

“IF IT AIN’T BROKE, DON’T FIX IT” - RESISTANCE TO CHANGE IN A ROMANIAN NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to identify change resistance factors, in the context of current social and organizational transformations. Alongside the analysis of both documents and dedicated literature in the field, the present paper is based on a longitudinal study carried out within a NGO in Cluj County, making use of qualitative methodology. The main results show that the way in which the change agent is perceived can drastically influence the resistance of members of an organization. Furthermore, if the major structural changes are not mirrored internally, by the culture, the resistance to change is going to consolidate itself and one way or another, things will be restored to their original state. Being carried out only within one organization, the outcomes of the research cannot be generalized. Nevertheless, the findings presented in this paper can serve as a starting point for more in-depth research **both in the same field (nongovernmental), in the for profit or public environments.**

KEY WORDS: organizational change, resistance to change, social services, nongovernmental organization

1. INTRODUCTION

"There is nothing permanent except change" concluded Heraclites thousands of years ago. This saying, once thought of as a simple philosophical concept, can be observed easily in the Romanian society of today. As a consequence of globalization and enhanced by the recent inclusion in the European Union, the change process Romania undergoes targets, what Aubert [1] would refer to as "hypermodern society". In a context of excess, attempts to overcome limits, exaggerated focus on profit, pleasure, competition and consumerism, changes are no longer perceived as a distinctive moment between two successive and stable phases, but as a continuous process, a permanent movement [1]. One can thus observe change both vertically, at individual, organization, environment or institution level and horizontally, in all sectors of society: economy, politics, legislation and technology.

Initially described by Taylor [3] in the context of scientific management and the organization perceived as a machine, organizational change was mostly focusing on structures, technologies and workflows. Later on, Hawthorne studies have proven the importance of addressing the human factor; industrial psychology consolidated the two perspectives and laid the foundation for future research in the field of organizational change.

The common ground of all theories in this field is based on the idea that organizations change by multi-stage processes. The first such model was Lewin's, in 1947 (unfreezing, moving and refreezing); it was later on followed by numerous stage presentations, each describing a specific number of steps and processes that needed to be followed in order for the change to be steered and under control.

Contemporary scientific schools support the idea that change cannot be controlled, but only shaped [12] and that these "idealized and linear models of change do not reflect the experience of organizational members, particularly those confronted by imposed reforms" [2].

The results of such change processes are not always the ones expected. Kotter [11] shows that only 30% of the organizational changes are truly successful and beneficial, the rest being either only partially and inefficiently or negatively implemented. The vast literature that targets strategies to

implement changes in organizations, the "efficient methods" and "examples of good practice" is only matched in size by an analysis of agents that prevent organizational change from happening.

Erwin and Garman [6] quote studies carried out on hundreds of organizations where the main agent generating change failure was resistance to change.

Literature in this field [3] frequently mentions that organizational change has at its basis personal change. Agreeing with this, it is useful to analyze the resistance to change of the members of the organization as one of the main agents that either support or undermine organizational transformation.

At an individual level, the analysis of the resistance to change was done mainly from a behaviorist perspective, having as a foundation the A-B-C theory of personality and looking at the four basic human processes [5] to perceive (to sense), to reason (to think), to feel (to emote), to move (to act). According to this theory,

"practically all people seem to automatically conclude, for the most part, that when an Adversity (A) occurs in their lives and they experience dysfunctional Consequences (C), that A directly causes C. Perhaps they are biologically prone to do so, because if they make this assumption and quickly try to change A – e.g. they run away from a lion – they will save their lives and protect their offspring. So they usually resist making what rational emotional behavioral therapy calls – the B-C connection – resist seeing that their Beliefs (B) importantly accompany the As they encounter and therefore contribute strongly to their Cs." [5]

The conceptual framework is the one proposed by Bovey [3] which links the three constructs from the A-B-C theory to the resistance to change:

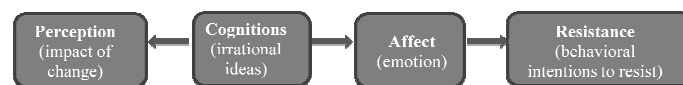


Figure 1. Conceptual framework [3]

These analysis guidelines have been developed and structured by Kurt Lewin [13] through the analysis of the force field. This theory differentiates between the pro-change forces (changes and influencers at macro level: e.g. new legislation,

innovation, etc.) and resistance agents (customs, traditions, organizational culture, etc.).

Additionally, resistance to change was analyzed at three main levels: individual, group and organizational [13].

2. BACKGROUND

For a long time, the Romanian society has lived by the following principle: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it", allowing rare and minor changes to occur. The 1989 revolution meant the birth of the social market in the true sense, along with another major social change, joining the European Union. A major impact on the Romanian society was generated by the adoption of the community acquis, globalization, technological revolution, the shift towards capitalism, freedom of borders, etc. All these happened fairly fast, in a rather short amount of time, having an abrupt start and a scanty management. This only contributed to the difficulty in their implementation.

In 1995, a period of major reforms within the main state institutions (education, society, economy and politics) began. In the social services field, over twenty new laws regarding the functioning of the system were passed in 2004 alone; needless to say that these were the subject of numerous changes in the following years. The greatest impact on social services in general and NGOs more specifically, was the creation of minimum quality standards for each type of social service, as well as fiscal regulations. On the one side these broadened the access of organizations to funds, but on the other hand they steered more strictly their functioning.

Simultaneously, several organizational sustainability, growth and consolidation initiatives, largely supported by international institutions or by the EU, were implemented. By means of Phare or structural funds, starting 1990, there was an attempt to support the development of Romania in three main areas: regional development, institutional development and the implementation of the community acquis. Despite some significant financial, human and material investments, the results were not the ones expected. An OECD report from 2006 [15] mentioned that

„ In recent years, about a quarter of donor aid, or more than USD 15 billion a year, has gone into technical cooperation, the bulk of which is ostensibly aimed at capacity development. Despite the magnitude of these inputs, evaluation results confirm that development of sustainable capacity remains one of the most difficult areas of international development practice. Capacity development has been one of the least responsive targets of donor assistance, lagging behind progress in infrastructure development or improving health and child mortality.”

Nevertheless, despite numerous and diverse strategies or national plans for social sector development, the percentage from the gross income allocated to this sector remained far below the European average. According to Eurostat, between 2000 and 2008 Romania directed 13.3% of the gross income to social service, while the European average was 26.7%).

As far as social assistance is concerned, the formal regulation of this field began in 2001 under the form of deinstitutionalization and decentralization of services. There have been designed multiple national and regional strategies, for each category of beneficiaries, every one of these being a priority at some point.

3. METHODOLOGY

Regarding the model of inquiry, I used mostly an "inquiry from the inside" [7], motivated by the assumption that "the researcher can best come to know the reality of an organization by *being there*, by becoming immersed in the stream of events and activities, by becoming a part of the phenomena of study" [7, p.389]. From this perspective, the aim of the research was to fully understand and depict the phenomenon of resistance to change in a certain nongovernmental organization. Taking into consideration the disadvantages of this model and the "fallacy of subjectivism" [7], I have chosen to work with a well-defined research strategy as well as with techniques and instruments that would allow later on an objective management and analysis of the data.

The data analysis has been carried out from a qualitative perspective, the aim being the portrayal and interpretation of the change resistance phenomena that have been observed. The data comes from structured and semi-structured interviews, participatory observations, internal documents of the organization (reports, minutes, letters), documents used in external communication and internal databases.

The main questions this research addresses are related to the resistance to change, the way it is expressed at individual, group and organizational level, as well as its impact on the overall organization.

The main criteria that influenced the data collecting, sorting and analysis methodology is based on systemic and cognitive theories. Accordingly, the organization itself is seen as a system of structuring activities that are based on the management of external resources; these resources are transformed and sent back to the exterior as products/services, operating in the context of entropy (the failure of the system when the access to resources is stopped) and homeostasis (the tendency of the system to keep its balance) [10].

Moreover, a special focus was the human factor – with an essential role in all these processes, by means of processing information and actually generating results. The organization has at its core individuals that build representations of reality by means of segmentation, ordering and transformation of various forms of external energy, creating, in the end, products [4].

The methodology that has been used for the purpose of this study neither allows the extrapolation of the data to the entire population nor provides us with statistical or numeric information. However, from a practical perspective, this can provide guidelines for concrete action and significant input in developing hypothesis to guide other forms of inquiry.

4. CASE OVERVIEW

The association, here referred as "Support for the family" was founded in 1991 at the initiative of a Norwegian family that, impressed by the media portrayal of the orphanages in Romania decided to come into the country and develop services in this field. After more than ten years of direct involvement in activities and work with beneficiaries, the founder died in an accident and the family moved back to Norway. Their aim was to continue to raise funds and to support further the activity of the organization. A welded team of 25 is left behind, people of different professions who have worked as volunteers throughout the years, initiating

and coordinating various projects. The budget managed by the organization was of over 222 000 Ron and material properties up to 300 000 Ron. The main lines of activity were a day center, a program of goods distribution (furniture, electronics, clothes, tableware, toys, etc) to individuals and institutions, as well as various projects to support with resources and information adoptive or foster parents.

In order to compensate for fairly rare contacts, for informal and dispersed communication with the organization, the founders decided to hire a consultant trained in management, to act as a link between the organization and those providing funding. The purpose of this employee was to focus messages, to distribute them in a structured manner and to support the organization in the development process that would follow.

For two years, within the organization, occurred several changes, the majority of which were of significant impact.

Strategically, these meant reshaping the mission, the vision as well as the way the organization used to define its activity. The vision was enlarged in order to accommodate more activities related to child and family protection. The mission was changed to include the support of several other beneficiary categories, offering more complex services – both primary and specialized.

From a structural and organizational perspective, the range of services was the first one to be restructured by eliminating some and introducing new ones. This led to a higher diversity in activities as well as a rise in quality standards by employing specialists (employees or volunteers) in different fields. The number of staff involved in the activities tripled, covering a significant range of specializations. New procedures in working with beneficiaries, documentation to back them up and a primary form of information management system were created. The status quo of the employees and volunteers was clearly stated through a new organizational chart, job descriptions and performance criteria and regular evaluations were undergone. For the first time, special attention was paid to the image of the organization - a strategy was designed and time, human and material resources were allocated to this plan.

Technologically, alongside the reorganization of the space, a computer network was created, a better internet connection installed and various adjacent services (printer, copy machine) became available. The restructuring of the rooms and entry points allowed a better management of the staff space, protection of documents and information confidentiality as well as respect for the intimacy of the beneficiaries.

The attempt was actually to shift a people-based culture [9] – in which the management was based on consensus, the majority of members was involved in the decision making process and the organization as a whole was perceived as serving one's own interests - into a task-based culture [9], with focus on expertise, abilities, project-based teams and proneness to change and dynamism.

During the following five years, the organization had four different presidents and three directory councils. Turnover was significant and key personnel (executive director, social program coordinator) left the organization.

The agent of change was the consultant who worked simultaneously with members of all different hierarchal levels in the organization. He suggested that specialists

should be hired and they, in turn, initiated and supported change processes from bottom-up.

The main pressure factors that fueled the need for change were both internal (involvement of specialists with a high level of knowledge and commitment) and external (laws that structured the responsibilities of NGOs as opposed to the public institutions). In the same time, quality standards were set at national level for social services and these standards had to be implemented within a specific period of time. Moreover, the organization has a rather bad reputation among other NGOs and thus a low credibility in the relationship with public authorities and control institutions. The organization was seen more as a second-hand shop rather than a supplier of social services.

5. RESULTS

The phenomenon of resistance to change was tracked for two years (2006 - 2008). 34 individual interviews with 18 people from various hierarchical levels (directory council, superior management, executive level) were carried out. In seven of the cases, the subjects terminated their collaboration with the organization and the interviews took place before their departure. In these cases, for the second round of interviews, the new personnel in these functions were interviewed.

Regarding human resources, based on the field situation, the article differentiates between: employees (people with a permanent or temporary contract, receiving a monthly salary), members of the organization (people with different responsibilities within the organization, acting on a voluntary basis, having the right to vote in the General Council meetings) and volunteers (people working on specific tasks or projects according to a volunteer contract). Anyone could become a member of the organization after paying an annual fee.

The internal documents analyzed were: drafts and final versions of the mission, vision and service description, internal reports to the directory council, correspondence and reports to sponsors as well as advertising material. Notes were taken during direct participation in teamwork meetings, in two annual meetings involving all members of the organization and minutes from other official gatherings were consulted. There was direct participation at the implementation of agreed changes and the behaviors of the ones involved were recorded.

5.1. From Explicit to Discreet Resistance to Change

As far as the expressions of the resistance to change of the members of the organization were concerned, they gravitated around the three types of resistance described by Fronza - revolt, withdrawal and discreet resistance [8] or what Palmer would label as active and passive resistance [12].

In a first stage, immediately after the joining of the external consultant (which was perceived as a change in itself) the attitudes of the members divided in two categories: absolute refusal of the collaboration and stand-by ("We don't yet know what is going to happen next, so we'll wait to see how things go.").

From the very beginning, one could notice the active and explicit forms of resistance to change expressed through complains, verbal expression of discontent and attempt to maintain the initial status quo. The toughest resistance act, seen more like a "punishment" of the organization, was

quitting the job / ending the collaboration. Throughout the two years, this phenomenon was rather frequent, at all hierarchical levels, reaching a point where it became a pattern of behavior and a form of manifestation of the conflict between the new politics and the internal structures of the organization.

Withdrawal, as a form of manifestation of the resistance to change, expressed through "psychological withdrawal from the work environment in order to build or strengthen one's identity in the private sphere" [8] was identified mostly with the higher educated personnel, either close to retirement or at the beginning of their career. In these situations, rationalization attempts would appear: "I don't need this hustle. I can just stay at home and watch my grandchildren." or "I will deal with this job simply as it is – just a job: no overtime, no initiatives, and no involvement beyond my job description. I have anyways other activities in which to invest my energy, including the finding of an organization that treats its employees differently".

Direct resistance, described by Fronza [8] as being similar to "a form of deviance which complies with the letter of the law but discreetly resists its spirit" was the most frequent. Behavior-wise, this was associated with verbal agreement with the objectives of the change, but with either actions contrary to the change or no actions at all. When the changing of procedure regarding working with beneficiaries and goods distribution came up to discussion, the whole team agreed that there is room for improvement, but nobody actually suggested anything. Once a coherent work system was designed and documented, the process itself began to be undermined by various "accidents" (social workers either did not have the necessary time to make enough new forms or they did not have time to thoroughly fill in all the form, because the beneficiaries, allegedly, were on the rush; documents were misplaced etc.).

Emotionally, the dominant feeling was confusion: "Why is there need for so many changes?"; "He (the consultant) has no right to tell us what to do and how to do it!"; "As far as I'm concerned, things were going well as they were... why change it into something more complicated when we don't even know if the new system will function?".

Another dominant feeling was frustration – frustration with having to accept the changes, although in disagreement with them. Additionally, a difficulty in reasoning this opposition was observed: "What annoys me the most is that if you discuss with him [the consultant], he plays with you and persuades you into believing in his arguments – and you, at that moment, agree with him. But when you get home and re-think all the arguments, you realize the situation is a little bit different." These feelings grew in dimension, fueled by a growing lack of trust.

The cognitive part of the resistance to change consisted mainly in identifying the change agent with the change itself. Rejecting him as a person, distrust in his motivation and interests - significantly lowered the acceptance of his ideas, from the very beginning. Blaming him was the main manifestation of active and explicit resistance: "From the very beginning he was perceived by the organization as a follower of the founder's work and he practically took their place. But he did not and will not rise to the expectation – that was clear for everybody. I don't know why he tries to make us believe that he is not the person who pulls all the strings and wants to lead." Moreover, an increasing level of criticism and

deliberate search for mistakes and faults changed the focus from the actual activity of the organization to an irrational struggle for power.

The distortion of messages towards the stakeholders was one of the manifestations frequently observed; at a certain point this came to actually endangering the relationship with the sponsors.

The groups within the organization were clearly built based on seniority criteria, level of studies in the social work field and the belonging to one organization culture or another: on one hand, there was a group consisting of the oldest members that openly opposed changes; on the other hand – the group of the new employees, specialists with university degrees, enthusiastic and willing to add professionalism to the organization's activity. In between, there was the external consultant – the main agent of change. The situation was similar to a triangle of forces, in which each part puts pressure on the others, either supporting or undermining change.

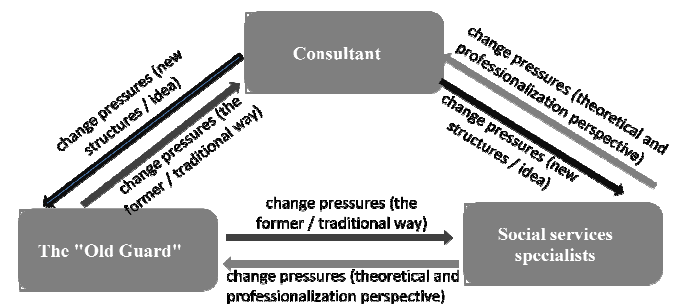


Figure 2. The triangle of change pressures

Thus, the organization became divided, each group developing its own way to support its purpose in the same time putting effort in resisting the pressure from the others.

5.2. Reasons for Resistance to Change

The newly joined people, with expert authority, initiated major changes. Even if these people had the necessary know-how to implement the suggested changes, they were perceived as a threat to the existing culture and traditions. Hence their experience and credibility were questioned.

"Who do they think they are to tell us how to do it?! We have created and kept afloat this organization for ten years!"

The underlying cause of this behavior could have been the fact that older members of the organization felt threatened – not necessarily at the competence level, but at the status level. During the 10 years of activity, each of them had earned a certain position in the organization and a restructuring according to performance would have meant an attack to their status and a loss of the pecuniary benefits that they had. Clearly, the change was perceived by all older members as being detrimental to them, both on the status and on the benefits side. As far as the latter is concerned, in the organization, there was a true "addiction" to goods received from abroad. Being used by the founders as a motivator for volunteer work, the preferential access to foreign goods, before there were shared with the beneficiaries, was a strong motivator for a significant part of the organization's members. This attitude fueled partly by the need for material security was threatened once the focus was changed from satisfying the material needs of the beneficiaries to their empowerment, to helping themselves in order to reduce their dependency on organization's services.

By restructuring positions and redistributing task, access to information was widened; more people would be involved in a process, especially when it implied taking a decision. In this context, the need for control of some members who reached key positions was no longer fulfilled. This generated a series of obvious or concealed reactions.

Alongside the distorted perception of the change agents, one of the fundamental factors of resistance to change was the conviction that those changes were not, in fact, necessary. The executive director would describe the organization as a "functioning structure – a machine that is ready to work". In addition to different perceptions of what "functioning" meant, the resistance was fueled by a faulty communication. Expectations and objectives were not always clearly communicated and they were not always measurable. This led to the belief that some of the change actions (such as investing in the design of a new logo and advertising) were disproportionate from a cost-benefit perspective. For the majority of the change actions proposed, the members believed that the time, resource and human effort is too high and that things can work as they used to.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The change agent had explained to the people in the organization all structural changes that were to be implemented. Regardless, it was not taken into consideration the need for a major change in organizational culture. The new process, structures, documents and image, being developed around the idea of professionalism and performance, were built on an organizational culture that prioritized personal interests. The way of thinking was still focused on organization's members and not on its beneficiaries. In this context, all attempts to change did not have a solid foundation and led to their undermining and slow return to original practices.

The changes that were implemented threatened directly the needs of the members in the organization, especially the material ones (access to goods) but also those of status and recognition. This led to the impact of change being perceived not only organizationally, but also personally – thus justifying the open and sometimes rough reactions of the members. Not only did some of the changes threaten their status, but they actually affected it (one of the presidents of the organization was dismissed, jobs descriptions were changed and responsibilities were reassigned).

The quantity and dimension of changes throughout the two years was large. Although there are not studies that show what the ratio of sustainable changes per time unit is, the feeling, especially on the management level, was that of being overwhelmed. High in number and of great impact on all organizational aspects, the changes did not have time to settle in and be internalized by the members.

The fact that resistance to change was present from the very beginning, determined a feeling of distrust in the intervention of the external consultant. Combined with a lack of clear strategy and inefficient communication, it diminished significantly the willingness of members to allocate time and resources to support change.

At a closer look at the change process in this organization, one can clearly notice that the dominant form of resistance to change was the discreet one. Many changes were implemented and improvements were made to structures,

organization, procedures and work documents. Nonetheless, change remained shallow and without substance.

Factors such as age and level of education have significantly influenced the degree of adoption of change. The understanding and accepting of concepts related to public image, logo, promotional activities and digital information management was difficult mainly because people were not familiar with this kind of idea and found it challenging. Numerous change strategies promote the idea of discussions, especially in order to acquaint members to the objectives of the change, in order to equip them with information related both to the process and the technical side of it. Although this was attempted, resistance to change was present at the change design level, some of the members being unwilling to even listen or understand the information.

A special type of resistance is the management's one. The observation sessions have shown that the manifest or direct resistance of management actually strengthens the resistance of other members of the organization and isolates the change agents and their actions. The lack of long term vision of the management (and in some of the cases, of the directors' council) alongside the acceptance of remaining simple providers of services and not social services professionals, acted as a filter for all change initiatives. "While lower-level employees may resist a change once it is in the process of being implemented, the resistance by senior managers is likely to occur at the stage of conceptualization of strategic options" [12]. Deciding action on the basis of a mental map in which success indicators were still from the past culture, the current management was unable to re-think the organization on different criteria.

The processes identified in such contexts are described in the field's literature as "the boiled frog phenomenon" as it relates to a classic experiment depicting the psychological response of frogs. In this experiment, "a frog is put in a bowl of water, which is then slowly heated. As long as the water temperature increases slowly, the frog will stay in the bowl until it boils to death, even though there is nothing to prevent it from jumping out at any point. However, if a frog is thrown into a bowl of already boiling water, it will quickly jump out and survive. Therefore, organizations become the equivalent of the boiled frog if they fail to respond to a series of changes (...)" [12].

In conclusion, a relation between the way the change agent is perceived, the amount of changes per time unit and the area where these changes take place can strongly affect organization's capacity to react, assimilate change and move further. An unfortunate correlation between these three factors can catch the people and the institution in an vicious circle of fight for power and hidden agendas which in time may lead to organizational decay.

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