



ORIGINAL PAPER

Organizational Change: Framing the Issues

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Abstract:

The study of change is a major concern at present in all fields of science. Traditionally, in philosophy and socio-human sciences, the concept of change was approached as opposed to that of stability, with intense debates about the desirability and importance of order and stability vs. the unpredictability of change. While in classical approaches to organizational change the conceptions that favoured order, stability, and routine prevailed, modern approaches recognize the decisive role of accepting change for the development and progress of organizations. In the field of organization development and organizational becoming nowadays strategies are sought and devised in order to align the organizations not only with their rapid inner changing, but also with the external multiple, complex, and dynamic environments. Starting from an outline of the factors of change and of the term of change as it has been conceptualized in sociology, the present paper aims to delineate a general framework for addressing organizational change. In this regard, after discussing the relationship between organizational change and the social and economic environment and delineating the main areas and agents of change in an organization, the various types of change in the organization and the models of their approach are addressed. Furthermore, since the resistance to change is a common and omnipresent human and social phenomenon, including at the level of groups and organizations, the paper approaches also the causes and manifestations of change resistance, as well as the possible measures for combating this phenomenon, in situations where the change is beneficial and necessary.

Keywords: *change; organizational change; organizational becoming; change management; change resistance.*

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Introduction

Presently, the study of change is a major issue in all fields of science. While traditionally, in philosophy and socio-human sciences, the concept of change was approached as opposed to that of stability, the importance and desirability of order and stability vs. the unpredictability of change being intensely debated, modern approaches, especially those regarding organizational change, emphasize the decisive role of accepting change for the development and progress of organizations. Thus, change is treated as the normal condition of organizational life (Mintzberg and Westley, 1992; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002).

Nowadays in the field of organization development there are sought and devised strategies designed to help the organizations to adjust both to the rapid inner changing and to the external multiple, complex, and dynamic environments (Van de Ven and Poole, 2005). That is why factors such as time, history, organizational experiences and actions are taken into account and links between change processes and organizational performance are assessed (Pettigrew, Woodman and Cameron, 2001). Change is an ongoing process and some scholars (e.g. Tsoukas and Chia, 2002), in order to highlight the pervasiveness of change in organizations, talk about 'organizational becoming'.

This paper intends to outline a framework for addressing organizational change. After some conceptual delimitations, the relationship between organizational change and the social and economic environment is discussed and the main areas and agents of change in an organization are delineated. Moreover, the various types of change in the organization and the models of their approach are addressed. Since the resistance to change is a common and omnipresent human and social phenomenon, including at the level of groups and organizations, the paper approaches also the causes and manifestations of change resistance, as well as the possible measures for combating this phenomenon, in situations where the change is beneficial and necessary.

Conceptual framework

The idea of 'change' began to be debated in philosophy in the eighteenth century as an expression of the conception that the unity of the substance is in fact revealed by the continual change (Cassirer, 1990). Such a viewpoint was in contradiction with the philosophical conceptions of the past, according to which the world that is undergoing change is merely an imitation of the world of universal and necessary ideas (Ferreol, Cauche, Duprez, Gadrey and Simon, 1998: 197).

Generally speaking, change refers to the transition from one state to another. Specific for the change is the fact that it can itself be seen as a state, even transient, which should be considered as such, but also addressing at the same time the differences between two successive states of the system. Identifying changes involves seeing to what extent there are modifications in the underlying structure of an object or a situation over a period of time. Any reporting of change means therefore also to see what remains stable, as a benchmark for measuring the transformations.

Overall, socio-human sciences, especially sociology, approach change at two distinct levels: a) macro-social, i.e. at the level of global society, referring to growth, evolution, development, progress, regression; b) micro-social, i.e. at the level of certain subsystems or components of society, such as organizations. The two levels are not necessarily and consistently put into relationship, some sociological theories focusing on macro-social changes, and others on the micro-social ones.

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Although many theorists have tried over the last two centuries to develop a general theory that explains the nature of all social changes, it is now admitted that no theory based on a single factor can clarify the diversity of the human social evolutions (Giddens, 2000: 560). However, there can be identified three main factors that have constantly influenced change in society (ibid.): physical environment, political organization, and cultural factors. While the physical environment has especially implications on the evolution of social structure, the political organization plays a key role in producing social change. Furthermore, the cultural factors have a significant, even primordial influence in triggering social change. For example, the technological innovations, scientific discoveries, cultural diffusion, religion, etc., are all cultural factors that can become catalysts of social change.

Thus, one can say that changes in the social sphere can occur either as a result of extraordinary challenges of physical living conditions or as a result of political actions (including a variety of factors such as governmental and legislative actions, implementation of political and social programs, changes of political regime, social movements of various forms such as protesting, reforming, or revolutionary ones, etc.), or as an outcome of cultural factors, such as the intentional or unintentional consequences of technological innovations, scientific discoveries, the emergence of a new religion, and so on.

The relationship between organizational change and the social and economic environment

Being part of the social environment, which is constantly changing, either slower or more accelerated, organizations must also continually adapt to the changing environment. Thus, adaptability to environmental change has now become a fundamental condition not only for the success of the organization but also, often, for its survival. The scope of environmental changes varies from country to country and region to region, but there are also global changes affecting companies worldwide, such as the crisis of energy resources, environmental pollution, etc.

In order to maintain and develop, organizations have to create structures capable of anticipating the trends in economic and social development, in general, as well as the structural and content-related market changes, in particular. Strategic planning of the organization, including that of human resources, is the most important managerial activity with long-term effects. Performing organizations allocate considerable financial resources for developing strategies, as well as for adopting policies on human resources (Stanciu, Ionescu, Leovaridis and Stănescu, 2003). Organizational changes in recent decades have led to awareness for the need for organizations to create structures to adapt to the environment. In this respect, forms of management have been developed, such as the management by objectives (MBO) or management by results (MBR), participatory management, total quality management (TQM), as well as structures to facilitate and expand internal and external communication.

The current economic, social and political environment determines, in the context of globalization, an increasingly fierce competition, so that the success of an organization depends on its ability to differentiate itself from the competition through a multidimensional contribution. These multiple dimensions refer to (Huțu, 1999): providing value and satisfaction to customers; ensuring the prosperity of owners and investors; ensuring the well-being of members of the community to which it belongs. In order to address all these dimensions, organizations need to make a series of assessments

regarding(ibid.): their own structure; the flow of fluxes of information and resources, the efficiency of the organization and the level of performances, the adaptability of the organization to the external environment, the capacity of the staff to use new technologies, the ability to finance its own restructuring, the willingness to invest in training and retraining of the staff, etc. Organizations also need to be prepared with strategies that make the organization able, on the one hand, to adapt to the transformation of the environment, and on the other hand, to continue uninterrupted the process of achieving the objectives.

Change in relation to organizations can also be seen in the reverse direction: not only the external environment contributes to changing organizations, but also organizations themselves can contribute to changing the external environment, for example by creating and spreading new technologies or products that, in time, can become dominant, can change people's way of life and habits and can even modify the social and natural environment to a wider level.

Areas and agents of change in an organization

Organizational change can aim various transformations in different areas of an organization, consisting of transitions from states that start to be regarded as deprecated to desired, up-to-date states, suitable to the dynamic and the challenges of the environment.

In order to describe the major changes undertaken in key organizational parameters, such as strategy, structure, technology, the distribution of power, and the people, there are used terms like 'quantum change' (Miller and Friesen, 1984; Greenwood and Hinings, 1993), 'second-order change' (Bartunek and Moch, 1994) or 'organizational transformation' (Wischnevsky and Damanpour, 2006). The different conceptualizations of organizational change have however the similar view that this process is consisting of major changes in multiple dimensions (Van de Ven and Poole, 2005).

Among the most important dimensions that could be subject to change in an organization can be mentioned: basis of the organization (its purpose, nature and level of activity, legal status, ownership form, sources of financing, ways to diversify production, etc.); strategy (planning and directing designs, short-term and long-term goals, schemes and procedures, the vision for the future direction of organization, etc.); tasks and activities (the range of products and services offered, sales markets, beneficiaries, suppliers, etc.); structures and management processes (internal organization, work flow, decision-making procedures, control methods, information systems, the flow of intra-communication, and so on); the technology used (technological processes, office technology, equipment, materials and type of energy used, etc.); people (staff and leadership – type, size, characteristics, structure, skills, conducts, attitudes, values, motivations, behaviour, work efficiency, etc.); organizational culture (influences and processes, values, traditions, leadership style, hierarchical structures, formal and informal relations, etc.); communication (internal and external communication models, image changes, strategies of dealing with the extrinsic environment, etc.).

Currently, many companies and organizations are aware of the importance of change and encourage the entrepreneurial spirit of their members. Some companies even have special departments dealing with innovation, as well as with proposing changes and the required measures to implement them. Such departments comprise people with innovative and avant-garde spirit.

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However, other members of the organization may prove to be also agents of change, without necessarily working in specialized departments. More and more organizations are open to the proposals of such entrepreneurial employees, knowing that nowadays novelty and creativity are the keys to the success of an enterprise.

Not only those who have innovative ideas in terms of production are considered to be agents of change, but also those who come up with proposals to restructure and to improve the quality of work, the climate in the organization, etc. From this point of view, it is expected that leaders and managers of organizations are agents of change, but other employees also should be encouraged to take the initiative.

There are also situations in which organizations hire agents of change from outside. Based on an audit, observation and analysis of the organization's work, they make specific proposals for changing the aspect of the company for which they were hired.

Types of organizational changes and models of approach

Some changes are foreseeable, such as those related to 'natural', evolutionary processes, like changes that are caused by adaptation to current technology and, in general, any change aiming the modernization of organization, personnel or leadership reshufflings, etc. Although not always entirely, such changes can be in the plans and strategies of the organization. However, other changes, especially those determined by factors from the external environment, are unforeseeable, and the organization must be able to cope with these as well. In the following section, some possible types of organizational change and their approaches are discussed, taking into account criteria such as the predictability and planning of change and the degree of participation of the organization's members to change.

Unplanned change. There exist not only predictable, but also non-predictable changes, which are usually not of an evolutionary nature. This happens when organizations have to react to new situations. For example, a crisis (economic, political, social) that suddenly bursts may limit the sales of a company; the behavior of competing firms may lead to a drastic reduction in prices; a strike can force an organization to raise wages and therefore production costs, etc. Such changes can be characterized as adaptive or reactive.

Even if an organization did not plan and often did not foresee the need for such changes, once the events are triggered, it must react before it would be too late and operate the change to respond to events or trends that threaten the organization, or, on the contrary, offer new, unexpected development opportunities.

Planned change. An organization must be permanently prepared to adapt to the general social and economic environment. However, it should not only wait for unforeseen events in this environment to make unplanned changes. This organizational vision would be a sign of an inefficient management. In order to develop, and even to survive, an organization must be able to 'look into the future' and to take into account the possible evolutions, and the strategies for adapting to them.

Planning does not completely eliminate unplanned changes, but it helps the organization to properly prepare for some transformations that can be anticipated, thus reducing the number of situations in which hastily changes need to be made, in an atmosphere of panic. Moreover, planning the change allows many organizations to 'create the future', for example by contributing to technological progress or by

launching new products and services, and this is possible when the organization proposes and plans to achieve ambitious targets.

To successfully plan change in an organization, a series of elements and questions should be taken into account:

Evolution and transformations in the environment (economic, social). Related questions: How stable is the economic/ social/ political environment? Which changes are currently taking place in this environment? What are their implications for the organization in question? And so on.

Evolution and cultural developments. Related questions: Which changes are taking place in customer preferences and/ or in their purchasing behaviour? Which are the trends as regards consuming? Which are the main interests and concerns of people today? Etc.

Aspects related to the own organization. Associated questions: What changes need to be made to the structure/ production/ climate/ staff/ leadership of the organization in order to achieve the goals? To improve activity? To maintain the market segment and/ or to expand it? And so on.

Issues related to the implementation of the changes. Linked questions: What is the time frame and the implementation plan for change? Implementation must be done in stages? Can we allow a long time change or should we act quickly? How will be the relationships between the various changes that the organization intends to make? How will be people's reactions to these changes? And so on.

The last mentioned issues are of great importance. It has been found (Cascio, 2012: 87) that both organizations and people can only absorb a limited volume of change over a certain period of time, and this "absorption capacity" may vary by country, region, or people. Therefore, the proper pace of change is one of the main issues to be taken care of and a critical dimension of change planning and achievement.

Imposed change. It refers to that type of change in an organization that is initiated and imposed solely by its leadership. Sometimes such changes are made from a position of power (for example, the staff reductions), in situations where consultations and negotiations would make it difficult rather than facilitating the process. Also, some minor measures and regulations do not justify and require lengthy consultation, and in this case they are implemented through imposed changes.

Another context in which such organizational changes take place is represented by emergency situations, in which case discussing and planning of change is difficult or even impossible. There are situations where making a decision to change is crucial, and any delay can be fatal to the organization. In such cases, the change is imposed from top to bottom. However, after resolving the crisis period, it is recommended that the leader/ manager explain to the subordinates the reasons why he/ she acted as such. Otherwise, they risk losing the adhesion and confidence of the group.

Participatory change. This type of change can be considered to be the opposite of the one described above. It involves modifications that are made through consultations and debates, and decisions that are made by all members of the organization. It is a form of change to which more and more organizations are now joining. Comparing with the process of imposed change, the process of participatory change is much slower, because consultation and participation of members of the organization requires time and effort. However, such changes are considered to have more sustainable results. Furthermore, participatory change helps leadership to benefit from people's experience and creativity, which is harder to achieve if change is imposed.

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The process of participatory change may vary with the organizational levels involved. It depends on the nature and complexity of change, the maturity of the organization, the motivation and team spirit of the working group. Generally, as well in this case, the direction of the process is from the top to bottom levels of organization: at a first level, the leader or the consultant hired by the organization informs the staff concerned about the possible measures that may be useful and about the need for change; at a second level, consultations are held with certain key people in the organization to get suggestions, criticism and/ or a prognosis of staff reactions to change; at a next level, ways are sought for all members of the organization to be actively involved in formulating, planning and implementing change; these pathways usually involve the formation of teams, working groups or committees that discuss and participate in the different aspects of change.

Negotiated change. The significance of this form of change is close to that of participatory change. The focus in this case is however more on negotiation than on participation. Negotiation can take place between groups in the organization directly involved or at least interested in the issues covered by the possible change. The negotiation can be understood simultaneously as: a process through which a person, group or organization succeeds in obtaining what he/ she/ it wants from other people/ groups/ organizations who, in their turn, want something from the first; an interaction between two or more parties with different interests, following which, through discussion, an agreement can be reached; the process of adjusting the viewpoints of different parties so that from an ideal solution to reach a real solution for solving a problem or conflict.

Negotiation is a prerequisite equally for achieving goals, resolving conflicts, obtaining agreements, and the dynamics of an organization. It is always done through communication. Negotiation is a voluntary activity. If some people or groups do not want to negotiate, then they should not participate in the negotiations. But if there change, participation in the organization's life and decisions, solving problems, reducing or eliminating certain existing tensions, etc. are aimed or desired, then negotiation is needed, because often the interests of the parties involved are divergent. If the interests or needs of the stakeholders involve, alongside divergent areas, also common areas, then it is preferable to focus attention on these common areas so that, through discussions and decisions involving inclusive compromises, gains and losses on both sides, a consensus is reached.

In general, at the level of an organization, the negotiated change is combined with the participatory decision, through which the managers, together with the executors, try to find: ways of regulating the activity; opportunities to improve future work; solutions for different issues. It is recommended that leaders and managers to be receptive to the idea of dialogue and negotiation with employees. This does not only increase the probability of receiving support from them, which facilitates the process of implementing change, but it also avoids the tension and conflicts, that are harmful for the organization.

Resistance to change

The resistance to change is a common and omnipresent human and social phenomenon. The term was introduced by Kurt Lewin (1947) as a systems concept, designating a force that affects managers and employees equally, that tendency of a system to continue its current behaviour, despite the attempts to change that behaviour

(Harich, 2010: 37). The intensity of the resistance to change of groups and organizations depends on their degree of cohesion, their organizational structure and/or their traditions and habits. For example, the church, the military, or the educational institutions have proved to be highly inert and reluctant to change, in comparison to other organizations that have a more flexible structure and are not so strongly anchored in traditions (Giddens, 2000).

It has been observed that, within companies, employees show resistance both to changes that directly affect the 'stability' to which they have become accustomed at their workplace, such as those related to their situation, the pace of work, the work conditions, etc., and the changes that do not directly affect them, aiming some neutral aspects, such as the structural and organizational ones. Moreover, employees show resistance to change even when it comes to issues that would be beneficial for them. The causes of this phenomenon are psychological, both individual and collective (Dent and Goldberg, 1999). Among the causes of change resistance we can mention:

Lack of belief that change is necessary. Unlike managers, who have an overall perspective on the organization, employees have a perspective that pertains only to themselves in the organization. Therefore, especially when the purpose of change is not properly explained, they do not see the necessity of change, and thereby as a result they tend to reject it.

The change is perceived and/or experienced as unpleasant. This happens especially when the change is proposed by agents from outside the organization, even if the measures do not necessarily affect the employees directly. This phenomenon occurs particularly when the employees have not been consulted about the pattern of change, and thus they feel 'betrayed' by the decision-makers, feeling therefore any suggestion of change as unpleasant.

Fear of inability and failure. Many employees are not convinced that they have the ability to meet the new requirements and the new roles required by the change. Even if managers succeed in persuading the subordinates regarding the need for change, this in turn can cause anxiety as it involves trainings, retraining, possibly more work or amendments to work, new and unfamiliar tasks, etc.

Lack of confidence and of positive feelings for the promoters of change. It has been found that resistance to change is directly proportional to the lack of popularity of those proposing change – whether they are change agents from inside (managers, people from specialized departments, etc.), or they are external change agents (consultants, experts, etc.).

The more those people who propose changes are more popular, and they have the respect and confidence of the employees, the less is the resistance to change and the chances for its successful implementation increase significantly.

If the resistance to change is too intense because of negative feelings toward the promoters of change, it is recommended that intermediary agents are involved for introducing the change measures. Optimally, for the success of the change, these should be neutral agents, at best respected persons within the organization.

The comfort given by perpetuating the existing practices and habits and the fear regarding unknown. Habits represent the most important factor against change. Thus, changes are often rejected simply because they disturb habitualness, the already installed routine, the customs, and the work procedures employees are already accustomed to.

To combat these causes, in order to successfully plan and implement change, effective management communication is essential. Therefore, the phenomenon of

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resistance to change requires special attention from those who initiate change, because any change is a renouncement from stability, which, associated with the impossibility of controlling the future announced by change, can cause uncertainty, dissatisfaction, discontent and, last but not least, anxiety. To avoid these phenomena as far as possible, a series of measures are recommended, including:

- streamlining the communication process between those involved in the change process; timely, realistic and responsible communication diminishes the likelihood of hostile reactions to change;

- development of a change project by the initiator of the transformations, in order to anticipate and control the stages of change or unwanted effects; without such a project the quality of change could be questionable;

- correlation of the pace imposed on change with the context of its generation; the idea of an instant change is extremely tempting, but rarely possible;

- involvement and effective participation of individuals in the process of change; so they have the opportunity to assume both the acting side and the effects, be they successes or failures; here an important role is played by the stimulation of thinking and creativity, simultaneously with diminishing the fear of mistakes;

- last but not least, resistance to change may be diminished if those who initiate and sustain changes are the first to accept those changes and change themselves, according to the principle “change begins with ourselves”; only by this those who are asked to accept change may be convinced to change their attitudes, behaviors, practices, habits, etc.

Conclusions

The main focus of this paper was to delineate a general framework for addressing organizational change. This concept was approached starting from a general outline of social change, whose research is currently – as has been over the last two centuries – a major issue in the field of socio-human sciences. As a first conclusion, it can be emphasized, that although many theorists have tried to originate a general theory that explains the nature of all social changes, such a theoretical model remains to the stage of a utopia. At present scientists agree that social changes and evolutions are too diverse, complex and unpredictable to be explained by a single theoretical model. That is why over the time various theories were developed in order to describe, expound, interpret and understand certain social transformations or particular aspects of human developments and changes.

The social environment is one that is continually transforming. As part of this environment, organizations must also constantly adapt to these dynamics. Adjusting to the environmental change has nowadays become a fundamental condition not only for the success of an organization but also, often, for its survival. Therefore, in the field of organization development there are sought and devised strategies designed to help the organizations to adjust both to the rapid inner changing and to the external multiple, complex, and dynamic environments.

Strategic planning of the organization, including that of human resources, is seen as one of the most important managerial activity with long-term effects, since in order to maintain themselves and to successfully develop, organizations have to create structures capable to anticipate the trends in economic and social development, in general, as well as the structural and content-related market evolutions, in particular.

Organizational change is a major process through which the organization adapts to the dynamics of the external environments, as well as to the inherent, also continuously changing internal evolutions. The targets of this process can vary, regarding transformations in different areas of the organization and consisting of transitions from states that start to be regarded as deprecated to desired, up-to-date states, which are considered more appropriate to the challenges of the external and internal environment.

Because currently many organizations are aware of the importance of change, they encourage the entrepreneurial and innovative spirit of their members. Moreover, they develop strategies and adopt measures to combat the frequent phenomenon of resistance to change, i.e. that tendency of a system to preserve the current state, although a new state would be more beneficial, and even when some attempts to change are made. This phenomenon can be observed both in systems as a whole and in its parts and elements, both in social as well as in individual attitudes and behaviours. The causes of this phenomenon are various, including the fear towards unknown, the comfort given by habits, the perception of change as unnecessary or as unpleasant, the fear to fail, as well as the lack of trust and of positive feelings towards the promoters of change. The more there is assessed which of these causes most accurately explain the resistance to change in an organization, the more the appropriate measures and strategies can be adopted to combat this phenomenon.

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