

HR Revolution – The Middle East Magazine

Interview with Amy Kates – Kates Kesler Organization Consultants

Interviewers: Mariham Magdy & Mahmoud Mansi

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HR Revolution Middle East: “We help our clients build their future organization, not just solve today’s challenges.” This statement is written on Kates-Kesler Organization Consulting website. Can you give us an example of how you were able to unleash organizations capabilities and lead them towards exploring their future potentials?

Amy Kates: Most managers and employees dread when they hear there will be a “reorganization” or a “restructure” or a “redesign” exercise. Their past experience is usually that leaders try to fix a business performance problem by changing roles and reporting relationships. This is disruptive. Rarely does changing the organization chart actually change the organization.

In our work we focus on designing to execute strategy. We work with leaders not to fix the past, but to identify the capabilities needed for the future. For example, we worked with a fast growing, global cosmetics company to launch products faster. This is an organizational capability, because to do it well requires a high degree of integration across almost all parts of the company. We had to work with them to change the system. They redefined the roles of the global teams that developed the product and the local teams that brought the product into the market. They changed the management and work processes that to speed decisions and alignment. They changed the metrics to encourage speed and collaboration. And, they gave people skills to work more effectively with colleagues across boundaries of culture, time zone, and functional area.

We are curious, Amy, how did you start your career, what was your first job? What did you learn most from it?

I grew up on a farm, but I always was fascinated by cities. I went to Cornell University and graduated with a Masters in City Planning. I immediately moved to New York City to work for the city government. For five years I helped the City Planning Commission and City Council make good decisions about how the city should grow and change. Although I love architecture, it was the complexity of the city that really interested me – how all the infrastructure, social, political, and economic systems work together.

I transitioned into the field of Organization Design with the same curiosity – how to make the strategic, technical, and people systems in a company work together. What I learned from my first career that still benefits me in my work today is an appreciation for power dynamics. Companies, like cities, are formed from a complex set of decisions in the formal and informal environment. In both fields, I see my work as helping leaders align on shared objectives and make well informed decisions.

Throughout your career, you worked with some of the icons of Organization Design like Jay Galbraith & others, now that you became a global OD icon yourself, how did this exposure shape your current approaches and views?

I met Jay Galbraith in the mid-1990s. At that time I was working with Diane Downey, who had a small organization development consulting firm. She was a fan of Jay’s and we frequently brought him into our clients. In 2001, he asked us to write a workbook, a how-to book on organization design. That was my education.

I learned the Star Model, which is still the core model in organization design. Jay was a brilliant thinker and anticipated many trends that are playing out today – the way that global organizations grow, the impact of digital on the shape of the company, and the need for agility and scale. Greg Kesler and I see our work as building on Jay’s foundation. As we consult, we continue to develop frameworks, methodology, and tools that allow line leaders and HR professionals to more easily do this work. We don’t try to invent something new, rather we ensure that tested and proven approaches are still relevant for today’s work. That is the “academic” side of our work and why writing and teaching are so important to us both.

Can you share with us more about Kates Kesler Organization Consulting history, at what point of professional growth did you decide to found it and with which objectives?

Greg Kesler and I joined together in 2010 with a shared vision that there was a need for an organization design firm that was focused on both delivering high quality consulting work and creating practical frameworks and tools for line managers and HR professionals. We both like to research and write and share what we learn. We’ve written two books together, based on the foundational work of Jay Galbraith, and put out numerous articles and videos. We’ve honed our methodology into workshops and webinars that have become the standard in companies around the world – from Google and Microsoft to Aditya Birla and Philips. We have a team of a dozen consultants – many of whom were OD leaders in their companies and our clients before joining us – and we work with CEOs and their teams around the world on major enterprise change projects. Greg and I have a wonderful partnership based on shared values of not just doing good work, but also contributing to the growth of the discipline.

How much is it common that organizations keep tackling other issues aiming to maximize their capabilities without noting to be having problems in their OD?

We often joke that our work is helping leaders design an “invisible, three-dimensional, abstract concept” called an “organization.” Tackling that is scary. It feels complex and overwhelming. And, because the field is fairly new, many leaders and HR staff don’t have experience with using the frameworks, methods, and tools needed to lead their organization through a disciplined, inclusive process.

So, it is often easier to address symptoms, rather than root causes of misalignments in the system. For example, consider a company that has a solid core business, but needs to accelerate innovation and new product development to meet changing needs of customers. We will often see clients try a number of tactics. They might create a new role – Director of Innovation. Or roll out a training program. Or culture workshops. Or idea contests. These activities are rarely sufficient, because if the system isn’t changed – power dynamics that drive decisions, management processes that set priorities, metrics that foster new conversations and behaviors – then we are unlikely to see a change in business results.

What benefits do organizations really gain when succeeding to build an effective OD capability?

Amy Kates: Honestly, it is unclear where Organization Design should live in today’s company. We believe it is an essential work for leaders. Understanding how to adjust the levers of organization is just as important as understanding how to develop strategy or talent. We see organization design as a mechanism of strategy execution, but most companies think in terms of strategy projects rather than on-going execution. And, it is seen as HR work, not the work of leaders.

So, org design is typically either given to the HR business partner or to a small group at corporate, usually in a Talent centre of excellence (COE). There are two problems with this approach. The HR business partner is busy and may only lead one organization design project a year, if that. This doesn’t build the depth of skills and experience needed. On the other hand, the COE group can bring expertise

and focus, but we often see these folks struggling to get into the business-based projects and find a way to add value.

An effective internal capability requires all three parties to play a role: line leaders to be educated in basic concepts and to believe that a holistic, inclusive design process will yield better results; a COE that provides expertise and tools and guidance to line leaders and their HR partners; and, HR business partners that can diagnose issues, lead projects, and effectively leverage their COE colleagues.

You partnered with Real Hands-on from Egypt to provide your Organization Design Certification in the Middle East, what encouraged you to work with them as a partner?

I am so lucky to do work that I am passionate about. I truly believe that good organization design creates positive work environments that allow people to make real contributions and gain satisfaction from their work. This is what drives me and my colleagues in Kates Kesler to not just consult, but to share our methodology widely. I teach in-house programs at our clients and public programs through Cornell. I also do a yearly seminar in an executive MBA program in Denmark.

When Maha Adel and Yasser Ghonimy from Real Hands On contacted me about doing a public workshop in Cairo last year, I was a little skeptical. As important as I think org design is, I wondered if the local market was really feeling a need for it. Were HR and business leaders in the region thinking about these issues?

I need not have worried. We had an amazing group of over 30 at our inaugural workshop from global and local business. We had HR and OD professionals, and CEOs and heads of Strategy. Real Hands On did a terrific job of setting up an ideal learning and networking environment. The group was experienced, sophisticated, and engaged in the topic. I learned a lot and I'm eager to come back!

After your recent visit to Egypt, what do you think the OD professionals in the region need to develop to better assist organizations working in emerging markets?

In the past three months I have been in Singapore, Cairo, Beijing, and Mumbai. Organization design and development are maturing fields and I see the same issues outside the US as I do here at home. My advice is the same whether working in a developed or emerging market, or with a legacy or start up business:

1. Know the business. Understand the strategy and how the business makes money. Where are the industry, customers, and competitors going? How is technology changing the work? Come as a curious, thoughtful partner and business leaders will always have you at the table.
2. Bring a systems approach. Have a toolkit that works for you, but also understand how systems work. It is like cooking. Anyone can follow a recipe, but if you understand a little about food chemistry then you understand the "why" between cause and effect.
3. Build your consulting skills. Get good at asking high impact questions. See the patterns across different situations. Facilitate others through self-discovery. Integrate diverse views and find common ground. Understand how to manage group dynamics and conflict.
4. Find a partner. I'm lucky to have a wonderful partner in Greg Kesler and a talented team around me. If you work inside a company, find an informal partner. Someone to share ideas with, review your work, coach you before a difficult conversation, and give you feedback on your deliverables. This work is always better with a second set of eyes on it.
5. Practice. You don't need a whole project to do an intervention and provide value. It could be in a conversation or in a meeting that you offer a framework that moves a group forward. The most

important skill to practice is your assessment and diagnostic skills. You can do that every day as you listen.

6. Reflect, share, and teach. Find ways to reflect on what you are experiencing and turn it into learning. Write blogs, teach new employees, volunteer at a college or for a conference. Thoughtful sharing is the best way to learn.

You currently became the Head of Organization Design Learning on LinkedIn, tell us more about that.

This was a great honor. I was approached by LinkedIn Learning in early 2017 to develop and film their course on organization design. I was assigned a producer and we met every week for an hour to develop 17 scripts. When a video is just three minutes long, every word has to count. And, sentences have to be easy to say. It was a new kind of writing for me.

I went out to California for three days of filming in August 2017. It was fun to see how much goes into even a simple video. Lighting, make up, direction, filming, and teleprompter. The videos were released a year ago and have tens of thousands of views already. What makes me so happy are the messages I get every week. From around the world I hear from people who have watched the course and are now eager to learn more or who now understand a concept for the first time.



About Amy Kates

Amy Kates is a Managing Partner at [Kates Kesler Organization Consulting](#), a boutique organization design firm based in New York City. Kates Kesler has been named by Forbes as one of America's best consulting firms for the past three years. Amy serves as a trusted advisor to business leaders in successful companies around the world, working with them to assess organizational issues, reshape structures and processes, and build management capability. In addition to her consulting work, Amy is a Visiting Fellow to the Government of Singapore for 2018 – 2020, a Resource Partner to the Center for Effective Organizations at the Marshall School of Business at USC, and a member of the i4cp Thought Leader Consortium. She was selected by [LinkedIn Learning](#) to develop their video course on organization design. She teaches in the Danish Technical University MBA program and through Cornell University. Amy is the co-author of four of the best-selling books on organization design, two with Jay Galbraith and two with Greg Kesler and a [video series](#) on YouTube. She also serves as a board member for [Educate!](#), an innovative non-profit focused on secondary school reform in east Africa.