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Case study

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The Knowledge and Human Development Authority:

Innovation in Human Resource Management
and People's Happiness

ABSTRACT

The Dubai Government Excellence Program (DGEP), part of the General Secretariat of the Executive Council of Dubai, launched in late 2015 an initiative with the title “Dubai We Learn”. In collaboration with the Center of Organizational Research in New Zealand (COER), the initiative strived to foster a culture of institutional learning and knowledge exchange within the governmental sector in Dubai, and consisted of a range of benchmarking activities. Thirteen projects from 13 different government departments took part in this award winning initiative. The Knowledge and Human Development Authority, with its project “People Happiness”, made the most recognizable progress in this field.

In an effort to embrace a culture of wellbeing within the workplace from top-down and bottom-up; KHDA altered its recruitment, retention and attrition policies and systems to select and support employees who will help contribute to the KHDA’s culture of wellbeing. The Knowledge and Human Development Authority succeeded in winning the Dubai Government Excellence Program award for having the happiest employees by implementing a novel, and cutting edge approach to improving the work environment. This was not confined to the Authority’s employees only, but rather all stakeholders who deal with the latter; such as parents, visitors, school administrators, teachers, and business partners. Reflecting on their achievements in improving employee happiness will be critical for this new phase in human resource management.

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INTRODUCTION

The Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) is the educational quality-assurance and regulatory authority of the government of Dubai, UAE. It is responsible for the growth and development of private education in the emirate and was established by a decree in 2006. Its mission revolves around providing support for schools, parents, students, educators, principals, investors and government partners to create a high quality education sector focused on happiness and wellbeing. The authority has succeeded in creating positive energy and an exceptional work environment for its employees, becoming a model for government agencies of the future. As a result of their hard work and success, the KHDA won the 7-star award from the Dubai Government Excellence Program (DGEP) for having the happiest employees. The core objective behind the KHDA's pursuit for this award was to demonstrate the implementation of best practices in terms of people's happiness, work-life balance and wellbeing. The commencement of this pursuit took off in 2014, where the Authority embarked on a journey of reform and modification through the comprehensive adoption of benchmarking tools that shed light on the best-management practices there was.

With that ultimate mission in mind, the KHDA chronicled a list of expected financial and non- financial benefits; one of which was becoming one of the top employers in the region attracting the highest available caliber in the labor market; increasing productivity rates by approximately 30%, and maintaining a 90% retention rate among employees. Furthermore, plans for more efficient spending schemes were anticipated alongside those expectations.

As part of a comprehensive action plan that the KHDA drafted to execute and achieve those ambitious objectives, they developed an ingenious communication plan exclusive to their community members. Eventually this unique communication strategy became recognized as one of the competitive advantages the Authority enjoyed; which paved the way for a guaranteed 7-star award conquest.

In conjunction with an innovative communication portal and awareness journey, the KHDA was committed to attaining the maximum level of engagement and dedication from its participating stakeholders. The people's happiness initiative was known to entail an extensive set of prerequisites, hence training and development were required. Hence, the Authority devoted a substantial amount of time and cost to educate and train its employees on the latest state-of-the-art benchmarking approaches and schemes. As a result of the push towards excellence and innovation, the KHDA entered the realm of benchmarking in order to improve upon the processes it was pursuing.

1 "Dubai Government Excellence Program". Emirates Government Excellence Program. Retrieved from www.egec.gov.ae/en/council-members/dubai-government-excellence.

Benchmarking was conducted at the KHDA; at both the organizational and educational levels; with the purpose of identifying any operational gaps. International benchmarking partners were selected, and an action plan to implement their best practices was put into operation. It was the TRADE benchmarking methodology in particular that the KHDA resorted to. Developed in 2009 by Dr. Robin Mann, TRADE was embraced by the KHDA to provide guiding frameworks in business and management processes. It is a certification system that focused on sharing information and best practices, to improve performance and deliver the best value to the organization. The KHDA's execution of TRADE was certainly a pivotal point in the authority's development course. Not only has it reformed the institution in an unprecedented manner, but it also played a crucial role in positioning the latter as a stand-alone model of innovation and excellence for everyone to admire.

The Dubai Government Excellence Program

The DGEP was established in 1997 as the first integrated program for governmental excellence in the world. It was created to serve as the driving force behind the development of the public sector in Dubai, and enable it to facilitate extraordinary services for all stakeholders involved. Recently, the DGEP succeeded in advancing and evolving the concepts, practices, performance and approaches adopted by the public sector. This successful enhancement goes back to the latter's collaboration with several government entities that committed to the DGEP's organizational and professional excellence standards. This Excellence Program is a stand-alone entity, that ensures the development of the systems and methodologies used by the public sector in order to keep up with the state-of-the-art administration and quality domains. Its main concern lies in supporting the government sector institutions to efficiently meet the dynamics of the changing managerial and administrative world.¹

The main project the DGEP launched and the focal point of this case study is the 'Dubai We Learn' initiative. This initiative was inaugurated in 2015 with the intention to promote a culture of organizational learning, transfer and exchange knowledge in the government sector in Dubai. Dubai We Learn was designed to improve government performance and the application of best practices to promote creativity and innovation. It was also set up to enhance satisfaction and happiness levels among all its stakeholders in the sector. Capacity building and human resource training were on top of the initiative's check list. They were regarded with top importance and considered to be the operational tools that will eventually achieve organizational learning and knowledge sharing. The ultimate purpose of this project was to enhance Dubai's image as an international hub in the area of government administration, excellence, creativity and organizational learning. ²

² "A successful first year for Dubai We Learn". Business Performance Improvement Resource. Retrieved from <http://blog.bpir.com/category/dubai-we-learn>.

Acknowledging the numerous challenges organizations face every day in our modern time is essential for any entity - be it private or public – to sustain its presence in a dynamically competitive environment. The DGEP Excellence award was granted to the KHDA based on the latter's innovative application of human resource management's unconventional criteria and standards. The Authority sought to discard of its traditional labor force management structure and replaced it with a modern outlook to employee-management. The TRADE managerial and administrative benchmarking tool was successfully incorporated by the authority from which all the innovative HR management reforms and changes were inspired and eventually applied correctly. The TRADE tactic was undertaken by the Center for Organizational Excellence Research in New Zealand (COER); where it offered a flexible step-by-step approach with five distinct phases and verified outcomes. TRADE is flexible in the sense that it can be used to explore a certain business concerns that would require in-depth investigation. The planning stage preceding TRADE is a rigorous exercise. It ensures that cost-benefit analyses are undertaken prior to the commencement of any benchmarking project. It entails extensive training and practice drills before implementation, and provides a holistic set of self-assessment tools that provide day-by-day evaluation of performance.

The KHDA Project: Innovating in HRM and Employee Happiness at the KHDA

Pursuing best practices enables organizations to continually question the status quo and innovate; thus resulting in more effective practices and appealing products and services. Whilst the desire for better/best practices is widespread, the approach to identify, understand and implement best practices is often unclear or applied inconsistently.

Having a positive attitude was proved to be linked to physical, mental and social health; improvement in work performance, and social relationships. It goes to show that institutions that are “Happy” could improve the levels of satisfaction, creativity and productivity among their employees and stakeholders. The KHDA's happiness journey started in 2013, inspired by emerging research showing that nurturing employees' happiness can effectively contribute to a series of both financial and non-financial benefits for the employees, the organization, and its stakeholders. KHDA leadership had actively embraced a happiness philosophy endorsed by his Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashed, and the directory general of the KHDA set the course for making the institution a leader in the field of employee satisfaction and a “place of prosperity” for all its employees. . The KHDA's initiative aimed to identify and implement the best practices related to peoples' happiness to increase their contentment, work-life balance, and wellbeing. The main objective was to become within the top 10% happiest organizations by the end of 2016.

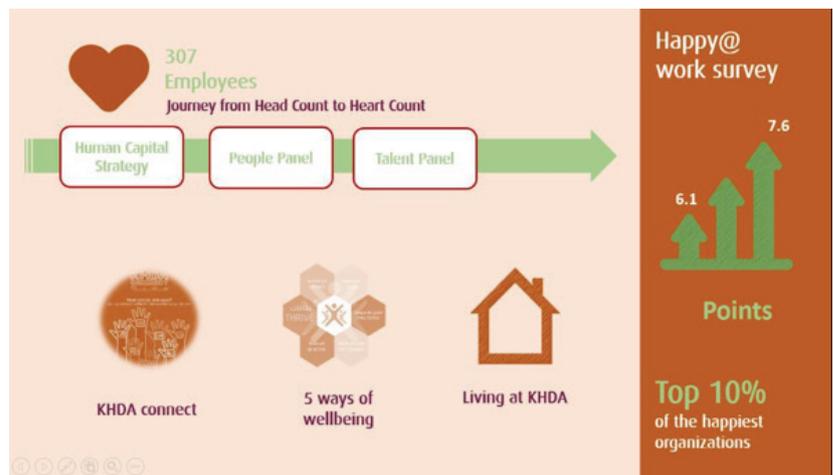
The scope of the project was to build an open, pleasant and healthy workplace culture that offered a fun working and learning environment, where opportunities are part of daily work and where employees were happy and engaged in what they did. This involved a series of radical changes in the KHDA's physical working environment, business processes, working conditions, working hours, hierarchical relationships, organizational structuring, job descriptions, and many more.

With this in mind, in 2014, the KHDA abolished what it referred to as “impersonal” terminology and replaced the words HR with “Heart Count”. It also introduced an innovative system, which considered its people as “Talents with Hearts” rather than merely a labor force. From this standpoint, a new “Talent panel” was derived. The talent panel was created to provide guidance and support to employees all the way from their

initial recruitment and selection to their career development schemes and paths. The ultimate result was a substantial reduction in resignation and absenteeism rates, and increased loyalty towards the institution.

The Talent-Management approach that the KHDA adopted evolved from the conventional HR management perspectives. It focused on issues that could have been otherwise overlooked. It worked on developing and enhancing the environment necessary for successful cross-functional teams to thrive, and also on some of the basic tasks of recruitment. In summary, the

talent- team was established to ensure the happiness of the KHDA's employees, together with the most efficient allocation of their knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs).



Source: <https://www.khda.gov.ae/en/Website>

KHDA employees were first consulted and asked to share their views and ideas pertaining to their perceptions on happiness. Accordingly, “happiness-driven” projects and initiatives within the authority were designed and implemented to guarantee the widespread of contentment among the latter’s community. This approach, illustrated in the figure above (provided by the KHDA team), focused on discovering, attracting and welcoming new talented potential recruits. It also focused on supporting self- directed learning, while ensuring that the right resources are in the right place and delivering up to their full potential. In addition to that, the KHDA’s new approach was built on the notion of creating new opportunities for new beginnings, and ensuring every employee at the institution had all his/ her administrative requirements attended to; and that these were aligned with achieving the KHDA’s strategies. The various areas related to talent management are reflected in 5 circles as summarized in the diagram below (provided by the KHDA team):

1. The Scouting Circle was set up to be responsible for attracting and recruiting new “talents”/ employees; in order to meet the business needs and the KHDA’s workforce plan. Alongside that responsibility, the circle members were committed to improve the recruitment chances of talented UAE nationals.
2. The KHDA Thrive Circle was created to spread the culture of an open and outgoing work environment that was pillared on learning and training opportunities provided for everyone. It also ensured the empowerment of its recruits with all necessary skills, competencies and knowledge required to endorse the KHDA’s strategies.
3. The Setting Circle was formed to process all administrative affairs and documentation issues for new recruits, starting from their job offers, contracts, to visa clearances.
4. The Peak Performance circle was assigned the responsibility to promote a high performance culture across the KHDA, via the recognition and acknowledgement of exemplary performance of distinguished employees.
5. The Reset Circle was founded to achieve the self-actualization needs among its employees. It was set up to assist employees in fully utilizing their skills, knowledge and experiences to actively “thrive” within the institution.

For starters, the government body adopted the “no-door” concept in its office’s layout. With the exception of some glass rooms that were designed to accommodate staff and employee’ meetings, partitions and doors were literally removed and abandoned from the institution’s floor plan. Open spaces and recreational facilities were placed instead, creating a joyful ambience for everyone to cherish. From ping pong tables, hammocks, tread mills, to real-life chirruping birds, and fresh fruits on the tables; the KHDA was certainly embarking on a wave of utmost euphoria for its employees and visitors alike. These unconventional physical changes to the work environment created a barrier and status-free area, which encouraged social connection, involvement, and motivation.



Source: <https://www.khda.gov.ae/en/Website>

Top management’s vision was embedded with the importance of creating a work culture that enabled employees to live and work according to their personal values and passions. They believed that by doing so, employees stayed engaged and created a high sense of pride and belonging to the organization.

It is worth noting that changes to the physical environment were implemented on a gradual, incremental basis; to allow employees a smooth transition from the conventional work environment, to the modern open-space one. KHDA stakeholders positively commented the changes and during the span of a year, employees volunteered to take part in the actual redecoration and interior re-design of the premises.

This sparked a profound sense of ownership to the project, and also added a financial advantage where the cost of hiring a special interior decorator was foregone.

The volunteer initiative was well received and resulted in a zero-cost budget for the physical changes implemented.

“Nic Marks had an idea worth spreading – that promoting sustainable happiness and well-being should be the aim of nations and people alike”.

-Chris Anderson, TED curator

Actions Taken in the Project

The KHDA 'Happy-Employees' project was strongly inspired by Nic Marks, founder of the "Happiness Workshop" who questioned why money and economics are often used as a measure of a country's success. He painted a positive picture of a future where we use less resources and lead happier, longer lives. He identified five main elements for leading a happier life:

- Connect - be social, get out there and enjoy the company of others.
- Be Active - an obvious one but exercise makes you feel better.
- Take Notice - be aware of what's going on around you, people, the changing seasons, etc.
- Keep Learning - not necessarily in the formal sense but stay curious.
- Give - it's proven that people who give to others are happier.³

Based in that, in 2013 the KHDA Happiness committee created what they called, the "Thrive" team, which was made up of employees from different departments across the institution. This team was inspired to continue the work of the Thrive circle mentioned previously. The Thrive Team's main objective was to execute the teachings of Nic Marks and implement the five elements of wellbeing through which happiness is achieved.

One of the rather interesting activities executed by the team was to initiate Morning Runs, Fitness Classes, and other unprecedented initiatives with the purpose of creating an exceptionally pleasant environment for KHDA employees, where exercise and activity were embedded in their daily routine. Exercise allows the brain to release endorphins, which are natural opiates, commonly known as happiness hormones. The "Be Active" attitude gave rise to more resilient, stress-free employees, with a more positive approach to life and work alike.

With respect to the "Keep Learning" value, the Authority created "Sharaccino" knowledge sharing sessions, open to all KHDA employees, where individuals came together to share the Best Practices they learned and acquired during international benchmarking visits. Furthermore, these sessions invited employees to express and share their passion towards any research field, activity, workshop, or skill that they might have recently acquired or experienced.

The "Give" pillar had a profound impact on the KHDA's agenda. Similar to Corporate Social Responsibility principles, the Authority has been supporting an Indonesian Orphanage, endorsing it financially, educationally, and providing short term volunteers from the staff on a yearly basis. Furthermore, annual "Ramadan Souqs" are held and organized for all KHDA employees and stakeholders where all forms of charity activities are undertaken and sponsored by the authority's representatives.

3 Geere, Duncan. "How to Be Happy: Nic Marks' Five-a-day Guide." WIRED UK. WIRED UK, 23 May 2016. Web.<<http://www.wired.co.uk/article/how-to-be-happy-nic-marks>>.

The communication plan that the KHDA implemented could certainly be considered as “The Connect” scheme. Employees from all teams were continuously informed and updated about their progress on the KHDA’s Happiness project through an internal social media platform, which was set up specifically for the institution as a communication tool. Yammer (the name of the internal social media platform) was used to share learnings and constructive feedback from benchmarking appraisals, communicate new initiatives, and collect general feedback from employees and stakeholders. Knowledge sharing sessions were also organized to exchange best practices ideas learnt during international benchmarking visits. This effective communication plan was further endorsed by awareness sessions that were conducted to facilitate the communication of specific initiatives that were meant to boost employees’ moral and motivation.

The KHDA also used its communication platform to communicate with its stakeholders. The platform invited school principals and kept them informed about important notifications and news updates such as upcoming initiatives, and also provided a smooth flow of idea-exchange and feedback among all parties involved.

The KHDA also enhanced communications with stakeholders through other initiatives, each designed to maximize relations. Their periodic ‘Design thinking sessions’ focused on inviting representative stakeholders to provide feedback and propose new ideas. The ‘Lighthouse Project” connected school principals and brought them together to work with KHDA employees on research projects focused on positive education. The ‘What Works Events’ connected the KHDA team with teachers to share information and collaborate. ‘What Works’ is a community event that brings together the education community and provides a unique opportunity to support the transformation of Dubai’s private education sector through collaboration. The results of these research attempts were later communicated and shared with school teachers and supervisors to establish two-way discussion panels on the best practices of teaching and learning.

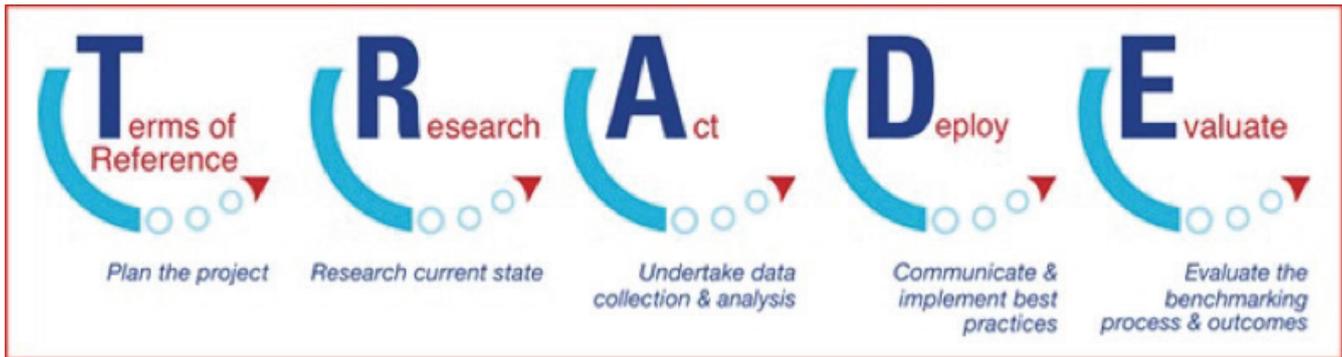
As an unconventional communication approach, the KHDA created the “ambassadors” team, which came together from different departments, to inform and update schools with the authority’s most recent research projects and findings. These school visits were consequently discussed during weekly meetings at the authority, where new job tasks and assignments were reconsidered, and redistributed according to the specific strengths of each team’s members. The purpose of this procedure was to allow for the most effective and efficient use of employees’ knowledge, skills, and abilities; and to channel them in their areas of research interest and competitive advantage.

The KHDA was probably the first Government institution in the U.A.E. to inaugurate the “Take Notice” concept by introducing Yoga and Mindfulness classes to its employees. The main objective behind those sessions was to alert employees that they needed to stop and pay attention to their surroundings.

[The Yoga classes were aligned with the KHDA’s strategic agenda of creating the happy work environment essential for happy and healthy employees, as one of the many benefits of the sport is that it improves depression, leads to a significant increase in the levels of happiness, and improves immune functions.

Benchmarking

The KHDA sought industry benchmarking and best-practice adoption to guide its efforts towards excellence. As a result, its implementation of the TRADE benchmarking tool was one of the many excellence awards that the institution strived to achieve. Benchmarking is all about the exercise of ‘continuously comparing the performance levels or organizations for specific process or activity’ and embedding best practices into the day-to-day functions of an organization.⁴



a. The “Terms of Reference” stage (plan the project)

In this stage, the KHDA set a clear outline of actions and responsibilities that were to be fulfilled to meet the benchmarking excellence award criteria placed by the DGEP. Numerous awareness and orientation meetings were held on a weekly interval to identify the aim, scope, and requirements of the project, along with the selection of the most appropriate team members who were to hold ownership of the latter. A task management force was put in action that conducted the distribution of roles, and communicated the actions being taken to the rest of the organization. Key staff member across all departments were identified and selected, endorsed by the full commitment of the leadership. All participating employees were granted complete flexibility and control over their assigned tasks, with the ultimate goal of achieving the award requirements. All team members taking part in the ‘Dubai We Learn’ contest were trained in benchmarking, while some attended international business events to gain more acquaintance. Terms of reference were consequently drafted during the series of weekly meetings that were held, prior to any progress-report submission to upper management.

⁴ Mann, Robin. “Everything you need to know about benchmarking.” *Effective Operations and Performance Management*. N.p.: Bloomsbury, 2010. 141-50. Web. <http://bit.ly/2kEoXAY>

⁵ “Apply - TRADE Best Practice Benchmarking.” COER. Center for Organizational Excellence Research, n.d. Web. 13 Dec. 2016. <<http://www.coer.org.nz/apply/trade-best-practice-benchmarking>>.

b. The “Research” stage (research current state)

The KHDA conducted regular, periodic meetings to track the progress of the project. There was a process of review for any previous research done earlier, where the Happiness Team worked on aligning the prevailing objectives and their measurements with the updated ones. Areas of improvement that needed enhancement and further development were identified in this stage. International benchmarking partners were identified and selected based on their proximity to cities where chief executives from the Authority were expected to head to. New targets and objectives for the “people happiness” initiative were put forward during the research stage.

A survey was conducted and distributed among KHDA employees to investigate their perception of happiness and contentment. The variables investigated in this data collection tool included everything from the respondents’ simple perception of happiness, to the implications of thinking positively, receiving praise, maintaining relationships at work among colleagues, enhancing personal health and wellbeing, to beautifying the physical environment on KHDA premises.

The main findings of this research endeavor emphasized the significant impact “constructive feedback” tends to have on its recipients. It was actually identified as the one happiness descriptor that improved the most during the ‘People Happiness’ project attempt at KHDA. Based on previous scholarly work, this observation merely proved the theory that there is a strong positive correlation between the genuine feeling of appreciation, employee engagement, productivity; and retention rates. The amusing conclusion that peer-praise has an even more powerful impact on employees’ sense of self-esteem was highlighted in the KHDA’s research phase. Similar weight was attributed to the maintenance of healthy work-relationships among employees and fostering a positive ambiance. Employees spend a considerable amount of time at work – away from their families – and this highlights how important it is to have a positive and friendly atmosphere among staff members, at KHDA; or any organization for that matter.

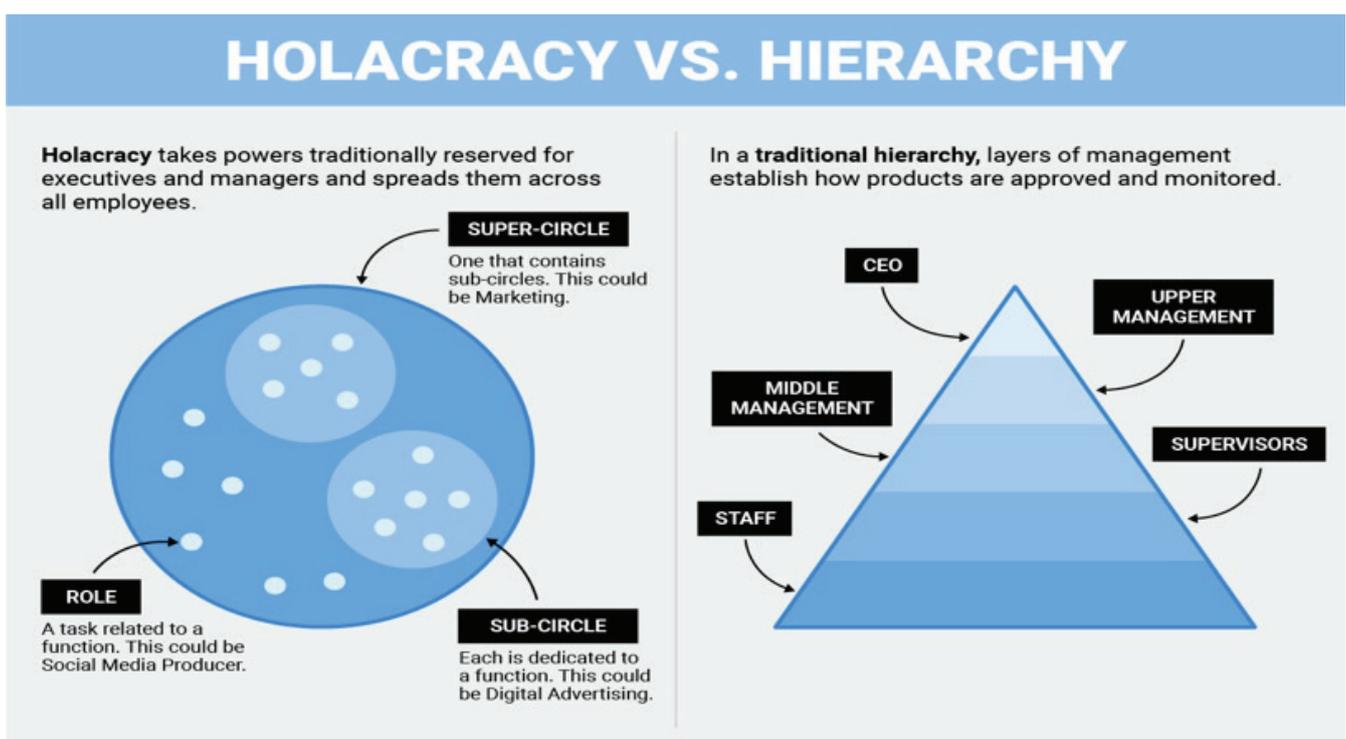
Another interesting finding reached by the KHDA’s research team was the fact that if the employer himself provided a healthy-lifestyle for his employees; whether as in providing them with the spare-time to exercise and/or encourage healthier eating habits, this would actually result in relieving employees from stress-related complains and improve productivity. Hence, the KHDA took these stimulating research findings into serious consideration, and embarked on acquiring the values embedded in them.

b. The “Acquire” Stage (acquire best practices)

Based on the key outcomes from the research stage preceding this one, the KHDA launched the adoption of a new contemporary management system known as the Holacracy arrangement. This meant that the KHDA was to abandon the conventional HR management practices, and experiment with a novel management system with unknown results.

The Holacracy arrangement is an emerging management structure that abolishes hierarchical rankings and reallocates them in circular-like pattern. In other words, the Holacracy management approach endorses the concept of having flat organizational structures, where hierarchical levels and ranking systems are traded for consensual decision making processes, where all affiliates participate equally. Holacracy is a complete, packaged system for self-management in organizations. Holacracy replaces the traditional management hierarchy with a new peer-to-peer “operating system” that increases transparency, accountability, and organizational agility. Through a transparent rule set and a tested meeting process, Holacracy allows businesses to distribute authority, empowering all employees to take a leadership role and make meaningful decisions. It is considered a system of governance where a higher degree of autonomy is allowed to various teams or circles to fulfill a certain purpose.

At the KHDA, the system involved the creation of management circles. Every circle represented a team and the circle’s boundary was the purpose required out of that team. The team higher up in the hierarchal order tinkered the boundary, i.e. the purpose of that team, but the internal workings and governance of the team were left to the team itself. Within that team, there was a leader called the Lead Link. This Lead Link conveyed the purpose of the circle to the circle.



The team worked by defining several roles. Team members were required to pick up roles they thought were suitable to them. Then they fulfilled the purpose of that role. However, the person in charge, had complete autonomy and freedom in choosing how to fulfill that purpose.

The fundamental concept about Holacracy at the KHDA was its power to adapt. Every circle held Governance Meetings after regular intervals. During these meetings, the purpose of the circle and the existence and efficiency of various roles were discussed. Old roles that were no longer useful were done away with and new roles were created according to requirements. If some task had become too complex to be just a role, it was converted into a sub-circle where a whole team could work on it. The power to make this decision rested on the team itself and the Lead Link. In that way, the power to make administrative decisions was distributed throughout the hierarchal order. Every circle was able to make decisions according to its requirements as that was the sole concern of what was referred to as the “higher circle”.

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The gradual movement towards transforming to Holacracy involved the establishment of a new set of work circles at the KHDA. They did this by reapplying the previous circle methodology to create the following circles:

- Thrive circle – Purpose: “Exploring Opportunities”.
- Visibility circle – Purpose: “Sharing what is within out”.
- Delight circle – Purpose: “Serving our guest virtually and reality”.
- Incubator.
- Parents Matter – Purpose: “Happy Family Experience”.
- Delphic – Purpose: “Thinking about the Future”.

6 Felloni, Richard. “Here’s What Happened to Zappos’ HR Boss When the Company Got Rid of Managers and Her Job Became Obsolete.” Business Insider. Business Insider, 12 Feb. 2016. Web. <<http://www.businessinsider.in/Heres-what-happened-to-Zappos-HR-boss-when-the-company-got-rid-of-managers-and-her-job-became-obsolete/articleshow/50968169.cms>>.

The key outcomes from the Acquire stage included the following:

1. A distinct recognition of the importance of allowing employees to live according to their personal values and passions was grasped upon completing the Acquisition stage of TRADE. This style of living guarantees the engagement and commitment of employees towards their organization.
2. Employees' happiness witnessed an impressive boost upon the implementation of the Holacracy policy. Staff experienced improved collaboration; enjoyed enhanced transparency; engaged in more teamwork activities; and demonstrated unprecedented creativity. There was a widespread sense of purpose and commitment among employees, where empowerment and accountability paved the way for amplified efficiency and productivity.

“School of Hearts was designed to provide insight to parents who look beyond examination results when choosing a school for their children”.

d. The “Deploy” stage (communicate & implement best practices)

Research by Harvard’s Shawn Achor and others in the field of positive psychology proved that levels of happiness and positive outlook are directly correlated to predictable levels of sustainable success; which eventually ripple out to surrounding people. The KHDA embarked on the opportunity and chose to maximize its benefits from such research. It provided training workshops to be attended by its employees believing that this would be nothing short of a revolution in the way it approached engagement and happiness in today’s competitive work environment.

The research undergone by Shawn Achor gave birth to the best-selling book, *The Happiness Advantage*, which was also the derived outcome from research done about ‘The Orange Frog’ Theory. The KHDA was one of those organizations, keen on investing in its employees, and striving to develop its human capital endowments.

Aside from deploying the Holacracy approach to management, the KHDA introduced a series of initiatives aimed at improving employee relations and wellbeing. One of them was to inspire schools and families to look beyond examination results, and focus more on the human element involved in the assessment process. The ‘School of Hearts’ initiative was created, which focused on three key areas:

1. School environment.
2. Personal wellness.
3. Peer-support.

The ultimate purpose of this was to help schools build a balance between academic achievement and development of character and wellbeing. The KHDA collaborated with WestEd - a San Francisco based non- partisan, nonprofit, research, development, and service agency whose main aim is to improve education in the USA and other partnering countries abroad – and created an unprecedented initiative of providing an optional online survey to be completed by students. This survey was designed to explore the level of contentment of some crucial areas such as:

1. Students’ physical wellbeing, i.e.; students’ breakfast and rest intake, healthy diet and physical stamina.
2. Relationships with adults; i.e.; namely the level and nature of interaction students share with their teachers and parents in matters related to their school work and home assignments.
3. Relationships among students, i.e.; peer support.

The ultimate objective behind the “school of hearts” survey was to support the development of healthy school environments, personal wellness, peer support, and a well-balanced academic habitat. In the summer of 2016, three teachers from the top schools of the ‘School of Hearst’ survey travelled to the Festival of Positive Education held in Dallas, Texas; where they were invited to collaborate with others working in the field of education and wellbeing. These Top-School ambassadors were selected after being judged by parents from Dubai’s school community. This event gave the KHDA the opportunity to share its positive education practices with an international audience made up of educators and policy makers from around the world.

Another initiative was the Board Meeting. The KHDA designed an open-door, large auditorium-like hall in which its monthly board meetings were held. There were no entrance/ exit restrictions, and the invitation to attend was extended to all employees. The casual set up of the seating plan



A monthly open board meeting - another way the KHDA helps to bring out the best from within its organization. October 2016.

provided an informal ambience, which aimed at breaking down formal barriers that may hinder innovation and creativity from attendees.

These open meetings provided valuable insights into the focus and progress of all areas and initiatives at KHDA, as well as a clear understanding of KHDA's vision, purpose and priorities. Two-way communication and feedback channels were activated between chief officers and first line employees during those assemblies. It was evident that the impact of such deployment spurred a wave of positive energy and most importantly, transparency among KHDA community.

A third initiative deployed by the authority pertained to its promotions policy. Referred to as "The Extra Ordinary Achievers", this initiative was launched to appreciate and reward a larger number of people rather than limiting their recognition to promotion-season. The KHDA adopted the notion that promotion should not be limited to a line-manager's immediate feedback, but instead should be determined by a candidate's peer-nominations. The "Extraordinary achievers" initiative was considered an opportunity for KHDA community to celebrate the people who thrive in the organization. The initiative was well-received, and has undergone several refinements and improvements in terms of transparency and clarity. A communication platform was developed to encourage employees submit their peer nominations throughout any given year.

Fourth was the KHDA's deployment of physical changes to the workplace environment. Progressive physical changes to the work environment were one of the most remarkable, if not radical, deployments of the Authority. A group of KHDA employees took the lead to apply interior design changes and modifications that all revolved around the theme of an "open-door" policy. Partitions and desk barriers were abandoned, and recreational tools were placed to allow employees the choice to break-off their work mood and enjoy a little time off their work duties, on premises. These changes took place at slow pace, and not comprehensively, to allow for a smooth transition especially among those who adhered to the classic-mindset of an office. Some employees resisted the idea of having shared desk stations that lacked the privacy provided behind closed doors. Those were given the opportunity to maintain status quo; but were there to witness the positive impact the changes were having on the rest of their colleagues. With the hope that they would eventually come around to join the new trend, the KHDA embarked on an unprecedented idea – at least in its domain – and created an outstanding manifestation of modernity and flexibility to its employees, that was certainly much appreciated. Meeting rooms were redecorated into theme glass cubicles, and informal set ups were inserted in replacement of traditional meeting tables and the formalities they radiate.

"What we really want is an engaged workforce capable of performing at high levels and generating competitive advantage."

- Shawn Achor



1 KHDA ping-pong tables and walk tracks served as recreational facilities for its community.

More initiatives were deployed by the KHDA under the umbrella of its Happiness Project. A Happiness Toolbox was deployed to spread the language and attitude of happiness among the authority's employees and visitors. Incorporating 12 different tools, the Happiness Toolbox provided a channel for positive beliefs and values to spread among the KHDA

community. In addition to that, a "Healthy and Happy School Award" initiative was designed to recognize schools that focused on students' wellbeing and overall happiness. To do so, the KHDA took the responsibility of spreading awareness among all schools about the importance of the values on which the award was based. Subsequently, 28 schools got engaged and took part in the initiative, sharing their best practices with the school community in open discussion forums.

Last, but not least, the KHDA also started an internal initiative called "Youth-On-Board" that targeted the empowerment of youngsters and educated them about the importance of self-responsibility, decision making, and future-planning. This initiative focused on mapping out and planning future programs that engage stakeholders and enlighten them about the dynamics of shifting towards a knowledge economy. This is started on the federal level where they appointed the Minister of Youth, KHDA has adopted this initiative and cascaded it.

e. The "Evaluate" stage (evaluate the benchmarking process & outcomes).⁷

In this stage, results were measured. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) were put forward for analysis and contemplation. Financial and non-financial projections were graphed to assess the impact of the innovative management reform program the KHDA deployed. Consequently, new evaluation criteria were developed. A work survey known as the "Happiness at Work Survey" was incorporated to measure for expected benefits. It was selectively handpicked amidst a number of other assessment tools, as it included numerous critical variables on which happiness was measured. It also assisted the evaluation team to identify and explore differences across the organization in a systematic way, and to highlight areas of improvement. Respondents were categorized according to their demographic factors; some of which were: age, gender, nationality, team, salary range, and tenure. These demographics were seriously considered to ensure a complete picture of the workplace was represented, and hence made available when benchmarked internationally.

⁷ "Apply - TRADE Best Practice Benchmarking." COER. Center for Organizational Excellence Research, n.d. Web. 13 Dec. 2016. <<http://www.coer.org.nz/apply/trade-best-practice-benchmarking>>.

Stakeholders

The main beneficiaries of the project were KHDA employees (including all full-time, part-time staff and consultants). Project stakeholders included:

- **KHDA Employees:** KHDA employees were found to be Happy employees who thrived at work, and were more engaged, productive, focused, creative and healthy. Happier employees can serve our stakeholders better.
- **Teachers and Principals:** Happy school leaders and staff are likely to provide an optimal learning environment for the students. They are also believed to contribute to achieve the National Agenda target related to happiness: “City of Happy, Creative, and Empowered People”.
- **Investors and Partners:** KHDA partners, investors, and visitors have the opportunity to learn about KHDA’s best practices related to happiness and wellbeing and they can adopt similar initiatives in their organizations.
- **Students:** Promoting the health and wellbeing of students has not only a positive impact on their personal health, but it also has the potential to improve education outcomes, and instill a culture of creative thinking.
- **Parents:** Happy parents are likely to provide an optimal environment for children to thrive in their studies and personal lives. They also contribute in achieving the National Agenda target related to happiness: “City of Happy, Creative, and Empowered People”.

Whilst the project focused on employee happiness, it also intended to take significant steps to engage its stakeholders in order to share the institution’s approaches and promote health, happiness and wellbeing across Dubai’s society, particularly with the Education community.

Challenges faced

In the business world, the one thing you can be assured of is change. As the economy ebbs and flows, so must the strategies employed by businesses. In this process, resistance to change is simply inevitable. While every organization is different, there are some common best practices that can help to overcome resistance to new business strategies.

Resistance to change is the action taken by individuals and groups when they perceive a change that is occurring as a threat to them. Key words here are 'perceive' and 'threat'. The threat needs not be real or large for resistance to occur. In its usual description, it refers to change within organizations. Resistance is the equivalent of objections in sales and disagreements in general discussions. Resistance may take many forms, including active or passive, overt or covert, individual or organized, ; or aggressive or timid. It is considered the act of opposing or struggling with modifications or transformations that alter the status quo in the workplace.

By the actions you take when you introduce change to your organization, you can cause serious resistance to these changes. At the same time, with a proper introduction and adoption, you can minimize resistance and avoid the process of dealing with employees' resistance to change. However, resistance to change is usually inevitable.

As much as it is unwelcome, as much as it is an element that ought to be prioritized on any management's agenda. Sadly, it is known to threaten the success of any new endeavor of management change, and could, furthermore, slow down the pace or speed at which an organization adopts an innovative move. Consequently, it negatively impacts employees' productivity, relationships, and in some situations loyalty towards the organization.

Some commonplace strategies to overcome resistance to change include:

1. Communication about change; explaining and clarifying how the planned changes the organization is intending to embark on, will affect each employee's status and work situation. the more employees know and understand about the changes expected to occur, the more they tend to accept rather than reject them.
2. Setting up incentives: Giving justifications for employees to adopt the change, encourages them to accept what is yet to come. Planning bonuses, rewards, and/or prizes for employees will spur their motivation and enhance the way they will embrace change in the short term future.

3. Establishing an open-door policy: It is possible employees may not feel comfortable to openly discuss their opinion or issues about the change in a group discussion. Here comes the benefit of an open-door policy, where employees can privately, yet freely, express their thoughts or concerns around changes. After acknowledging these concerns, employers or managers can provide advice on how to deal with change, performing a role similar to that of a moderator who guides his audience towards a favorable objective.
4. Clarifying or asserting that change is inevitable: It is advised that managers clarify to employees there is no choice about change. They should know that managers will be there to support and help through the transition. Unfortunately, it becomes clear to those who ultimately cannot handle the change, to be no longer part of the organization.

With respect to the KHDA, many, if not all of the above commonplace approaches were addressed. From the KHDA experience, resistance to change was no surprise, and by no means, less profound. Verbal complaints were informally voiced at the commencement of the organization's initiative, in what was referred to as "pantry room chit chats". To professionally handle the resistance expressed by some of the KHDA employees, the latter created a team called the "Reset Panel" who was made responsible for the support and assistance found essential for those who were struggling with the new make-over of the institution. This panel was created to provide advice and support to those who were actually finding it difficult to adapt to the changes the institution was adopting. It also provided consultancy sessions to those who decided to leave the KHDA, and needed help searching for another job.

Outcome

As a result of the TRADE methodology application, there were various financial and non-financial benefits anticipated. These results could be based on the experiences of both staff and beneficiaries, and focused on stakeholder happiness across the board. In terms of non-financial benefits, there were improvements in the following areas:

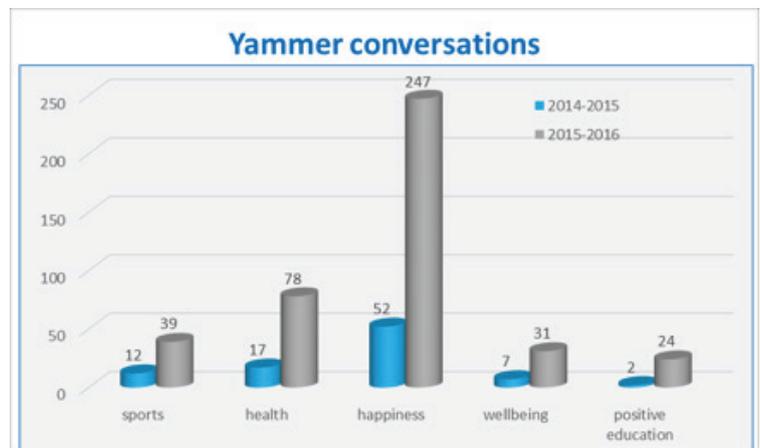
1. Motivation and engagement of employees.
2. Employee health.
3. Work life balance.
4. Personal resilience.
5. Innovation/creativity.
6. Customer satisfaction.
7. Student wellbeing.
8. Increased visibility for the KHDA as a role model.

This was to be measured using the ‘Happiness @ Work’ survey, which had been undertaken in 2015 and again repeated at different intervals in 2016 to compare results. As for results and benefits, the following benefits were to be measured to assess success of the initiative and it was found that, in most measures, the KHDA exceeded their targeted goal.

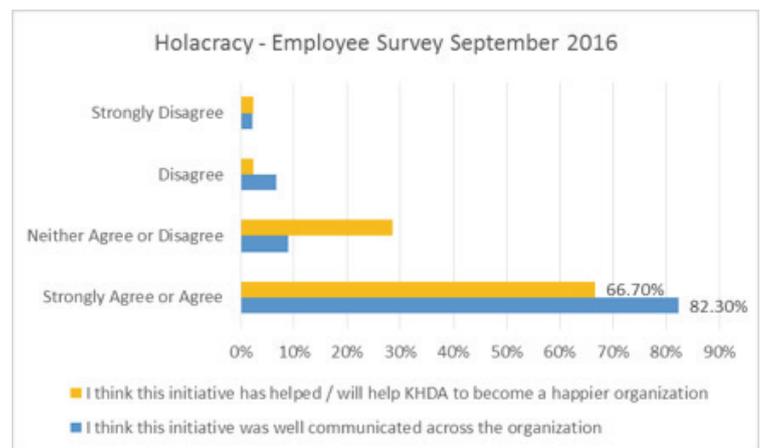
In relation to overall happiness at work, employees rated their happiness at 7.3 out of 10 in early 2016. This went up to 7.6, which is slightly higher than the goal of 7.5. Absence of stress levels and work life balance also exceeded expectations, moving from 5 to 5.8 and from 6 to 7.1 respectively.

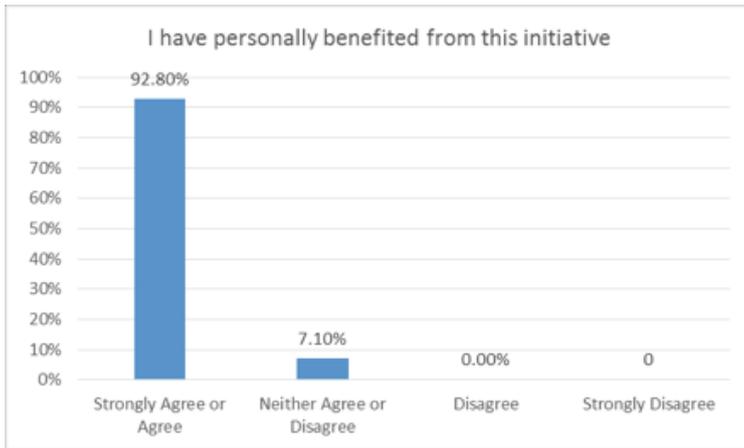
Non-financial goals also exceeded their targets. Employees personal health, happiness and personal resilience all improved reaching 7.3, 7.7, and 7.3 respectively. In terms of improved work environment, employees reported improved motivation and team work from a start of 7 and 6.4 to 7.4 and 7.1. These results are seen as the impact of initiatives like the Happiness tool.

In terms of Improved motivation, engagement & commitment of employees demonstrated increased levels of interest and engagement, which were reflected in their participation in the Authority’s social media portal – known as Yammer. As a matter of fact, conversations related to these topics have increased particularly on the portal, proving the efficacy of the latter.



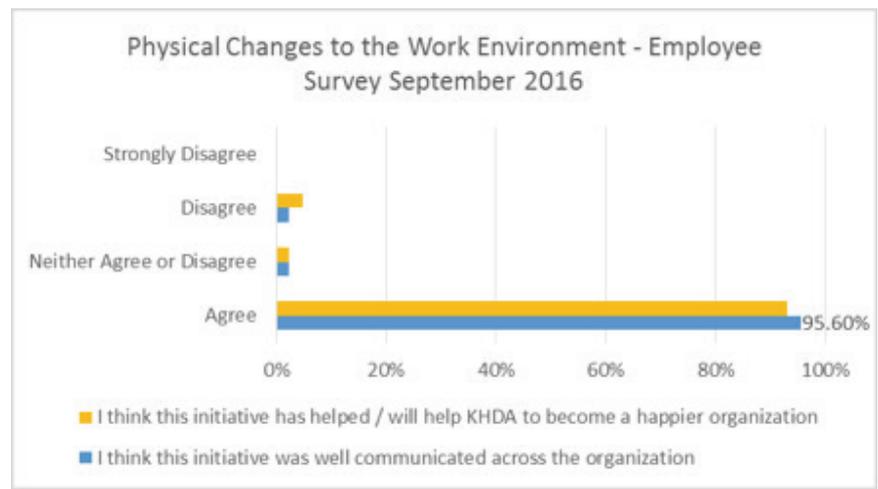
The Holacracy initiative was also found to be successful as 67% of KHDA respondents believed it made the institution a happier place, and 52% personally benefited from this initiative. This was also related to the results of the Board Meeting initiative, which was closely related to the implementation of Holacracy. The Holacracy initiative was highly appreciated, with the ‘organization well managed’ approval rating shifting of 8.1 to 8.3 over the course of 2016. Initially, only employees rated the ‘team well managed’ rating at 6.8, which shifted to 7.5, an impressive achievement.





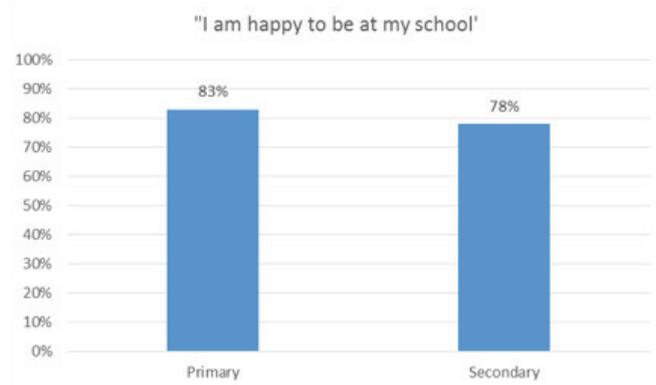
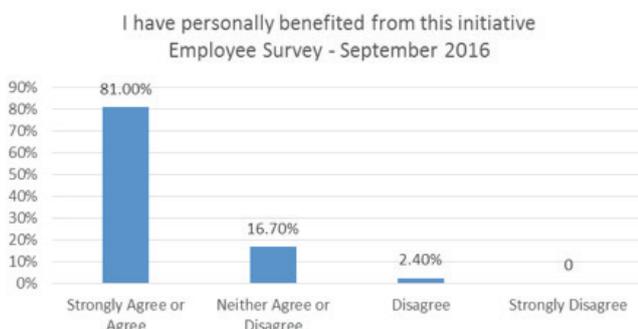
As for physical Changes to the Work Environment, most employees felt they had personally benefited from the initiative and that it improved the overall happiness of the KHDA team. In early 2016 the 'pleasant environment' was rated at 7.3, and by the end of 2016 this had gone up to 8.3.

As for the impact on stakeholders, the team improved students wellbeing and increased the percentage of students in good and outstanding schools by 2% (2014/2015 school inspection cycle Vs 2015/2016 school inspection cycle).



In the years 2014/2016 they raised the number of students in good/outstanding schools from 51% to 61% students. Additionally, they carried out the School of Hearts Survey 2016 (school climate survey with 9,000 responses at 40 private schools), which was the first ever survey to measure students' happiness. The School of Hearts initiative was highly successful, with 8.6 rating for 'societal benefits' moving up to 9.0 in 2016 alone.

They also Improved KHDA visibility as role model for workplace happiness measured as number of 'safari' visits (visits from government entities, semi government, private sector, education providers, students, hospitality sector, quality assurance associations and diplomatic delegations). In 2015, 35 delegations were hosted by the KHDA for benchmarking. In 2016, 51 delegations arrived at KHDA for benchmarking: 3 entities were implementing KHDA best practices to increase people happiness.



Lessons learned

The KHDA has clearly demonstrated a unique, stand-alone model of implementing the most innovative techniques in creating happiness among its employees and stakeholders. In this regard, the authority has certainly positioned itself as a benchmark for those who would like to follow it in its implementation of best human resource management practices.

According to the KHDA happiness team, the strengths of the project were based on the complete endorsement they were provided from their peers, top management, and partners. Mainly, the selection of a diverse group of team members from various departments lead to the expansion of perspectives and insights into the organization and its stakeholders. Secondly, they felt that the support of the partnership and research team was the critical primary step in allowing them to identify suitable benchmarking partners. This enabled effective knowledge sharing. Lastly, the role of the engagement team was highly prized as it implemented the initiatives within the school community.

The lessons learned from the experience highlight the importance of communication amongst team members and within the organization as a whole. Team members reported that the success of the projects implementation was largely due to their unique and comprehensive communication strategy. Additionally, the importance of organization and systematic documentation of benchmarking outcomes, and the resulting follow up helped solidify improvements. The KHDA's journey towards winning a seven-star award in excellence and innovation was no easy path to take. Facing up to its own share of obstacles and challenges, the authority succeeded in providing a positive impact on other government departments who wish to progress on a journey towards increasing happiness.

With a wide range of unconventional, controversial, and novel approaches of managing its physical environment, human capital, and off-premises activities; the KHDA's leadership impressively embraced the happiness philosophy introduced by his Highness Sheikh Mohamed Bin Rashed. Top management at the institution set the momentum and paved the path to make the KHDA a pioneer in the field of employee wellbeing, and a place for all its employees to thrive.

The KHDA's happiness model could very well serve as an enlightening case study, where a public sector organization identified and exploited its comparative characteristics to its own advantage. With effective communication consoles, devoted top management figures, committed employees, and the right strategic plan, the KHDA was able to allocate and effectively operationalize its resources in the most productive way possible.

Progress and Future Prospects

As the business world gets more and more competitive, organizations – being private or public – may find themselves having to compete in ways never seen predictable. The KHDA was no exception. To qualify for the DGEP excellence award, the KHDA was forced to shift to a more innovative thinking style and was asked to excel in attracting, retaining, and managing its employees, stakeholders, and what it referred to as “potential talent”. Hence, the authority found it inevitable to deploy state-of-the-art business and managerial tools – such as TRADE and others – that were to assist it in reforming its outlook to HR Management. With respect to the KHDA, its innovation and excellence pathway were not confined to a workplace-environment make-over; but rather it was a matter of embedding an organizational culture that valued unconventional techniques in managing each and every factor of production it possessed.

The progress the KHDA achieved was far beyond impressive; it was future-oriented, becoming a source of inspiration in the realm of innovation and human resource management. The KHDA's upcoming challenge will be to maintain and sustain what it has accomplished in this excellence journey. After all, innovation and excellence are regarded as evolutionary, non-linear, and interactive processes between the firm and its environment; and the KHDA succeeded in achieving just that.

Under the guardianship of The ‘Dubai We Learn’ initiative, the KHDA successfully benchmarked and implemented best human resources managerial practices in terms of happiness, in a way that was compatibly tailored to the organization’s agenda. The KHDA built upon and developed a culture of happiness by incorporating the TRADE benchmarking tool to identify its points of strengths and opportunities while eliminating weaknesses and threats. This perception was aligned with Dr. Abdulla Al Karam’s statement, (Director General of the KHDA), which said, “Dubai Future Accelerators has provided an important platform to boost innovation and create a futuristic city where new ideas are encouraged”. The KHDA is expected to witness further innovative ideas that will help solve future challenges and potentially have a significant impact on the economy and society.⁸

⁸ “Future Accelerators launches 2nd cycle with 11 new global challenges in vital sectors for innovative enterprises”. Dubai Media Office. Retrieved from <http://www.mediaoffice.ae/en/media-center/news/2/1/2017/dubai-future-accelerators.aspx>.

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