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Three ways Middle Eastern organizations relied on culture to navigate during crisis

In moments of extreme uncertainty, culture becomes operational infrastructure. Here's how organizations across the Middle East relied on it to protect people and sustain performance.

The recent geopolitical crisis in the Middle East has put organizations based there under intense and ongoing pressure. Some have managed to weather the storm better than others. What has been the differentiator?

Based on our extensive work across the region and discussions with a number of executives over the past three months, we believe it comes down to whether business leaders were able to rely on, trust in, and commit to their organization's culture. Those who were able to do so, we found, were able to resist three common instincts that often drive organizational response to crisis:

- The instinct to prioritize business performance over employee needs;
- The instinct to wait for certainty before communicating; and
- The instinct to add additional mechanisms of control rather than simplify.

Crises do not change organizational culture; they expose it. Our broader work on performance culture consistently finds that alignment across purpose, strategy, culture and structure creates the conditions for sustained execution.[1] The crisis in the Middle East exposed this reality more clearly.

Over the past several months, the Middle Eastern corporate leaders who navigated the sudden and urgent tensions of the war most effectively were able to resist these common responses and instead act based on clarity about their priorities—because their cultures had already equipped them to do so.

Lesson 1: Protecting people strengthened performance— it didn't distract from it.

One common organizational instinct during crisis is to focus first on operations, customers, and commercial performance.

Across the organizations where we interviewed leaders, the opposite occurred. People's safety became their first principle—because they understood that sustained performance depended on employees believing the organization was appropriately committed to their and their families' safety.

Leaders at ADES, which provides jack-up rigs for the oil and gas industry, have long described safety as "a license to operate," measuring culture not through high engagement scores but also through low incident rates. In an environment that was suddenly much more operationally tense, not a single incident was reported. Their focus on safety extended beyond physical well-being to financial security. When one of the employees' greatest concerns was life insurance in a conflict zone, ADES proactively worked with relevant providers to put contingency plans in place for extreme circumstances, giving employees confidence that they and their families would be protected.

At OiLSERV, an oilfield services company, the message from the CEO was simple: "*Do not expose any employees to situations that you would not expose your brother or son to.*" That principle became the practical guide for every operational decision.

At Alshaya, a retail franchise operator, leaders anchored every decision around two principles: protect our people and protect our business. If those priorities ever came into conflict, people came first. The CEO and chief people officer communicated frequently with frontline employees via their mobile phones, keeping them informed as the situation evolved, while Alshaya's leadership entrusted their operational teams in each country to make decisions at a local level. During the crisis, employees themselves created a song expressing how proud they were of the way the organization had supported its people. Alshaya also launched a "Donate a Day" campaign, with employees contributing several thousand leave days to colleagues

1 Salim Earle, Holly McLeod, and Atif Sheikh, "What it takes to build a lasting performance culture," Heidrick & Struggles, June 22, 2026, heidrick.com.

stranded outside their country of work so they could continue to receive pay until they were able to return.

For the American University of Sharjah, safety meant protecting students, faculty, and administrative teams while maintaining academic continuity and integrity. At Aramex, employee assistance programs were expanded to include family members, recognizing that crisis extends well beyond the workplace.

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Leaders further emphasized tactics that many organizations had long used to promote collaboration and mutual support within teams: buddy programs, regular line manager check-ins, and smaller project team connections became an essential lifeline. While utilization varied across employee groups, leaders consistently observed that employees valued connection as much as formal support.

Leadership visibility reinforced these commitments. We know from our work across the region in organizational culture that it is what leaders do—not what they say—that gets replicated across an organization.[2] Employees we spoke with during this culture work repeatedly described solidarity and visibility from leaders as one of the defining characteristics of organizations that navigated the crisis successfully.

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Several leaders who had the opportunity to leave the region chose instead to remain alongside their frontline teams during a period of significant uncertainty. As Bahrain came under attack and aluminum producer Alba's operations faced direct threats, executive leadership and management remained engaged, led from the front, supported employees, and ensured business continuity. Their visible leadership and decisive actions reassured employees, inspired confidence, and reinforced Alba's culture, where people, safety, and well-being come first.

Across these organizations, culture became most visible in the way work got done under pressure. The organizations that sustained performance did not separate humanity from commerciality. They understood that protecting people was not a pause in performance—it was the condition that made continued performance possible.

Lesson 2: In the absence of certainty, provide clarity

One of the strongest instincts for many leaders during crisis is to delay communication until more information is known and the situation is less fluid. Leaders worry about changing facts, incomplete information, or saying something they may later need to revise. However, across the organizations we interviewed, the strongest leaders did the opposite. They recognized that while certainty was impossible, clarity was essential.

Clear communication, leaders said, helped create a perception of stability when actual certainty was impossible. Rather than attempting to answer every question, leaders established simple principles, communicated with rhythm and consistency, and created confidence by remaining visible. Organizations which had worked to build a culture of trust, transparency, and mutual buy-in found that these values paved the way to build this confidence during crisis.

Aramex approached communication through what it called the three Cs: care, clarity, and consistency. The company launched a well-being survey in relation to the crisis, drawing from the survey to shape its approach to communication during the crisis. The CEO delivered regular Monday video messages addressing safety, children's schooling, family well-being, operational resilience, innovation, customer impact, and the role of managers. The CHRO reflected that "It was rhythm and consistency, not volume, that mattered." Employees valued not simply the frequency of communication, but the relevance and authenticity of the themes being discussed.

1 For more on the role of culture in driving performance, see Rose Gailey, "Aligning Culture with the Bottom Line: How Companies Can Accelerate Progress," Heidrick & Struggles, heidrick.com.

At the American University of Sharjah, clarity was critical and complicated because leaders were communicating simultaneously with students, faculty, parents, embassies, government authorities, and regulators. Leaders "marched in lockstep" with the National Emergency Crisis and Disaster Management Authority, Sharjah authorities, and other official bodies. When the university committed to delivering the remainder of the semester online, their trust that they could execute on that commitment depended not on predicting the future but on communicating clearly, acting consistently, and following through on commitments.

Core42, an Abu Dhabi-based sovereign cloud and AI infrastructure company, said to us, "We believe effective communication is not only about sharing information, it is about creating space for honest dialogue." They launched Unfiltered at Work, an initiative designed to give employees a direct and open channel to share their questions, concerns, and ideas. By listening actively and bringing these insights into leadership discussions, leaders were able to shape the company's communications, policies, and decisions in ways that reflected employee experiences. The initiative helped Core42 build trust, stay connected to employee sentiment, and remain responsive during disruptions.

None of these organizations waited for perfect information before communicating. Instead, they reduced ambiguity by giving employees something more valuable than predictions: a clear understanding of priorities, principles, and direction.

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Lesson 3: The fastest organizations didn't add controls—they removed complexity

External pressure naturally encourages organizations to tighten control. Leaders tend to add approvals, expand governance, create more committees, and ask for more reporting in an effort to understand and reduce risk. While these responses are understandable, they often have an opposite effect from that intended. Excessive complexity slows execution, diffuses accountability, and increases organizational fatigue precisely when speed and judgment matter most.

Leaders at the organizations we interviewed consistently resisted this instinct. Instead, they simplified priorities, clarified decision-making, and gave leaders permission to adapt as conditions changed. The most effective organizations were the ones whose leaders knew they could rely on their culture, not new procedures or policies, as the bedrock upon which they could quickly build an effective response.

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OiLSERV described extensive scenario planning across the leadership team during the crisis—not in order to create elaborate contingency plans for every possible outcome, but to ensure decisions could be made quickly as circumstances evolved. Leaders explored multiple scenarios together and understood the implications for the business during the crisis and were therefore able to respond quickly and effectively to real-world events.

Core42 recognized that supporting its people meant rethinking how it worked, with some of their existing policies no longer reflecting the realities their employees were facing. Rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach, they adapted their work arrangements to provide greater flexibility and support, helping employees navigate unprecedented circumstances while enabling the organization to continue delivering for its customers. "Progress at the scale we work towards," they told us, "always starts with our people."

For Alshaya, the right approach looked different: given that 85%–90% of the business operates through stores and frontline operations, the company deliberately chose to stand as one team on core employee policies rather than introduce different flexibility policies across employee groups. Their #OneAlshaya banner united the company under the principle of "if our stores are open for business, everyone in Alshaya is open for business."

Excessive complexity rarely reduces risk. More often, it delays decisions, obscures ownership and leaves leaders exhausted rather than effective.

As one leader reflected, the challenge was not simply to respond to the crisis. It was to continue making good decisions while living through it.

That is the essence of organizational adaptability. It is not the absence of process. It is the ability to simplify enough so that people can continue exercising sound judgment when circumstances refuse to stand still.

Culture is shaped long before the crisis arrives

Every organization within the Middle East faced the same external shock. What distinguished those that sustained performance, we have found, was not the sophistication of their crisis plans or the speed of their operational response. It was the culture they had built long before the crisis arrived.

The organizations that emerged strongest consistently resisted three instincts that pressure naturally creates. They did not treat people and performance as competing priorities. They did not wait for certainty before providing clarity. They did not respond to uncertainty by adding complexity. Instead, they held the tension between humanity and commerciality, created clarity through simple principles and consistent communication, and simplified decision making so the organization could continue adapting while executing.

Too often, organizational culture is viewed as a set of values, an engagement initiative or a long-term transformation program. Crises, however, make the reality of culture overt: no one can miss the fact that culture is operational infrastructure. It determines how quickly decisions are made, how confidently people act in the absence of perfect information, and whether an organization becomes more resilient—or more fragile—under pressure.

None of the organizations chose the circumstances that tested them. What set the most effective apart was that culture wasn't something they reached for once the crisis hit—it was already load-bearing.

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