From fragility to antifragility

Change management and communication in the Middle East education sector
The shift in our thinking about education as a result of the rapid move towards the fourth industrial revolution has prompted key regional governments to embark on education reform that holistically addresses their challenges in improving the quality of education to meet the increasing labor demands of the digital world and beyond.

Managing organization change is hard, but today, top performing organizations are constantly changing and adapting. We call these organizations “adaptable.” They are organizations that not only survive, but thrive in the midst of radical change. They gain from disorder in their industry, and they get stronger rather than weaker in stressful times. Prof. Nassim Taleb calls these organizations “antifragile.”

The education sector in the Middle East is being tested for adaptability and antifragility. Education leaders are trying to implement education reforms that focus on improving the quality of education and eliminating the gap between the skills required by the job market and those taught in schools. According to the World Bank: “The Middle East and North Africa Region (MENA) has taken great strides in education. It has quadrupled the average level of schooling since 1960, halved illiteracy since 1980 and achieved almost complete gender parity for primary education.” Yet it still faces fundamental challenges related to education quality and skills mismatch. One underlying reason for this discrepancy is due to the education sector’s failure to adapt and change.

In their book, A New Culture of Learning, Doug Thomas and John Seely Brown say that: “For most of the twentieth century our educational system has been built on the assumption that teaching is necessary for learning to occur. Accordingly, education has been seen as a process of transferring information from a higher authority (the teacher) down to the student. This model, however, just can’t keep up with the rapid rate of change in the twenty-first century. It’s time to shift our thinking from the old model of teaching to a new model of learning.”

The shift in our thinking about education as a result of the rapid move towards the fourth industrial revolution has prompted key regional governments to embark on education reform that holistically addresses their challenges in improving the quality of education to meet the increasing labor demands of the digital world and beyond.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, for example, is currently embarking on an ambitious education reform program comprised of a portfolio of initiatives that covers all stages of education from K-12 to higher education to life-long learning. Those initiatives have an immense impact on education policies, practices, systems and most importantly, on people and their ways of working.

One key initiative is the implementation of Competency Based Education (CBE) in pilot schools. Through CBE, the teacher’s role will change from transferor of knowledge (content delivery) to facilitator of student learning and ignitor of students’ curiosity to become lifelong learners. The students’ behavior will also need to change. Students will need to learn “how to learn” on their own with teachers acting as facilitators of their learning and their peers as their support communities.

To successfully implement an education reform at an organizational and national level, leaders need to adopt a change mindset. A number of key strategic questions include:
1. Why is applying change management and communication strategy a key success factor and enabler to implementing education reform?

2. Given that the majority of leaders in organizations believe in the importance of managing change, why is change management and communications still not getting the needed sponsorship?

3. How can educational organizations increase the odds of successfully implementing an education reform that sticks?

**A key success factor – change management and communication**

Given the ripple effect that education reform will have on education practices, systems and people, change management and communication are key to enable the adoption of this massive national-level change. If ignored, or if not executed properly, the risks of organizations not meeting their intended objectives and realizing benefits increase exponentially.

The question remains: how successful is the education sector in enacting and managing change? What is hindering it from sustaining the required behavioral changes and new ways of working?

**Challenges facing change management and communications**

From our experience in working with public and education sector clients in the region, the importance of change management and communication as an enabler to any transformation program is well understood, but can sometimes be hard to implement.

The challenges facing change management and communication in the education sector are:

- Change management is a young management discipline. As such, it is not always made clear that unless people change their behavior and embrace the new ways of working, the education reforms benefits cannot, and will not, be realized.

- Initiative sponsors are usually experts in their industry and/or policy making though may not necessarily have the skill to lead large-scale change efforts. Articulating a compelling vision and communicating the case for change to their stakeholders are important to initiatives’ long-term success and benefits realization.

- Sponsors may not always align all impacted leaders to the organization’s vision, thus jeopardizing winning their support and commitment when implementing the initiatives.

- The perception that change management and communication is a linear set of activities carried out in a sequential manner, with no interdependent changes that are carried out independently from project management activities.

- The education sector is highly structured, decision-making is centralized and very slow. As a result, it may not always have the agility, adaptability and capability to implement strategic change.

- Government employees are usually harder to motivate than private sector employees according to *Harvard Business Review*, due to weak performance management and incentive systems.

- Previous negative experiences in change efforts, coupled with multiple initiatives implemented simultaneously, have sometimes resulted in employees feeling change fatigue and resisting...
The education sector is highly structured, decision-making is centralized and very slow. As a result, it may not always have the agility, adaptability and capability to implement strategic change.

The adoption of the proposed changes. This gets more complicated if the employee experience during the change journey, and how the change affects their daily work, are not taken into consideration.

Given the above challenges, how can the education sector increase its chances of successfully implementing reforms in order to achieve the intended objectives and get the most out of its investment?

**Raising the odds of success**

To holistically reform education so that it may keep adapting to the exponential changes, change management and communication activities need to be embedded in the DNA of the organization. This is done by:

- Selecting initiatives/sponsors who have high tolerance for ambiguity and change and have deep experience in leading large-scale transformations.

- Establishing nimble governance that provides oversight, sets the direction, monitors results and manages people-related risks.

- Aligning leaders on the vision of the reform so they set the right tone for their organization.

- Communicating the case for change to create urgency and win stakeholder support.

- Training leaders to tell inspiring stories, to role model the right behaviors, to hold difficult conversations, and to provide reassurance during the transition.

- Addressing the different needs of the impacted stakeholders through targeted change management and communication interventions to win their support and commitment.

- Embedding the change management and communication activities in the project management plan and allowing for mid-course corrections to manage people risks.

- Understanding change from the point of view of the employees by assessing their readiness for change as well as the impact of the change on their day-to-day work and designing targeted interventions to facilitate adoption of the change and new ways of working.

- Looking at other enablers of change such as performance and incentive systems as well as removing change

To holistically reform education so that it may keep adapting to the exponential changes, change management and communication activities need to be embedded in the DNA of the organization.
blockers such as slow decision-making processes and empowering front-line teams to make quicker and better decisions to serve their stakeholders.

**Conclusion**

In order to keep up with the exponential change of the digital world and to ensure that students have the right skills for the 21st century, the education sector in the region has to reform education, and fast. Change management and communication are key to enable this mass change at an organizational and national level. While there is no one-size-fits all approach to designing and implementing change management and communication interventions, there are factors that increase the odds of success. Four key success factors are:

1. The leadership team is aligned and enabled to articulate the vision and case for change.
2. Stakeholders are engaged and understand the cost of not changing.
3. Governance and accountability of change are clear to all.
4. Systems that enable and sustain change, such as performance management and incentive systems.

Change will come at a faster rate than ever and will not end in implementing a reform. Therefore, moving towards an “adaptable organization” will eventually change the DNA of the education sector to embrace continuous improvements and be “antifragile”. 

by Ziad Zakaria, Director, Operations, Consulting and Elham Barghouty, Manager, Consulting, Deloitte Middle East

---

**Endnotes**

3. Thomas, D. and Brown, J.S. (2011) *A New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change*

---

**Sources**

- The Adaptable Organization - Harnessing a networked enterprise of human resilience, Deloitte
- Thomas, D. and Brown, J.S. (2011) *A New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change*

---

**Figure 1**: In order to thrive in an uncertain world, organizations should consider shifting stable and predictable characteristics to adaptable ones.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stable organization</th>
<th>Adaptable organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Profit-driven</td>
<td>Purpose-driven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal-focused</td>
<td>Customer-focused ecosystem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hierarchal structure</td>
<td>Flexible network of teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siloed bureaucratic interactions</td>
<td>Collaboration and agile governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-size-fits-all talent management</td>
<td>Individualized talent engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistance to change</td>
<td>Change and learning are continuous</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**Figure 1**: In order to thrive in an uncertain world, organizations should consider shifting stable and predictable characteristics to adaptable ones.