

## SCHOOL MANAGEMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF CHANGE

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**Abstract:** *In recent decades, societies in general and education systems in particular have undergone significant changes. Change is not something they have not experienced before, but the present times' complexity and pace are anew. School systems face global, cross-nation challenges, which affect schools in most parts of the world (to a greater or a lesser extent), as well as local challenges, in different areas or countries. There are challenges that involve not only optimization work or streamlining, but also major changes in the school, often showing a high degree of radicalism unknown until now (Păun, 2017: 116). The extension of the school analysis from the perspective of the organizational model has enhanced the identification of variables that can support the optimal functioning of the school. When analyzing the school organization based on theories and practices in the field, the following questions arise: What is change and how does it occur in the school organization? What are the factors that generate change and resistance to change?*

**Key words:** *management; change; learning organization; school manager.*

### 1. Change in the school organization

Mainstream literature provides several definitions of the concept of *learning organization* - in what follows we shall present those that highlight the characteristic elements of such an organization and are relevant to what is understood today by *learning organization*:

- the organization characterized by in-depth thinking in relation to organizational issues, concerned with restructuring through the individuals who make it up (Simon, 1969);
- the organization that develops an understanding of reality, observing the results with great caution (Hedberg, 1981);
- the organization in which a group of people work together to enhance their collective capabilities in order to achieve the intended results (Senge, 1990);

The analysis of these definitions is indicative of the fact that the learning organization is featured by adaptation and innovation so as to increase efficiency through individual and collective learning.

Senge (2012: 27) endorses the phrase *learning organization* and defines it as that organization in which a group of people continually boost their capacity to create the results that they truly desire, in which new models of thinking are nurtured and cultivated, in which common aspirations are set free, and in which people are continually learning to do everything together.

According to Senge, the learning organization is characterized by five dimensions, five core disciplines, in the sense of areas of personal development that deserve to be scrutinized and practised over a long period of time: systems thinking, mental models, team learning, building shared vision, personal mastery.

Handy (2007: 213) considers that the learning organization can mean two things; it can be a learning organization and/or an organization that encourages its people to learn.

The reason we need schools as learning organizations is related to the transition from planned to continual change. Even if there is no general consensus on what *learning organization* means, we do know that it is a good direction to follow by all organizations, including schools.

Păun (2017: 122) considers that what brings the school close to other organizations is its characteristic of a learning organization, and what distinguishes it from other organizations is the fact that it generates learning, being an organization that performs a particular type of work - "travail de l'humain sur l'humain" (Tardif and Lessard, 1999).

Change is something that has been experienced before, but the today's unprecedented complexity and pace of change is anew.

Joița (2008: 68) notes that although changes in education and in education management have always been the rationale for educational theory and practice, they still become the object of a specific management i.e. change management. They themselves are subject to the management standards of analysis, design, implementation, evaluation and regulation.

Schlesinger (Kotter, 2008: 35) claims that it should be borne in mind that there is nothing more difficult to complete, with less chance of success and more dangerous to control than initiating a new order of things. In every school institution that wants to be effective, an agent has the obligation to assume this role of change manager, doing away with proven inefficient systems, changing mindsets, triggering new institutional behaviours.

We spend a large part of our lives in organizations, and the changes that take place within them affect us in one way or another. Vlăsceanu (2003) considers that to understand how and why changes occur means, in fact, to exercise our ability to predict what is going to happen and, possibly, to influence the direction or magnitude of changes, but, above all, to know how (and where) to invest our resources in a smart way.

Change is a process rather than an event (Fullan, 1993), it is a process associated with a timeframe, an evolution of different states, and be they natural or artificially induced.

The best known approach to change is attributed to Lewin (1951), who explains change by analyzing the force field. He considers change to be a dynamic balance of forces that, on the one hand, puts pressure on change and, on the other hand, determines resistance to change.

Another perspective is that offered by Crozier (1964) who, premised by the idea that change is a construct, state that it does not happen naturally; several types of changes are identified:

- Change through crisis and adaptation underlies the idea that in the life of an organization there are periods of crisis that fuel the stability of the organization, without being frequent. In this context, crisis means adaptation, which does not necessarily imply a change in the deep structures, but appears as a form of extension of periods of stability;

- Change through learning is based on the idea that any change is determined by discovering and acquiring collective capabilities, new ways of reasoning, new ways of living together, in this case change becomes a learning process;

- Change as development is a variant of change through learning, with an emphasis on existing resources and previously initiated (ongoing) transformations.

At the school level, organizational change aims at important changes in the structural elements of the organization with major implications on the behaviour of all members.

The school, operating in a constantly changing organizational environment, requires the training and exercise of skills of forecasting and of influencing the nature of change so that the human resources are used effectively. More often than not, the logic of the social actors and the logic of educational ones do not converge because the internal logic of education is the result of its history (Bourdieu, 1970), the result of successive systematizations that underpin pedagogical practices, attitudes and mindsets that tend to self-preserve and self-reproduce, relatively independent of external pressures and influences.

Change is a process that does not take place randomly, research in the field confirming that change is based on an analysis of areas of action.

Vlăsceanu (2003), in an attempt to explain the mechanisms of change at the organizational level, makes a synthesis of its main characteristics: the source of change can exist at the intra-organizational level or outside it (the environment); change / development strategies are forced to take into account a wide range of variables: the size of the organization, competition relations, changes in the environment; beyond the dependence of the organization on the environment, its change can also be seen as a way to create change, thus emphasizing the proactive side (not only the responsive one).

Păun (1999: 41) proposes two types of change from an organizational perspective:

- Preventative, predictive change before the problem arises, the drizzle being preferable to the thunderstorm (in Druker's terms), this type of change protects the organization from disturbances and imbalances;

- Corrective change following the occurrence of certain dysfunctions in the functioning of organizations;

Bogathy (2004, drawing on Mintzberg, 1978), distinguishes between inevitable, emerging change and deliberate change, planned by the members of the organization:

- Emerging changes occur spontaneously, under the influence of changes at the social, political, economic, intra-organizational or inter-organizational levels, but bear no consequences on the identity of the organization.

- Planned changes are deliberate and have two basic objectives: to prepare the organization to face the changes in the environment in which it operates and to increase the degree of behavioural adaptability.

In a constantly changing world, the use of the model of planned change by the school organization can be a solution for its development. The advantage of this type of change consists in practising change that determines the development of adaptive and flexible behaviours, which can be effective tools for the management of external environmental pressures.

Stoll and Fink (1992) identify two models, starting from the specificities of changes in the educational field:

- Top-down changes - changes initiated by senior management, developed as an educational policy by obedient school headmasters and disseminated in schools through bureaucratic networks;

- Top-down and bottom-up changes - involve institutional restructuring in order to foster implementation decision making in schools that are in line with the general education policy and with centralised decisions concerning resources and staff. This model provides guidance and financial or other kind of support, also encouraging

individual schools to go for the change and adjust to the context, leading to effective change in schools.

Depending on the dominants of the organizational culture and the particularities that individualize them, organizations can opt for different strategies of reaction to change (Constantin, 2004: 236):

- Conservative strategies in which any change is perceived primarily as risky, the organization reproducing the same behaviours and the same practices. Such a strategy features narcissistic culture organizations, with a mindset marked by the refusal to question the internal situation, showing a weak interest in things and events outside them, and a great interest in what constitutes their own vision of the world.
- Rationalist strategies aim at change by activating, in particular, yield-related values. These strategies are found in organizations that have a defensive culture. Compared to narcissistic organizations, defensive organizations are less open. This type of culture is specific to traditional organizations.
- Personalistic strategies, as well as rationalist ones, want to change the situation through emphasis on human values, trying to achieve the change through intervention on the social system, working conditions, level of staff satisfaction. This type of strategy is specific to organizations showing a clan culture.
- Decision-making strategies are those aimed at simultaneously improving performance and human values. They allow for the emergence of innovative practices. They are encountered especially in organizations with an adaptive and visionary culture.

School organizations react to change through a combination of personalistic and rationalist strategies. The adoption of a decision-making strategy in the face of change could take place in time, once the decentralization of education has been achieved. Schools will need to open up to continual evolution, develop their organizational capacity to seize opportunities and adjust their structures to these opportunities.

In the school organization, the identification of the attitude towards change represents the first step in a diagnostic approach to the introduction of some changes.

## **2. The school manager as an agent of change in the school organization**

In a school organization, headmasters are the ones who promote change, they are the ones who should first know the conditions that determine change and understand the attitudes and motivations that create it.

In the Romanian school system, many changes could not occur or did not have the expected results because very often the level of motivation was inappropriate or low.

There will be no change in school organization if psychological conditions are not taken into account. Even if the changes are logically justified, they may not occur if the conditions experienced by employees are not considered: anxiety, insecurity, conflict, stress.

From the perspective of the attitude towards change, the school organization is made up of three groups of people, with different expectations and mindsets: conservatives, moderates and radicals. It is very difficult to initiate and implement change in the context in which all those who have been successful will oppose. The desire for change is related to attitude. Conservatives do not oppose change, they rather reject the idea of being changed. The ability to change of moderates and openness to the perspective that change offers will support the changes introduced by the leader.

The role of the school manager as an agent of change has become important in the context in which schools have undergone major and significant changes in the last two decades. The often contradictory political changes have always brought about changes to the level of educational policies, putting considerable pressure on school organizations in Romania.

For school managers, as agents of change, there are a number of recommendations in the literature, with respect to change in the organizations to which they can relate in building any practical approach (Mullins, 1993; Sparrow in Cooper, Cartwright, Earley, 2001, apud. Pânișoară and Pânișoară, 2004):

- Changes do not happen easily, especially in a school organization which is recognized for conservatism, so there is need for a well-designed, coherent programme.

- A situation or organizational culture cannot be changed by merely stating that you want to produce a change. Many of the Romanian educational reforms of the last decade have been perceived as belonging to the ministers of education and not as part of systematic and coherent actions, very often the teaching staff did not see the purpose of such changes.

- The changes must be made in a climate of trust and involvement, which will keep the members of the organization united. The interference of political parties in the school life has had detrimental effects on the relationships between appointed headmasters, often on political grounds, and other teachers.

- The members of the organization must feel that they are part of the change, must play an active role in the decision making in relations to the changes that will take place. In the context described above, it is almost impossible to build team work to implement change;

- Changes need constant managerial support, but in the Romanian schools the management change often occurs with the change of the political parties that are part of the government, so that few headmasters manage to achieve the objectives they set in the institutional development project. People generally do not adopt or give up values very easily, in the same way old habits turn into new skills over time, hence, long-term thinking is absolutely mandatory.

- The need for changing attitudes and behaviours requires additional effort for the agents involved in the process of change, therefore the introduction of a system of incentives is required, in support of a programme meant to introduce change.

The differences between the theoretical requirements of change and the practical reality of the school organizations are sharp, which means that the efforts should be directed towards raising the degree of professionalization of the human resources and towards professional leadership.

The scientific promotion of change in the school organization is due to the belief that when managed adequately, change is no longer a threat, it is an opportunity, it is the very source of improvement (Antonesei, 2000: 31).

The headmaster involved in the process of change must display a behaviour similar to that described by Argyris (1985), as an effective behaviour of the manager in the process of change, which s/he opposes to ineffective behaviour (see Iosifescu, 2001: 69).

**Table 1. The actual behaviour of the manager**

<i>Behaviour</i>	<i>Response</i>	<i>Results</i>
<i>Ineffectiveness</i> - not defining the objectives; - maximizing the gain and minimizing the losses; - minimizing the expression of feelings; - permanent display of rationality.	- people become defensive, inconsistent; - the feeling of vulnerability develops; - manipulative actions predominate; - the existence of mistrust; - not taking the risk or taking a very high risk; - retention of information; - power-centered behaviour	- limited tolerance for ambiguity; - unquestionable results; - distancing people from results
<i>Effectiveness:</i> - emphasis is placed on interpersonal relationships (explicit manifestation of mutual dependence); - common control of task accomplishment is accepted; - protection of feelings becomes a shared responsibility; - issues and results are discussed, rather than people-related issues	- building self-confidence and self-esteem; - development of individual and organizational learning; - decrease of the defensive character of the relationships and of group dynamics; - the confrontation of ideas becomes free and open	- increased ability to experience new situations; - informed choices; - intense emotional engagement

Source: Iosifescu, 2001

The literature on general management (Prodan, 1999: 172-174) designates the type of manager concerned with change by the word *transformational*. S/he uses higher rank motivations, takes risks, clearly communicates his/her new vision, believes in intuition, is confident in the success of change, recognizes the need for change (proposes new performance standards, proposes changes in methodology and style, even sets up a promoters' group, continuously stimulates any new managerial ideas, thinks in line with the team, enhances cooperation.

### **3. How prepared were school managers to deal with all the challenges in a pandemic context?**

The emergence of the pandemic was a challenge for the entire education system, and the identification of alternative solutions had to be done *ad hoc*, depending on the existing resources and so as to reach as many students as possible by efficient means. Headmasters were primarily responsible for coordinating, managing and monitoring learning activities immediately after the suspension of face-to-face courses.

How prepared was the school as a learning organization to cope with the unforeseen changes caused by the pandemic? How prepared were school managers to deal with all the challenges in the pandemic context? The crisis that the Romanian schools went through during this period, the lack of a legal framework to regulate the activities carried out in the school (teaching and administrative alike) made the headmasters face many challenges in organizing activities and managing multiple risk situations. We mention below some areas in which school managers encountered such difficulties, specified in the study mentioned above (<http://www.ise.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Invatarea-la-distanza-Raport-de-cercetare-august-2020.pdf>):

- assuming (individual) responsibility by headmasters in making decisions regarding the organization and supervision of distance learning activities:

Examples of challenges faced by headmasters in organizing and coordinating distance learning during the suspension of face-to-face courses:

- very high individual responsibility in decision making, given the fact that it was more difficult to consult the entire teaching staff;
- organizing the Administrative Board and the online Teachers' Council via Microsoft Teams; adjustment to new situations in a very short time; assimilation of information that underwent daily changes (according to headmasters' opinions).

- **Law enforcement and meeting administrative requests**

Examples of challenges faced by headmasters in organizing and coordinating distance learning during the suspension of face-to-face courses:

- faulty and changing legislation; lack of procedures; lack of specific provisions for vocational education in terms of online activity; lack of coordination at the national level;
- imposing measures that are difficult to apply in the "architecture" of schools in Romania;
- lack of regulations for all types of education (e.g. vocational art schools, additional education);
- the high amount of paperwork;
- numerous reports to submit to the county school inspectorate (according to headmasters' opinions).

- Deficient educational infrastructure: lack of an educational platform in the school, lack of specialized staff to administer the educational platform, restructuring of teaching activities and of the timetable so that the platform will run smoothly.

- **Involvement of the human resources in the school.**

Examples of challenges faced by headmasters in organizing and coordinating distance learning during the suspension of face-to-face courses:

- lack of a computer engineer; lack of a system administrator / computer engineer to coordinate a single platform at the school level; teachers' reluctance to carry out online activities (for "fear of being exposed to the inappropriate behaviour of students hidden behind pseudonyms or of hackers);
- lack of digital skills of teachers;
- lack of experience in working with students online before the suspension period;
- preparing online activities (selecting the right tools for classes, preparing for the lesson, adapting messages and content, all of which require time, patience and commitment from teachers) (according to headmasters' opinions).

#### **4. Conclusions. Recommendations**

The role of the headmaster as an agent of change in the school organization will determine changes in his/her training as a manager. We synthesize the problems outlined in the management of the school manager training, in terms of conditions, criteria, content, strategies (see Joița, 2008: 68-70):

- understanding the new mission of the school manager, in the general context of the management changes, where it is seen as the driving force of the adjustment of the school organization to the requirements of the continuous development of the beneficiaries of education;

- a clear vision regarding the school organization to be achieved through rational management, through medium- and long term strategic approaches, bridging tradition and the future, through achievable projects;

- understanding and establishing criteria of management efficiency, focused on principles, as a new model: clear objectives, communication, participation, adaptation, delegation, thinking in terms of success, capitalizing on human resources and relationships, creativity;

- the gradual introduction of changes in order not to amplify resistance: clarification of the change needs, of the expectations, awareness of the new elements, active involvement in their application, improvement and generalization of the results leading to the modification of the current style;
- capitalizing on the human resources of the school through new roles of the school manager, through participation and involvement;
- changing the content, conditions, meaning and mode of communication in the school organization;
- motivating those involved in the change by attracting participation, achieving individual and collective success, granting incentives;
- harmonization of group interests at the level of the organization: formal managers, teachers - class managers and the instructive-educational process, parents, groups of students, different entities in the institution, between categories of teachers who agree to follow different paths of change;
- the introduction of changes is also determined by the impact on the relevant dimensions: the introduction of changes at the level of the instructive-educational process is easier, difficulties, obstacles appear when changes of attitudes, personal and professional behaviour are required.

The real problem of the Romanian school is not represented by change, but by learning for change. This process, according to Carnall (1990, p. 7) involves:

- Clarity of objectives at all levels of the organization;
- Action planning, participation of managers to focus on problem solving;
- Increasing the degree of responsibility of all staff so as to support initiatives;
- Evaluation of the management performance at each stage of development;
- Promoting feedback in order to build self-confidence;
- Capitalizing on the ideas of all the organization staff;
- Establishing a balance between monitoring and autonomy development;
- Understanding change as a lifelong learning process.

In order to experience a comfortable change we must become accountable, reshape the framework and accept the negative aspects.

Petelean (2006: 241), seeking to achieve a taxonomy of managers according to their attitude towards change, identifies the following types:

- Managers in the area of acceptance - those who agree with the need for change and have a receptive attitude to it;
- Managers in the area of non-involvement - those who refrain from any action that could transform the managerial culture;
- Managers in the rejection zone - those who express an attitude of non-acceptance of change, showing rigid behaviour by which they constantly blame everything on the difficulties in the business environment, and adopting the strategy of resistance as a natural way of self-protection.

The challenge for school managers as agents of change is to identify ways to trigger the staff willingness to change. School managers need to provide the conditions for a comfortable change: to empower teachers, reshape the framework and accept that learning and change are never clear or secure.

Change is inextricably linked to its complement, i.e. stability. On the one hand, the school organization perpetuates patterns of behaviour and relationships, traditions, rituals and myths for conservation purposes. On the other hand, due to changes in the social culture or in the internal life of the school, the organizational culture of the school undergoes changes, adaptations or adjustments. The most important factor in



any change is the learning process, understood as the assimilation, storage and application of knowledge, values and ways of action.

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