced the reputation of the leaders, their departments, and the organizations.

5. Discussion

The research reported in this paper revealed the challenges faced and strategies adopted by department leaders in two health-sector organizations during the implementation of a technological change. Whilst the political and technical context called for change, there were structural and cultural factors that constrained leaders' behaviors, or made the change they were attempting more difficult, both in the organizations and reportedly, in the sector as a whole.

According to Arvey et al. (2006), around 10 percent of leadership is explained by environmental factors such as opportunity while others, such as Kempster and Stewart (2010) and Willis et al. (2017) argued that leadership is highly contextualized, and the findings of this study support their findings; in the two organizations participating in this study, leaders' roles in the change and the challenges they encountered were influenced by the organization hierarchy, and the position of the organization, within the sector and in relation to the change, as well as national cultural tendencies.

The leaders participating in this study, despite having little or no role in planning the change, were held accountable for sustaining and embedding the change. However, the options available to them were affected by the relationship of their organizations to a higher sectorial authority. This meant that sustaining the change, in the sense of the continued use of the new system, and even its roll-out to other organizations in the sector, was mandated by the sector leadership at the government level. The role of department leaders, in this situation, was to ensure implementation, minimize or overcome resistance, ensure that all parties understood their roles in relation to the change, and maximize employee commitment and productivity in order to get work completed to the required standards within the agreed timeframe.

Among the challenges faced was the relationship between leaders and higher levels in the organization, characterized by high power distance (De Mooij and Hofstede, 2010), seen in the strictly prescribed limits to leaders' authority and the communications up and down the bureaucratic hierarchy required to approve any change, causing a delay in decision-making.

Communication gaps in the hierarchy, moreover, sometimes led to a lack of clarity, causing negative feelings and confusion. Since feelings of uncertainty and ambiguity are said to be a major reason for resistance to change (Bailey and Raelin, 2015)

failure to provide sufficient clarity could have damaging consequences. Indeed, both organizations, at the start of the change project, faced resistance from employees and (in CCHI's case) externally from other affected organizations. This was more severe where the change was perceived as imposed because one of the reasons for resistance is perceived loss of control (Eby et al., 2000). Leaders also had to work within policies and regulations that limited their freedom to organize the work (for example by delegating certain powers to subordinates) and the incentives available to motivate employees.

A major role in leaders' efforts to mitigate these challenges was played by their strategy of improving communication via various channels and techniques. The emphasis placed by both leaders and their subordinates on leaders' use of communications between leaders and individual employees, team/department discussion, and (in CCHI) between departments or with other organizations bears out the argument that successful communications at interpersonal, intra-group, and inter-group levels are critical in change situations, for stakeholder involvement and reduction of resistance (Wagner and Harter, 2006). One of the benefits of effective communication is to create a sense of community and identification with the team or organization, which in turn increases commitment (Meyer and Allen, 1997). Leaders and employees agreed that, as indicated in the literature, the discussion provides an opportunity for leaders and employees to talk positively about the change project, and provides a foundation for corrective action (Soltani et al., 2007), while the drop-in practices maintained by leaders at this level can be seen as enabling a form of employee participation which according to Meier et al. (2013); tends to increase readiness for and acceptance of change and reduce the stress of the change situation.

Regarding the purposes of communication, narratives highlighted leader behaviors of explaining, persuading, and providing clarity. In particular, leaders and employees emphasized the efforts made by leaders to explain the change, the specific tasks and procedures involved, and the expected outcomes of the change. Their attention to this process suggests their recognition that explaining is important for reducing uncertainty, for example regarding the aims, objectives, and methods of change, as well as the anticipated consequences, both for the work and for individual employees, and so, helps to create readiness for change, according to Cinite et al. (2009). The findings support previous evidence by Soltani et al. (2007) regarding the role of effective communication in achieving acceptance of change in the public sector and, hence, their conclusion regarding the importance of disseminating information. Leaders for the most part seemed to have been successful in communicating the benefits of the change, but more especially in CCHI, where the extensive discussion had enabled two-way communication in which employees voiced their ideas and concerns.

Leaders also claimed and were frequently commended for supportive, relationship-oriented behaviors in which, consistent with [Holten and Brenner \(2015\)](#), and [Van der Voet et al. \(2016\)](#); they showed concern for employees' needs and feelings and displayed feelings of respect towards them. Such behaviors were reflected, particularly, in their use of motivational strategies, and in their attention to behaviors that focused on respecting employees, caring about their well-being, and displaying appreciation and gratitude. This involved a deliberate setting aside of the traditional leadership role of the past, marked by high power distance, in favor of a stronger adherence to the collectivist cultural values said to characterize Saudi Arabia, and the sense of working for the common good, which [Ahmad and Ogunsola \(2011\)](#) identified as a feature of Islamic leadership. Leaders expressed a recognition that it is largely employees who implement and are affected by the change, and so their perspectives are important and should be taken into consideration. In expressing and acting on this belief, they showed consistency with the suggestion of [Noe et al. \(2018\)](#) that enabling employees to be involved in decision-making is an important responsibility of change managers.

Managers also attempted, within the limits of their authority, to allow employees some flexibility in working arrangements. Procedural inflexibility is one of the features said to make change difficult in the public sector ([Van der Voet et al., 2016](#)), and employees' appreciation of managers flexibility supports the view of [Eby et al. \(2000\)](#) that flexibility in procedures is an important contributor to readiness for change.

It was also noticeable that leaders used various motivational strategies to encourage employees' performance, and to enhance their organizational commitment and identification with the organization, as proposed by [Burton \(2012\)](#). Financial reward played only a minor role, as, under organizational and sector policy, such rewards were not available, or not within the remit of departmental managers. Instead, the most commonly used strategies were training and development, moral support, and the leader's working 'hands on' alongside employees.

All six leaders used a strategy of training and development, whether by providing informal, individualized instruction or by exploiting available courses and facilities. In this way, they performed the role of "facilitating and developing capability" ([Higgs and Rowland, 2011](#)), which supports people in finding their own answers to problems. Training is seen in the literature as a way of embedding change and advocated by [Soltani et al. \(2007\)](#) as essential for change success.

The perceived relationship between training and motivation is consistent with [Ashar et al. \(2013\)](#) who found training gives employees a feeling that the organization is concerned about them and values them, and [Cropanzano and Mitchell \(2005\)](#) suggested that training encourages employees'

commitment. Another reason why T&D was used to enhance commitment is that training can overcome deficiencies of knowledge, information, and skills that might otherwise be sources of resistance ([Kitchen and Daly, 2002](#)).

In addition, the extensive use of *moral support* was a further compensation for the lack of authority to provide material rewards. Such support was appreciated and seen as inspiring by employees. Indeed, the use of this strategy, and the response to it, are consistent with what [Rusaw \(2007\)](#) said about the impact of transformational leadership in public sector change, as well as being consistent with the need for affiliation ([Hutchings and Weir, 2006](#)) in a collectivist culture.

Ultimately, the strategies adopted were perceived to be reflected in the success of the change and the enhanced reputation of the leader, the department, and the organization as a whole, showing how leaders' actions are judged by their consequences ([Burnes et al., 2018](#)). This is an important outcome in a collectivist culture, where the success and failures of one member belong to the whole of the team or organization, and it is important to avoid bringing shame or loss of face ([Hofstede, 1984](#)).

6. Conclusion

Under the influence of Vision 2030 and the drive to improve service efficiency, the organizations in this study undertook a major change project: the introduction of a new computer system for managing and using health insurance data. This paper addressed two questions: What were the challenges faced by Saudi public sector leaders during the time of change? How did leaders deal with these challenges? These questions were addressed via in-depth interviews with department leaders and employees involved in the change. These revealed that with regard to Q1, although the need for change was recognized initially in CCHI, at the middle management level, leaders had limited roles and decision-making authority as change agents. The structure of the sector and the organizations, together with the bureaucratic culture, resulted in a lengthy chain of command and the need for complex and prolonged negotiations up to and down the hierarchy, for approval of the change project and decisions during the implementation process. These factors were also associated with a lack of autonomy and discretion given to leaders at this level and limited the strategies they could use, for example, to motivate their subordinates. Lack of clarity about the change, as well as a tradition of authoritarian leadership and the lack of material incentives for employees, were sources of employee frustration and added to the challenge of resistance commonly experienced during change. Leaders were faced with the need for advocacy and negotiation to win support for changes approved, or even mandated by others, convince employees and other stakeholders, build commitment and facilitate employees' contributions. Q2 concerned the strategies adopted.

These included increasing the frequency and quality of communications, liaising between different levels of the organization hierarchy, and using explanation and persuasion to improve clarity, overcome resistance and win support for the change. Leaders also modified their leadership role to focus more on employees' opinions, needs, and feelings. This change of approach was reflected in the provision of opportunities for employees' participation in operational decisions, attention to their welfare, flexibility to meet their needs, and use of a variety of motivational strategies, including moral support and training and development, to compensate for the lack of material incentives. Positive outcomes, in terms of overcoming resistance, employee commitment, and change success, were perceived to result from these strategies, and the resulting declared successes were seen, in turn, to enhance the reputation of the leader, the department, and the organization.

The research contributes to meeting the need for more in-depth empirical studies of the change process in public sector contexts, especially in non-Western contexts, and specifically the need for insights into leader behavior during change. Evidence was found of employee focus and involvement of subordinates, in marked contrast to previous accounts of high-power distance and autocratic leader behavior (Bjerke and Al-Meer, 1993; Mellahi, 2006). Saudi Arabia's development agenda, Vision 2030, can be seen as a driver of a more "universal" approach to leadership. The study also makes a methodological contribution by the use of unstructured narrative as a data-gathering technique, in contrast to the more familiar quantitative approach (Alamri and Alfawsan, 1997). By demonstrating the feasibility of this approach, as well as its value in providing rich data and deep insights, this study may open the way for other researchers to use a similar technique.

By identifying problematic aspects of leaders' roles, which challenged change management and sometimes led to employees' frustration, the study has implications for strategies that might increase the likelihood of change success. One source of frustration, for example, was inconsistency in the availability and use of financial incentives. There is a need for a unified, clear policy throughout the sector, regarding the availability of such incentives, who has the power to confer them, and under what circumstances they can be awarded. It is important for leaders to pay attention to their administrative role in advocating for promotions and awards for deserving employees, and such awards should be based on transparent policies.

Another concern is related to lapses in communication and coordination, attributed to the strongly hierarchical nature of the organizations, resulting in occasional uncertainty and ambiguity, which could impede the progress of the work and lead to employees' frustration. This could be remedied by a systematic mechanism to involve employees in inter-departmental coordination, or at

least keep them updated on the outcomes and implications of discussions. This would enhance employees' understanding and acceptance of change and is likely to facilitate smooth and timely implementation.

As with any study of this nature, there are limitations. Firstly, it was confined to a single change project and to two organizations, with a small sample of participants. To address these limitations, future studies could investigate other types of change, and involve a larger number of organizations, to provide a wider range of perspectives. Secondly, it did not take account of the perceptions of stakeholders beyond the leader and follower. In future research, it would also be interesting to explore the opinions and experiences of a wider range of stakeholders in change, for example, top management, or stakeholders outside the organization. It would also be worthwhile to develop measures of change outcomes so that leaders' strategies can be linked to specific consequences. Moreover, it would be interesting to follow up change processes over time, to allow outcomes to be identified. The information from such studies would help in developing change strategies and increase the likelihood of change success, contributing to the achievement of Saudi Arabia's ambitious vision.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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