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Leadership Training CHANGE Champions

Module – How to address resistance

Recommended time: 6-8 hours

Structure:

Objectives

FGM and resistance to change

1. Understanding the resistance to change
2. Dealing with resistance
3. Resistance and communication skills

Conclusion

Objectives:

- Understanding why people are resistant to change
- Preparing the Champions to address resistance to change
- Preparing the Champions to face resistance from the community
- Learning to deal with resistance
- Learning to use understanding and communication strategies in order to reduce the level of resistance within the community

FGM and resistance

People resist to change. This reality has been proved more than once in different contexts: at a personal level, in work places and in cultural situations. As the name “CHANGE Plus” suggests, the goal of this project is to help bringing change in the cultural tradition FGM. Our Champions need to be prepared for the resistance they will experience from the community, as they are proceeding with the project. In this module we will treat two different kind of resistance: the resistance to change, as many practitioners want to maintain FGM; and the resistance to the bringers of change, included our Champions. It is very important for the Champions to understand the reasons why people resist to change and to learn how to deal with it. This requires from the Champions a lot of understanding and communication skills. The objective of this module is to provide the Champions with the appropriate preparation in order to be able to deal with the community’s resistance.

1.Understanding the resistance to change

There are more reasons why people resist to change. In this module we have selected three main reasons that we are going to analyze:

1. Change is related to the ‘unknown’
2. Change brings confrontation
3. Change affects your identity

Change is related to the ‘unknown’ and the unknown is “the oldest and strongest kind of fear” (Lovecraft 1920). People are afraid of change. Change involves something new which breaks with the past, something unknown that is going to happen. Nobody knows with certainty what it will happen after that change. The unknown is scary. FGM is a very old tradition and it has marked the story of generations, families and clans. For its practitioners FGM is ‘normal’ and ‘certain’. People say: “We have always done it, why should we change it now?” This statement may sound very superficial to us, but in fact it is a strong form of resistance. When FGM practitioners are confronted with change, they may experience the fear of the unknown. It is very important to

know the reasons why FGM seems to be so ‘certain’ and ‘normal’ to the community. For example: People say FGM helps girls to keep their virginity until the marriage. A change means to them the uncertainty of the results: Shall my girl lose her virginity? Shall my daughter go with all the boys around? Shall my daughter not being able to find a husband? Shall my daughter be dirty? Etc. This is the fear of the unknown and may be dealt with (correct and ensuring) information, which follows in the next chapter

The second reasons why people are resistant to change is that change brings confrontation. People do not like to be confronted, especially when this confrontation raises personal conflicts or conflict within the community. It is difficult to go against your family, clan and community. People who are confronted with change may think: What will they say? What will they think about me? Will they reject me? Will I lose my position in the community? Will they still respect me? Etc. Change brings confrontation with questions and realities that people do not like to face. Confrontation is the second reason why people resist to change.

The third reason we have mentioned is that change affects your identity. FGM is a cultural tradition and like every other cultural tradition, it strongly defines your identity. For some clans FGM is used to distinguish themselves (tribal marks) from other clans or to affirm their moral superiority on others (Gruenbaum 1996: 462). People also tend to reinforce their cultural traditions when they feel their identity is threatened. A FGM practitioner who is moving to a new town or country where FGM is not practiced may feel their identity at risk. They do not want to become like ‘all the others’, they do not want to lose their cultural specificity, they want to make it clear that they are different. This is why sometimes people tend to practice their traditions abroad even more than at home. While you are speaking with the community about FGM, you will hear people say: “We do not want to give up our traditions!”, or “We do not want to be westernized”. All these statements and positions are form of resistance to change and they all have to do with people’s (cultural) identity. “People do not resist to change. They resist being changed!” Peter Senge

Exercise:.....40 minutes

Write down a list of things or traditions that make you feel “.....” (fill your nationality or ethnicity). Now image someone telling you to change

one of some of these things. How would you feel? What would you think? How would you react? Discuss with the group.

2. Dealing with resistance

In the first paragraph we have seen some of the reasons why people are resistant to change. Now that we have the understanding of the resistance, it is important to learn how to reduce the level of resistance in order to make the change desirable to the FGM practitioners. Below a list of the most important ingredients to deal with the change:

- a. Familiarity
 - b. Information
 - c. Involvement
 - d. Create small wins
 - e. Communication skills
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- a. **Familiarity.** It can make a big difference whether it is an outsider or someone from the community who brings the change. Familiarity is given by sharing the same background, culture, religion, history, family, language, etc. This will help people to relax, to get confidence and to accept the change more easily as they will be less eager to think that change is an effort of Western or other cultures to affirm their power and superiority. This is why CHANGE Plus involves people within FGM practicing communities.
 - b. **Information** should emphasize the **need for change** and include **storytelling**. Correct and positive information is essential in order to ensure people that they do not need to fear the change. Things where people need to be informed about concerning FGM and the abandon of it are physical, psychological and social ones. What are the risks of FGM for the physical and mental health of the woman? What are the false cultural beliefs around FGM? What are the consequences of FGM? What are the personal experiences of people who have been victims of FGM? What are the stories of people who have changed this practice? What were the positive consequences of the change? Why change? What is the need for change? These are some questions you should address in

order to provide people with correct and positive information. Information meetings are very important in order to reach this goal, and should emphasize the need for change and include storytelling.

- c. **Involvement.** Another way to reduce the resistance to change is to let people participate in the process. Bringing them in contact with other people from their community who have made the change or letting them participate to prevention activities or other events will help them to take courage and go for the change.
- d. **Create small wins.** As already mentioned in the paragraph ‘information’, it is very important to let the people see the advantages they will gain by stopping FGM, such as: better physical and mental health, no fatal accidents or bleeding till dead of girls during the circumcision, etc. It may also be very useful to give some rewards or acknowledgement when people get involved in the process.
- e. **Communication skills.** Talking about FGM is not always simple. It is a very sensitive topic and a taboo in a lot of practicing communities. This is why it is very important to be careful how to pass the message, trying to not be judgmental and paying attention to your communication skills. In the next paragraph we are going to learn more specifically about communication skills.

Exercise:(30 minutes)

Two volunteers make a short act. The one represent a FGM practitioner who shows resistance to change. The other is the Champion who is bringing his/her message to change. Then discuss together about the performance of the Champion: What did he/she do very well? What he/she needs to improve? Did he/she show understanding, empathy and communication skills? Did he/she use correct and positive information including storytelling and emphasizing the need for change?

3. Resistance and communication skills

As bringers of change, the Champions and anyone who wants to stop FGM, may experience opposition from the family, clan and community. Critic, offence and exclusion are some forms of resistance they may experience. These are the challenges that the Champions could face during the CHANGE Plus program

and during their lifelong fight against FGM. Being blamed to be ‘the shame of the family’, ‘an enemy of the Islam’, ‘a betrayal of the community’; or being laughed because as a man ‘you should not interfere with a female topic’, are some examples of resistance to the bringers of change. The Champions should be ready for it, have a lot of understanding, empathy and using the right communication skills in order to face this resistance. They should not be judgmental and should be open for the dialogue trying to avoid dysfunctional discussions but being effective and persuasive in giving their message against FGM in order to win the confidence of the people and reach the goal. Below some verbal and non-verbal skills you should care of while speaking about FGM during a group discussion, information meeting or presentation:

- **Verbal skills:**

Convincing (good arguments)

Clear voice (i.e. not mumbling)

Speaking volume (not too soft, not too loud)

Speaking fluency (not too many silences, or “uh’s”)

Speaking rate (neither too slow nor too fast)

Vocal confidence (neither insecure tone nor dominant tone)

- **Non-verbal skills:**

Body movements (e.g. not too nervous, but walking and stay calm)

Appearance (e.g. not too closed/formal)

Gestures (e.g. emphasizing speech)

Facial expression

Use of eye contact

Exercise:.....(30 minutes)

Working in two, prepare ten minutes presentation. Now go in front of the group and pretend you are doing a presentation at an information meeting. Record yourself in order to evaluate your verbal skills. Discuss at the end with the group: How was the presentation? Was it clear what it is all about? How was her/his verbal and not-verbal skills? What would you advice?

Conclusion:

While fighting against FGM it is very important for the Champions to become aware of the resistance to change they will experience from the community. In

order to deal with this resistance the Champions should get the understanding of it and find ways to reduce it. This module offers some examples of the reasons why people resist to change and provides the Champions with some strategies/method and communication skills to reduce the resistance to change.

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