ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE: A MATTER OF INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP BEHAVIOR TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract: *Contemporary life is raising a plethora of challenges for all organizations. Therefore, flexibility and continuous change ought to be their priorities. The main problem is how to actually implement change and make it work. The answer suggested by this article is that by transforming people's behavior and attitudes one can actually lead to organizational change. However, some insight into the prerequisites needed to transform individual and work group attitudes and behavior is required. As a result, in order to identify and list a set of principles that should play the role of the 10 Commandments in any organizational change process the aim of this article is to take a theoretical approach to this issue.*

Keywords: *organizational change, behavior transformation, attitude, group dynamics*

1. INTRODUCTION

Organizational change is a salient feature of organizational development [1]. In this respect, the research in the field [2] defines it as a proactive search and identification of development opportunities. Hence, organizational change involves identifying and/or formulating flexible answers to the economic, social, technological and political dynamics of an organization's external environment [3].

Regardless of its target (*i.e.* changing an organization's legal status, organizational services/product diversification, redefining individual and team tasks and activities, adapting to new technology, restructuring and remodeling organizational processes, reinventing organizational image [4] or its type of response to external challenges (*i.e.* reactive or proactive) the most important resource needed in the transformation process is the human one [5]. As a result, its values, attitudes and behaviors are of utmost importance. Their proper understanding and management with tangible results in terms of employee involvement and commitment to organizational objectives are the keystone in supporting and accomplishing the change desideratum. On the other hand, poor management or disregard for the aforementioned aspects both

at group and individual level can lead to apathy, passive, active or, at worst, aggressive resistance [6].

Based on the above observations, the aims of this article are threefold. First, a theoretical model describing the link between organizational change and individual and group behavior transformation will be briefly overviewed. Moreover, a set of principles grounded in behavioral psychology, underlying any description of human behavior in terms of values and attitudes and enabling the view on organizational change as an unfolding process will be presented. These theoretical assumptions will contribute to the identification of a number of factors that need to be taken into account when approaching attitude (and, inherently, behavior) transformation as a necessity for organizational change. All this will result in a number of laws that should govern any organizational change attempts.

2. KURT LEWIN: A THEORETICAL MODEL OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

One of the theoretical models of great impact upon research and practice in the field of organizational change was developed by Kurt Lewin [7]. The propositions underlying it can be formulated as follows [8]:

➢ Individual behavior is a merger between personality traits and environmental features. Therefore, the best means to change behavior is to change the environment.
➢ Facilitating behavioral change at individual level and, as a result,

at organizational level, involves creating an imbalance in the field of forces that lead to a behavioral *status quo.*

Concerning the first hypothesis, Lewin emphasizes that understanding and predicting individual behavior requires grasping the interdependence between an individual and his conditioning environment. The latter has an important say in consolidating social habits and group norms and rules that underlie individual and organizational behavior. Therefore, long lasting behavioral changes and transformations consist in deconstructing the equilibrium of these habits and norms. Moreover, the more valued the latter are, the greater the change effort required. Hence, the ensuing dilemma: what actions are required to produce behavioral change not only at an individual level but also in the environment to which belongs the individual.

Lewin's solution is to first change group norms by creating a state of disequilibrium (the **unfreezing** stage, as called by the theorist) in these forces, namely a feeling of dissatisfaction and discomfort. The ultimate aim of such an action is to undermine the self- satisfaction feeling induced by group norms acceptance. In practice, such action is possible by confronting the individual with a set of information that comes in contradiction with his expectations. However, the information must be linked to what the same individual values most [9].

Second, a transition stage (**moving**) is needed. The latter involves identifying unproductive behavioral patterns, defining the

desirable ones. In this respect, changes in organizational processes and structures are required. Some of the most important include the following: redefining roles, responsibilities and organizational relationships, developing skills and competencies, encouraging change promoters and removing change resistance agents [10].

As a result of the two previous stages a new organizational equilibrium (**refreezing**) is needed. The solution towards creating it consists of consolidating organizational culture and structure, as well as the reward system.

The conclusions that can be drawn from this theoretical input can be formulated as follows:

➢ Individual behavior change is possible by acting upon the group norms enforcing it.
➢ Behavioral change rests upon identifying and acting upon the values upholding the attitudes of affiliation to group norms.

As a result, organizational change must be first and foremost grounded in understanding individual and group values, attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, to accomplish it one needs a better theoretical understanding of these concepts and of their interrelationships.

3. INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR: SOME THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS

Social systems and social behavior (and in the case of organizations individual and group behavior) can be defined and explained in terms of values, norms, communities and ensuing individual roles. From this point of view, Homans [11] formulates a number of theoretical propositions derived from behavioral psychology:

➢ **Behavior is the result of the benefits it yields.**
Thus, individual behavior is described by a set of actions undertaken in a given environment. Their consequences may be positive ones (such as rewards, incentives, positive reinforcers) or negative ones (such as sanctions, punishments or other negative reinforcers). Therefore, behavioral alternatives are modeled in accordance with the results of initially made decisions.

➢ **Social behavior is an exchange process.**
From this point of view, the exchange process can be defined as the social interaction between behavioral systems. Such an interaction, also known by the name of "*action and reaction*" [12], is grounded in the benefits gained by an individual from another individual's behavior and it takes the form of sociability, cooperation, competition, etc.

The theoretical principles accounting for individual and group behavioral variations are formulated as follows [13]:

➢ **The success principle:** the more frequent an action's reinforcement, the greater the likelihood of that action to be repeated.
➢ **The principle of stimuli similarity** upholding that similar situations yield general reinforcing effects. Thus, if a certain stimulus was used as an action reinforcer in the past, the

more future stimuli resemble that specific stimulus, the greater the likelihood for an individual to perform identical or similar actions to the one previously reinforced.

➢ **The value principle:** the more valued an action's result, the greater the likelihood of reiterating that very action.

➢ **The deprivation/sufficiency principle**: the more frequently used a reinforcer, the less valuable the latter becomes to an individual.

➢ **The aggressiveness/approval principle:**

- when the reward or sanction received for a specific action contradict the individual's expectations, the latter will react emotionally. Hence, the likelihood of an aggressive behavior increases and, in the end, its results may be positively valued by that person. (the aggressiveness principle).

- when the reward for a specific action meets or even exceeds the individual's expectations or when an action is not sanctioned as expected, the likelihood of valuing the results of the ensuing behavior and, hence, of repeating it increases. (the approval principle).

Referring to the latter principle, Homans introduces the distinction between reflex and voluntary behavior. Thus, if in the initial stages an emotional outburst can only be a matter of reflex behavior, the positive reinforcement of its results may lead to future voluntary behavior.

The above principles are based on the hypothesis of a personal history of positive and negative reinforcers and, inherently, on a complex set of expectations derived form them. As a consequence, these principles are important to remember when attempting to induce organizational change since they underlie a "*spontaneous order*" [14] within social systems and are strongly connected to reinforcement strategies.

Two concepts complementary to these principles are necessary to be understood before taking any change effort. These are: *expectancy* and *value.*

As far as expectancy is concerned, the latter is the result of previous experience and influences future behaviors. It cannot be held under scrutiny like behavior but it establishes the values underlying behavioral variables and thus plays an important role in influencing behavior. As a result, alongside with its positive or negative assessments, it is an inherent component of attitudes.

Value, from the perspective of the above principles, is defined as the frequency of the choices made by an individual to perform or not a series of actions based on the benefits or costs they incur at a personal level. These costs and benefits are nothing but means and desirable goals [15], even if in an idealistic definition they are equaled to universal values such as equality, freedom, etc. [16] or individual ones like self- development, recognition, love, security, etc.[17]. Thus, even though generally speaking values are described as more abstract and all-inclusive compared to the attitudes they uphold, this article will be referring to values in terms of the

costs and benefits an individual attaches to his actions.

An important argument in favor of such an approach is brought by Muzafer Sherif and Carolyn Sherif [18]. According to them, the assessment of an individual, object, situation (in other words, the attitude) does not depend on the quality of the arguments presenting the advantages and disadvantages, but on its alignment with an already existing attitude and on the results it may have upon future individual actions (in other words, on the costs and benefits).

4. ATTITUDE CHANGE: A PREREQUISITE FOR BEHAVIORAL CHANGE

A definition of attitudes highly relevant for the purposes of this article suggests the following [19]:

"When we talk about attitudes we actually talk about what a person has learnt as a result of his integration into a family, group, or society and, hence, about what enables him to reject transitory reactions in favor of a constant and characteristic manner of acting. As a result, such a person can no longer be neutral in assessing the surrounding environment and therefore it includes it in the dichotomic categories of pleasant- unpleasant, favorable-unfavorable, agreement disagreement".

The more frequent an object (*e.g.* a person, place or problem) is assessed, the more likely a certain attitude to emerge (the concept of attitude accessibility) [20]. Thus, an attitude of high intensity (*i.e.* highly in favor or against) is the result of an automatic association (an association which in its turn is the result of a continuous process of learning and updating) between the features of an object and its assessment in terms of the strong emotions it yields. On the other hand, a low intensity attitude results from the association between an object and its medium to neutral emotional assessment. In this respect, it is important to emphasize that an individual may be familiar with an object's features without automatically associating them with their positive or negative evaluation.

The conclusions emerging from the experiments done in order to appropriately describe the concept of accessibility and, inherently, the relationship between behavior and attitude [21] are as follows:

➤ The more frequent the mental association between an object and its emotional assessment, the more complex their interrelationship.

From this point of view, the object of love or of hatred is associated with negative or positive feelings, as the case may be. Thus, the more automatic the association is, the more intense and the more influential the attitude at a subconscious level for individual behavior becomes.

➤ Humans are more likely to pay more attention to the objects associated with accessible attitudes.

In other words, the more intense the feeling towards certain objects, the more likely for those objects to draw our attention.

➤ Accessible attitudes act as filters for information processing.

The likelihood of processing information in a biased manner is

heavily influenced by the automatic activation of attitudes when encountering real life situations. The more associated the latter with powerful feelings (whether negative or positive), the more likely for them to act as triggers for attitudes.

As for the factors that contribute to attitude change and, inherently, to behavior transformation they are divided into four categories [22] (the **message- learning approach**): the source, the message, the receiver, the target.

Concerning the source of the message aimed at changing attitudes and behaviors, its influence depends on:

➤ Credibility: a highly credible source is more likely to influence a receiver. From this point of view, the assessment criteria for a source's credibility are competence and honesty.

➤ Source's attractivity for the receiver. The latter can be best assessed by the following criteria: familiarity, similarity with the target and liking. Thus, a liking, physically attractive or similar source is much more convincing than its less attractive alternatives.

➤ Power. From this point of view, a source perceived as able to reward or to punish can influence a lot publicly or privately held opinions.

As for the message target [23] there are two important factors used by any receiver to process messages, namely: motivation (defined as the degree of commitment and the need to learn) and competence. The more interesting and relevant a problem is, the more motivated a receiver is

to listen to a source's message and, eventually, to change his attitude and behavior. Moreover, the greater the need to understand certain issues is, the more open the receiver is to message processing. In this respect, competence plays a major role in maintaining or changing attitudes: the more knowledgeable someone is, the more difficult it becomes to convince that person.

The impact of a message aimed at transforming an attitude/behavior depends on the quality of arguments and on the conversational style (i.e. fluency, rhetorical devices, etc.) chosen to present them.

5. ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE - A MATTER OF INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP BEHAVIOR TRANSFORMATION. SOME PREREQUISITES

Based on the theoretical input overviewed in the previous subchapters some fundamental prerequisites for organizational change can be formulated. They are as follows:

➤ Change involves undermining the self- sufficiency feeling by helping individuals and groups unlearn some attitudinal habits;

➤ Change is a matter of interrelationships and that, in its turn, is facilitated by organizational infrastructure;

➤ Change is synonymous to learning by continuously questioning individual and group habits and norms;

➤ Change is a process of discovery, of testing and validating alternatives (first, the ones

pertaining to individual and group attitudes and behaviors and second, the ones related to an organizations' mission and objectives);

➤ Change is the result of taking responsibility for the consequences of one's behavior on the other individuals;

➤ Change is a matter of honesty to oneself and to the others;

➤ Change is a matter of competence;

➤ An individual's motivation to change depends on the costs/benefits ratio.

All of the above prerequisites are based on interaction. The latter is actually the keystone to organizational development and change [24].

Therefore, in order to understand how organizational change can take place by transforming individual and group behavior one first needs to understand the organizational scripts that generate this behavior and its underlying attitudes. Hence, the goal of organizational change ought to be the rewriting, the renegotiation of those scripts and of the contracts they generate for each and every individual. Thus, by meeting the prerequisites above a coherent contribution of an organization's employees to the latter's attempts at changing itself becomes possible.

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