

Change Processes in Organizations: Challenges and Impacts

Processos de Mudança nas Organizações: Desafios e Impactos

Procesos de Cambio en las Organizaciones: Retos e Impactos

Heraclitus of Ephesus (540-475 BC) is not an author of note in organizational and management studies, but his philosophical contributions can certainly offer valuable insights into understanding the role of change in the life cycles of people and organizations. In fragments of his work “On Nature”, Heraclitus highlights the transience of things, emphasizing that everything is in constant flux and transformation: “Nothing is permanent except change” (Kahn, 1979). From this perspective, change seems to be inevitable — even under strong resistance, obstacles, or attempts to deny its inevitability (Baloyannis, 2013).

This Heraclitean vision of a world in constant becoming, in which nothing is permanent and everything is in flux, can be particularly relevant to understanding the challenges faced by organizations and their managers in an increasingly dynamic and unpredictable environment (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Understanding the inevitability of change processes, whether in the incorporation of new technologies or in the socio-economic and cultural transformations of society, provokes the need to learn to develop specific skills, to adapt to new scenarios which are not always positive, and to assess their impacts and consequences over time in the organizational structure and processes.

It is possible to say that dealing with change is an imposition on the human species and its creations, such as organizations. As a result, three sets of fundamental competencies have evolved, related to an extensive set of physical, cognitive, and emotional skills: 1) Adapting to the environment and its variations, circumstances, and challenges. This ability to adapt is essential for survival and coexistence in a constantly changing world; 2) Acquiring, transmitting, or transferring knowledge, learning, habits, values, beliefs, and patterns of behavior. These competencies together enable human beings to accumulate and share experiences, as well as to build a solid knowledge base for dealing with processes of change; 3) Anticipating actions and their possible consequences even before they occur, in order to be able to deal with dangers, unnecessary risks, changes in the environment and in interactions with it. This ability to forecast and plan helps the quality of decision-making, making it more rational and assertive in preparing for action, solving problems, and finding solutions in advance.

William James (1842/1910), philosopher and one of the main thinkers of the nascent psychological science of the late

19th and early 20th centuries, argued in his classic work “A Pluralistic Universe” (James, 1909/2018) that what really exists are not made things, but things under construction. That reality, as we perceive it on a daily basis, is not a singular, unified entity, but rather a plural universe made up of varied perspectives and experiences. On the other hand, Ilya Prigogine (1917-2003), winner of the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1977, stated that the world is made up of possibilities, some predictable, others not, whether from the point of view of the evolutionary process of the human species, transformations in nature, the dynamics and conflicts in society or even individual behavior.

The ideas of William James and Ilya Prigogine emphasize that processes of change and transformation are part of the constitution and development of human societies and therefore influence people’s daily lives, perceptions, and experiences. It is up to organizations and their leaders to understand this “motor-continuum”, in other words, the ability to generate energy to act based on the energy of the movement itself, bearing in mind that change is inherent to human action in organizations and in other dimensions of life. Some authors call this internal movement in organizations “organizational capacity for change” or “organizational change capacity” (Judge & Douglas, 2009; Soparnot, 2011; Supriharyanti, & Sukoco, 2023).

The process of globalization of economic and social exchanges, digital transformation, the network revolution, computer modeling, and artificial intelligence reflect processes of change and the incorporation of recent possibilities in terms of human history. These transformations continue to have profound impacts on the modus operandi of social exchanges, on the structure and dynamics of organizations, and on the possibilities of individual or collective action.

Globalization has intensified economic and social interactions on a worldwide scale, creating opportunities and challenges. Digital transformation, with the advance of information and communication technologies, has enabled the automation of processes, the collection and analysis of large volumes of data, and the creation of new business models. The revolution in social networks and online communication has changed the way people relate, share information and organize themselves (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Computer modeling and artificial intelligence have made it possible to simulate complex phenomena, make decisions based on data, and automate tasks previously performed only by humans. These technological

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innovations have had a profound impact on the structure and dynamics of organizations, requiring adaptations to their processes, management models, and ways of interacting with customers and employees (Cruz et al., 2023)

In this context, knowing how to deal with processes of change and their consequences is a challenge for all human beings, as well as for organizations. It means being prepared to understand the diversity of ideas and problem-solving perspectives, learning from past experiences, and whenever possible, predicting scenarios and new economic, technological and cultural challenges to be faced. It also means developing management strategies and practices by adopting strategies that make them more resilient and flexible, capable of continually reinventing themselves (Hanelt et al., 2020; Pettigrew et al., 2001).

One of the main challenges in understanding and managing change processes lies in the culture of organizations, including their management practices, which directly influence the way people think, act, and relate to each other in the workplace. In general, organizations that know how to deal with the challenges of change and learning while preserving values, beliefs, norms, behaviors, and practices in work environments aimed at human health, safety, and integrity are recognized as functional or positive organizational cultures. In this type of culture, there is a favorable environment for boosting performance in relation to objectives, improving skills, engaging teams and satisfying professionals, and consequently, their customers (Warrick, 2017; Wilderom et al., 2011).

On the other hand, dysfunctional or negative organizational cultures tend to maintain an unhealthy work environment, in terms of managing work processes, and are refractory to change and innovation. In these cases, there are losses in motivation and engagement, lower group morale and talent retention, and the attraction of new qualified professionals. Generally, dysfunctional organizational cultures have high rates of turnover, occupational illnesses, and labor liabilities, due to inadequate practices in working relationships (Balthazard et al., 2006; Van Fleet & Griffin, 2006).

It is important to recognize that processes of change, even if initially challenging, have the potential to reshape not only how organizations operate, but also how people live and interact. Learning from the consequences of these changes is fundamental to the development of organizations. More or less disruptive changes can trigger cycles or transition processes in response to changes in the environment, both for people and for organizations. It is crucial that these transition processes are compatible with the real capacity for change of each individual and organization. For professionals, disruption can mean the need to acquire new skills, adjust their expectations, and be open to new ways of thinking and acting. This can require a process of emotional and cognitive adaptation, as change is not always easy or comfortable.

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