



Using change management to redesign Oman's health professions education sector

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Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

proposed changes, as well as their views on the possible strategies to achieve the desired goals, this study aims to contribute toward developing a better understanding of the effect of change on employees during a period of transition.

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

2. Method

2.1. Participants

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

2.2. Data collection

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

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