The Determinant Factors of Success in the Management of the School Organization

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Abstract: The development of the school organization is becoming more and more cooperative, interactive and the systematic experience requires a position in a given context. The process always depends on a number of factors which receive different degrees of significance and importance in time and in a multidimensional and fluctuating context.

The school organization in the third millennium has the opportunity to develop in an extremely diversified, contextualized environment, under the combined influence of factors that limit or that are sometimes contradictory, a fact which encourages creativity, initiative, cooperation and communication; on the other hand, all these features of the environment in which the school organization develops often become disadvantages due to the lack of a clear determination between factors and effects, which reduces the chances of scientific research to offer generally valid models for the development of any school organization.

The development of the school organization is indeed the result of a multitude of factors, out of which some are more relevant due to their more obvious impact. Without minimizing the importance of the other factors, we will focus upon those that are seen as having greater influence on the process of development, namely objectives and climate.

Present day society expects all her citizens to be able to accept change in their lives in a more active way, on both an individual and a collective level, in a context of global, dynamic and multicultural transformation. Of all social institutions, the school is the only one that truly promises to have a great contribution in reaching this goal. Nevertheless, education, far from being a way of providing people with minimal preparation for change, is the exact opposite. To break this deadlock, educators must consider themselves and must be viewed as experts in the dynamics of change. To become such experts, they – both administrators and teachers – must become competent agents of change. If they become such morally motivated agents, educators will be able to change the lives of teenagers coming from all backgrounds and, by doing so, they will help improve the society's ability to accept change. These purposes are also the ones that determine today the objectives of the school organization.

Every organization has its set of clearly defined purposes to motivate and engage the individuals taking part in the development of its activities. E. Păun (1999, p. 8) believes that "every organization is a fairly stable combination of human and material resources in reaching certain goals". These aims of the school organization have certain specificity, being trans-individual, standing for the organization as a whole, for its general politics and orientation. However, they must not ignore or be in complete opposition with the goals and aspirations of the individuals that make up the organization. There must be at least a minimal compatibility between the aims of the organization and those of the individual, which is achieved not by eliminating and ignoring the latter, but by including them in the goals of the organization. Thus, organizational purposes will be accepted by the individual and will generate interactions, participant practices and common actions with the purpose of reaching them.

Personal goal and vision constitute the starting point. They come from inside, giving meaning to the work and they exist independently of the organization or the group to which the individual might belong. Once put into practice, a personal goal does not remain as private as it sounds. Especially in a moral occupation such as education, the more you risk expressing your personal goal, the more you find people who share it. Your aims and theirs will overlap to a great extent. Good ideas converge, if there is communication and collaboration.

Individuals will notice that they can turn their own wishes into social programmes meant for others.

Finally, in a paradoxical manner, personal goal is the road to change for the organization. When personal goal is diminished, its place is taken by group thinking and a continuous flow of surface, temporary innovations. In short, we see people indiscriminately accepting innovation; the more things change, the more they stay the same. When personal goal is present and active, it supplies the power needed for more profound change.

"Cultures can change in many little ways, not by dramatic announcements coming from the teacher's council hall. If we wait for top management to make the change we want to see, we lose sight of what is most important. If the future we wish is to become reality, we must be the initiators."(Block, 1987, p. 97)

Visions appear later, because the process of combining individual views with collective ones takes time. There will always be tension between personal and collective ideals within an organization. A common view is vital for organizations that are based on learning, because it provides the energy and the concentration needed for study. While adaptive learning is possible without a vision, creative/productive learning takes place only when people strive to obtain something very important for them. In fact the whole idea of creative/ productive learning – extending creative capacity – will seem pointless and abstract unless people become excited about a vision that they want to put into practice. Today, the term *vision* is a familiar concept to the leaders of corporations. But on a closer look, we will notice that it is generally the vision of only one man or of a small group which is imposed on the whole organization. Such visions can be no more than submissions to orders and they are not an actual commitment. A common vision is that which is embraced by many because it reflects their personal views.

Reaching a collective vision implies a profound and solid process of growing clarity, enthusiasm, communication and commitment. The productive change is, to a great extent, a process of mobilization and positive contamination. Senge P. (1990, p. 211) notes that organizations which intend to create common visions encourage their members to develop their own views. If people do not have a personal vision, they can only subscribe to someone else's views. The result is passive acceptance and never real commitment. On the other hand, people who have a very strong sense of personal orientation can unite to create strong synergy directed towards what I/we really want.

Experts warn about the risks of having one vision at the level of an organization. Thus, Stacey (1992, p.146) mentions that the trust in 'vision' perpetuates a culture of dependence and conformism that prevents questioning and complex learning which are necessary to a creative leader. The perspective of dynamic systems determines the managers to think not in terms of previous intentions, represented by objectives and visions, but in terms of the continuous change of individual problems, aspirations, challenges and intentions. The key to shaping a strategy is the efficiency with which the managers of an organization draw and solve such lists of problems.

Therefore, the critical question is not whether vision is important or not, but how it can be shaped and reshaped so as to take into consideration the complexity of change. On the other hand, we may synthesize some answers to the question regarding the reason behind the premature disappearance of a vision. This happens:

- when the vision is a product set only to paper, achieved quickly and in large quantities by the leading teams;
- when it is static or even wrong and when it tries to impose a false consensus, suppressing rather than giving possibilities for the personal visions to flourish;
- when too many people are involved from the start;
- when leaders do not manage to back up their own vision;

- when superficial dialogue and not in-depth investigation and action is the method used;
- when we try to convince everyone to agree with us before putting things into practice.

Many years ago, one of the experts in management launched the idea of the organizational abandonment: "An organization, regardless of its objectives, must be capable to rid itself of yesterday's tasks and thus free the energies and resources needed for new and more productive tasks. If it wants to be able to influence chances, it must be able to leave behind the unproductive and erase the antiquated." (Drucker, 1969, p.193) Correlating this idea with Pascale's idea that, "not surprisingly, easily acquired ideas are also easily abandoned" (1990, p.20), we grasp the true complexity and difficulty that accompanies the problem of a school organization's objectives. New ideas that have a certain value need a profound understanding to be made efficient and a development of abilities and devotion to be made valuable. These things cannot be forced.

The new paradigm of change sees organizations in a different set of relations, contrary to the traditionally accepted hypothesis about vision and planning. By doing so, they will achieve more profound and stronger common views which will lead to more enthusiastic action taken day by day by the entire organization. But "to get to" is, as we have seen, only temporary; the strongest common vision is that which stands as a basis for future creative learning and that acknowledges the fact that there will always be a dynamic tension between individual development and the development of the organization.

In the field of developing school organization there are many different points of view, due mostly to the contextual – situational character which is stronger than with other educational problems which are easily submitted to centralization and generalization. There is still a consensus on the importance of the subjective dimension of a school organization which is generated by the interaction among its members and by the feelings associated with the activities that take place: satisfaction – dissatisfaction, joy – sadness, trust – discouragement, cooperation – disagreement, etc., socio-emotional conditions which **determine the climate of the school organization**.

By **climate** we understand the moral and intellectual atmosphere around a group, the set of collective perceptions and of emotional states within an organization. The climate refers to subjective states, especially those of a moral and emotional nature. It is a state of collective psychology, a group phenomenon, a state of collective contamination which is embodied by what may be called the internal human ambiance of the organization. (E. Păun, 1999, p.115) Culture and climate shape the overall image of a school organization: culture stands mostly for the objective dimension, which can more easily become manifest in the behaviour of the members, while climate is the subjective dimension which is strongly contextualized and also exposed to the exterior influences of an extraprofessional nature.

One basic condition in dealing successfully with the problems of school development is identifying the type of organizational climate and adapting to its specificity. Thus, studies on this topic are very useful and we would like to mention at this point the classifications made by R. Lickert – J. G. Lickert (apud. Păun, 1999, p.131):

1. *the exploiting autocratic climate* – characterized by the managers' lack of confidence in their subordinates, who are not involved in taking decisions, as well as by the use of threats and punishment to accomplish tasks;
2. *the benevolent autocratic climate* – based on the managers' condescension towards their subordinates, who are partially involved in taking decisions;
3. *the consultative democratic climate* – based on increased trust and bidirectional communication between the manager and the subordinates; decisions are partially centralized;

4. *the participative democratic climate* – based on trust, communication and total involvement of all members of the school organization.

As we can see, climate types are categorized according to the degree of trust, involvement and communication existing among the members of the school organization, with the extremes of *opened* and *closed climate*:

1. *the closed climate* – characterized by lack of involvement, trust or interest, by a high degree of control, tense relationships, routine and difficult communication;

2. *the opened climate* – characterized dynamism, commitment, communication, involvement, interest, respect, camaraderie, mutual support.

There is a continuum between the two extremes, and assigning school climate under one of these categories is only relative due to the dynamics, the complexity and the contextual variables involved.

"There is no such thing as an ideal climate, but one can talk of efficient climates – the opened ones that lead to higher performance – and less efficient climates – the closed ones that have a negative impact on the quality of the didactic-educational process." (E. Păun, 1999, p.133)

Research has shown that successful schools dedicate more time to creating a climate which favours development before starting to make substantial changes, noticeable in the pupil's results. The most frequent actions in this direction are:

- to promote trust and openness among the members of the staff, the pupils and the community;
- to acknowledge the merits of the teachers and to promote their achievements;
- to encourage a sense of humour;
- to make informal, extraprofessional activities a current practice;
- to inform every interested person about the school's problems and progress;
- to consult the members of the school organization and involve them in the process of decision making;
- to cultivate transparency in matters concerning the activities of the school organization, etc.

The psychological state of the members of the school organization may have a decisive impact on the process of school development. Reynolds and Packer (1992) maintain that disregarding interpersonal and psychological processes may lead to teachers exhibiting a defensive behaviour so as to protect themselves from those innovations that might expose their weaknesses.

The development of the school organization brings forth the need for an efficient, stimulating climate, which was conceptualized by the theory of *"organizational health"* (Păun, 1999, p.133) stating that a healthy organization is defined by its capacity to survive and to adapt to a hostile environment, but mostly by its capacity to develop and function successfully – which actually regards the school development nowadays. The climate of a "healthy" organization promotes team work and cooperation among all its members. Here are only a few examples of ways in which such a favourable climate for the development of the school organization can be obtained:

- by making changes in the physical environment, both for adults as well as for pupils;
- by providing greater opportunities for the parents to get involved, by employing new staff members;
- by involving teachers in taking decisions, by establishing a schedule which favours team work;
- by establishing a conduct policy;
- by making changes in the structure of the institution –motto: "Together, We learn and We care";

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- by making acknowledgement and celebrating events a frequent occurrence;
- by organizing teams on a voluntary basis;
- by informing the personnel about the progress of each team;
- by solving the conflicts that imply negotiation abilities which were obtained by means of workshops at the end of which teachers concluded that conflicts could have been healthy and productive if they had been coordinated properly.

As Goodlad (1992a) states: "healthy nations have healthy schools" and not the other way around. Many things are necessary for a nation to be healthy: education on what concerns the responsibilities of parents, a variety of agencies and institutions including schools united under one educational consensus, a moral code of business/corporations focused on producing best quality goods at the lowest possible price, a substantial investment in research and development, leaders and decision makers who are up to the task by displaying a high degree of efficiency in all aspects of their activity, etc. Therefore, the state of comfort, of well being, of normality which is induced by the idea of health makes it possible for this term to be successfully applied in the field of education as well, even becoming one of the very goals of the school organization.

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