CONDITIONS OF THE CHANGE IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS IN CITY COUNCILS IN POLAND

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Purpose: The aim of the presented research is to identify conditions of change process in city councils in Poland.

Design/methodology/approach: In order to complete the research objective, the survey method was used. This method uses a targeted selection technique. It has been assumed that the selection of councils of cities in which the number of inhabitants exceeds 20,000, allows for the implementation of the research objective.

Findings: The obtained results indicate that there is a strong conviction among the respondents about the awareness of the change process dynamics and finding their way in such a complex environment. Changes prepared and implemented by city councils make use of the achievements of modern management science, which is clearly indicated by the solutions used by them that activate participants of changes.

Research limitations/implications: The basic limitation of the conducted study and the recommendation for future research is the measurement of the concept at many levels of the organizational hierarchy and among different groups of respondents.

Originality/value: The article deepens the understanding of the change management process in city halls in Poland.

Keywords: change management, city council, change, public organization.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Changing technologies, customer expectations, values, unification of consumption patterns and intensifying global competition have triggered processes of change, whose directions are difficult to predict and anticipate. All of these factors happen at the same time, simultaneously entering into mutual interactions complicating the picture of the situation. The world has entered into a period of discontinuity and uncertainty. Decisions are made in the absence of information on the causes, scope and consequences of the solutions implemented. Changes are

treated as something inevitable, something that cannot be opposed. Experience from the market clearly shows that the ability to manage the process of designing and implementing changes constitutes the basic skill of a manager in the 21st century, including a manager in public organizations. Structural changes in public administration were initiated in the second half of the 18th century. The beginning of political and intellectual events that have a significant impact on changes in the functioning of public administration, such as the Napoleon Code, Rechtsstaat and bureaucracy, which was later described by M. Weber, dates back to this period. However, the Weberian administration concept is not able to meet the changing expectations of stakeholders. Changes take place in the sphere of tasks, solutions, procedures, as well as competences and skills of public managers. There is a diffusion of typical business solutions into the public sphere, but is it happening fast enough, without any problems?

The model of organization functioning based on the general trend of change management in public organizations is the New Business Models for Public-Sector Innovation (Micheli et al., 2012). It emphasizes the encouragement of public managers to put greater emphasis on measurable benefits for citizens through improvements and changes in the provision of public services. Some authors emphasize that this allows for organizational resistance to change and for public managers to overcome their risk aversion (Brown et al. 2002).

In the case of public organizations, the importance of change management is also determined by its environment. This results from the emergence of technical and technological innovations in the process of providing services, the occurrence of frequent and unpredictable changes in the state policy and changes in attitudes and values of citizens. On the other hand, public organizations introduce changes less frequently due to the fact that services offered do not change in the long run and new competitors do not appear.

2. Literature review

From the very beginning of discussions on changes, such discussions were guided by the idea of rationality. A planned change is a process of rational goal setting, followed by several phases to successfully move to the desired future state (van der Voet, 2013). A well-designed change reduces the cost of implementation, increases the chances of success and acceptance, and reduces the time necessary to achieve the assumed results. The most known, and at the same time the simplest, three-step model of organizational changes was proposed by K. Lewin (Dawson, 2003). This model is very simplified, and it does not take into account the complex spectrum of contemporary conditions. J.P. Kotter proposed an extensive, eight-step model (Kotter, 1996):

1. create a sense of urgency;
2. build a guiding coalition;
3. form a strategic vision and initiatives;
4. enlist a volunteer army;
5. enable action by removing barriers;
6. generate short-term wins;
7. sustain acceleration;
8. institute change.

This model places more emphasis on building the implementation team and emphasizes the need to manage the internal communication process to mobilize the involvement of the organization's members. Just realizing the need for change is not enough. It is necessary that the participants of changes understand their sense and the expected vision of transformations (Schmidt, Groeneveld and Van de Walle, 2017). In 2014 J.P. Kotter (2014) modified his model, pointing to the need to advance, accelerate changes, embedding them into the organization's DNA code. Activities undertaken through integration with processes, systems and procedures aim at institutionalization of success. The new culture, with an increasing number of implemented changes, has a cumulative effect. When the system works well, problems with the construction of a new and different type of organization are solved in a natural way. They provide energy of highly motivated employees, coordination, hierarchy and network integration, and the necessary cooperation. The system matures and gains momentum. Every used opportunity and minimized threat accelerates it, becoming a way to function in the dynamic, rapidly changing world.

With regard to the process of designing changes in the public sector, it is often noted that it should be assumed that this will be an action spread over time. F. Longo (2008) claims that it is difficult to find a complete organizational change in the public sector that lasted less than 2-3 years. In his opinion, the process of implementing such changes can proceed according to the following scheme:

1. conferences and workshops aiming at systematization and extension of knowledge about the area of change;
2. evaluation studies to analyse the decision situation;
3. building a group of support, alliances (political, managerial, employee, public opinion) on issues that are subject to change;
4. development of a technical change design;
5. training and coaching;
6. first experimental, pilot implementation;
7. first assessments and strong support and incentives for innovators;
8. dissemination and increase of the implementation rate;
9. assessment and rethinking of the needs related to the change.

Managing changes in public organizations is very often a result of top-down strategies of exercising political power. This can be considered as having strategic significance in the functioning of an organization. Changes are achieved through a pre-designed top-down implementation process resulting from the new strategy (Dunphy, 2000). Literature on the subject of change management in the public sector indicates greater complexity and ambiguity of this process in public organizations than in business. The importance of the environment in this process is also emphasized (Lutrin and Shani, 1998).

The key factor determining the success of the change implementation process is the understanding of the conditions initiating, determining, and defining it. These factors, interrelated and dependent, both endogenous and exogenous, create the background and, at the same time, the cause of changes. Their intensity and existing constellations make it easier or more difficult to implement new solutions. There is detailed literature raising the subject of the specificity of objectives, the environment, the organizational structure of the public sector and the characteristics of its employees (van der Voet, 2013). In today's theory and practice of management, there is no doubt that participants of organizations decide about the durability of implemented solutions. Their involvement is "sine qua non" to achieve the goal (Denager Staniok, 2016). In the short presentation of change models, the need to win their support is indicated as the basic element conditioning the success of the operation. In literature, the success factors in introducing changes are divided into three categories: process, organizational and people-centred (communication culture) (Dobrovič and Timková).

In the change process, managers can come across different attitudes and behaviour of employees towards change, from hostility to enthusiasm, from resistance to cooperation. The reaction of individuals is a result of forces regarding the nature of change, its consequences for the person concerned, the history of the organization, experience of an individual and their type of personality (Cameron and Green, 2012). There are many critical points in the implementation process (Figure 1).
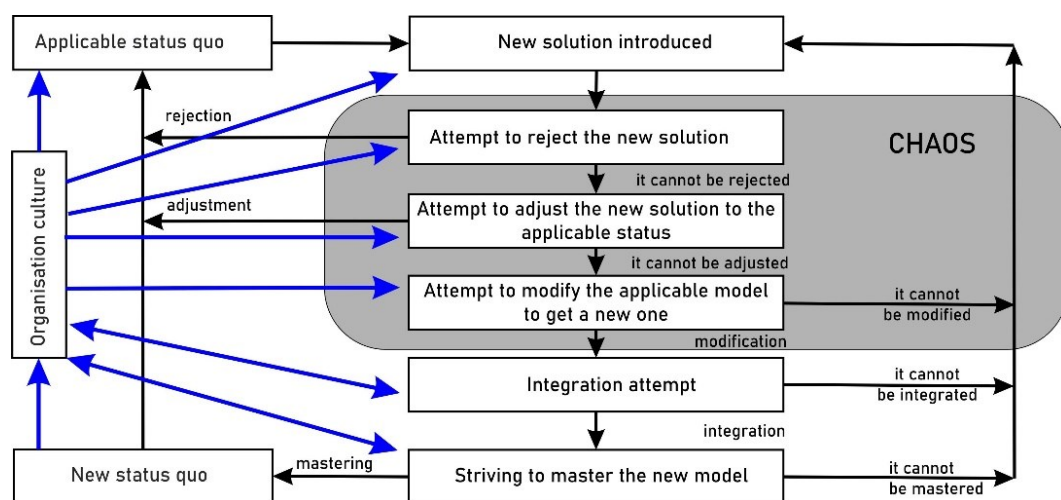

Figure 1. Critical points in the change process in a public organization**.** Adapted from: Cameron and Green, 2012.

In the public sector, there is a permanent tension between the need for a cultural revolution of outdated patterns of bureaucracy to increase flexibility and innovation on one hand, and the willingness to maintain standards and fair procedures necessary for servicing a wide range of stakeholders on the other. Emphasis on flexibility and adaptive and innovative skills is mainly in the sphere of organizational culture. Organizational culture includes a number of complex social phenomena. It is most often identified as a multi-layer construct, which can be divided into layers according to the observability and availability of these phenomena. Culture has been identified as the patterns of common values and beliefs over time, which creates behavioural norms that are adopted in solving organizational problems (Siemiński and Krukowski, 2018). Organizational culture has been recognized as an integral part of successful change initiatives and strategies (Parry and Proctor-Thomson, 2010). "By articulating a vision, fostering the acceptance of group goals, and providing individualized support, effective leaders change the basic values, beliefs, and attitudes of followers so that they are willing to perform beyond the minimum levels specified by the organization" (Podakoff et al., 1996).

One of the main reasons for the resistance to changes is the fact that they can threaten the continuity of the work environment and create a climate of uncertainty and ambiguity. "There are two types of resistance to change that can be encountered during reorganization projects. The first type is an active resistance which means that employees initiate certain actions to block the project or change its scope. The second type is a passive resistance consisting in a lack of involvement of employees in the implementation of tasks" (Strojny and Jedrusik, 2018). Considering the scope and scale of changes implemented in organizations, it is understandable that some employees may strive to maintain the status quo and resist these changes. Most often, resistance results from one or a combination of the following factors (Dawson, 2003):

1. substantive change in the scope of work (change of requirements, skills on the position);
2. reduction of economic security or continuity of employment;
3. psychological threat (perceived or actual);
4. disruption of social conditions (new arrangements for work);
5. lowering the status (redefining the power relations in the organization).

According to expectation theory, resistance will occur if one of the following conditions is met (Lines, 2004):

1. a person has expectations that the relationship between change in behaviour and performance is uncertain;
2. the relationship between inputs and results is uncertain;
3. results have a negative value for an individual.

A significant change in the nature of work and skills required to perform certain functions may lead to distrust and resistance, especially in situations where employees are not informed about the change before its implementation. Even if these threats are reflected in the perception

of the change by an individual rather than in the actual threat, resistance of employees is likely to occur.

When analysing the reasons why employees resist changes, possible causes are (Dawson, 2003):

1. the problem cannot be understood;
2. the implemented solution is not the best from the employees' point of view, because an alternative solution is preferred;
3. there is a sense that the proposed solution will not work;
4. change is associated with unacceptable personnel costs;
5. rewards are not sufficient;
6. there is fear of not being able to cope with the new situation, new requirements;
7. change threatens to destroy existing social arrangements;
8. current sources of influence and control will erode;
9. new values and practices are difficult to accept;
10. the will to change is low;
11. motives for introducing changes are considered suspicious;
12. other interests are more valued than new proposals;
13. change will reduce dynamics and/or career opportunities.

One of the contemporary, intriguing directions of research in the field of sources of resistance against change is to identify the role and significance of organizational cynicism. Cynicism is defined in many ways, but Y. Qian and T.D. Daniels (2008) defined it as being specific to change, referring to a specific organizational change consisting of three dimensions: disbelief in determined or alleged motives of change management, a sense of pessimism and frustration due to efforts to introduce a change and criticism towards a specific change. According to the authors' research, cynicism has a strong influence on the intentions of resistance to change. If a group is dominated by cynicism, resistance will be the most likely reaction to change (Qian and Daniels, 2008).

In literature on the subject, one can also find ambivalence about the attitude to change. Behavioural reactions to change may be contradictory, for example, explicit support for change accompanied by implicit rejection through anonymous criticism in a suggestion box. The need for change may be accepted at the cognitive level, but there can be emotional resistance. The nature of behavioural response is not a simple result of cognitive and affective reactions (Smollan, 2006). Attitudes of employees towards organizational changes are, to a large extent, attributed to situational variables related to the initiative of change and, as a result, they can evolve over time as their experience changes. Moreover, people can have different perceptions, even if they work in the same organizational context and experience the same objective reality and that behaviours and attitudes of individuals are more determined by their perception of reality than by objective reality (Choi, 2011).

Other recommendations include co-optation, negotiation and/or support for people/groups who lose the most with the new solutions, or even forcing expected behaviours. The latter solution gives a quick effect, but it is most often unstable and in the future it may turn the situation into a sharp conflict. Other authors indicate that for the success of implemented changes, the key is to create an innovative climate and a strong vision that builds a sense of responsibility for changes and psychological reinforcement of employees (Seppala et al., 2010).

J. Stewart and P. Kringas (2003), based on research on Australian public organizations, identified success factors in terms of effective implementation of changes. According to these authors, success in implementing changes depends on many factors. However, based on research, they found that it mainly depends on: having a developed model of change; effective leadership; having sufficient resources; communication in the organization; the extent to which the change has been negotiated; political support and support of external stakeholders for a given change.

Based on the conducted research, T.A. Judge et al. (1999, pp. 115-116) identified seven personality factors that positively predisposed to change. They were grouped into two main categories: positive self-concept included: a sense of control, self-efficacy, self-esteem and positive effectiveness, while risk tolerance included: openness to experience, tolerance for ambiguity and risk of aversion.

To sum up the previous considerations, change in contemporary organizations is a typical and permanent state. The ability to draw dynamics and strength of development from it, entering it, as postulated by J.P. Kotter, into the organization's DNA, constitutes the basis of success in the 21st century. Being aware of difficulties and threats faced by managers seeking to build an agile, accelerating organization, let the instructions of P.F. Drucker (1998) be their motto, according to which modern management:

1. is primarily about people – success or failure depends on them;
2. is deeply rooted in culture;
3. requires simple and understandable values, goals and tasks;
4. requires the construction of a learning organization;
5. requires an efficient communication system;
6. must be clearly targeted at the customer.

The above recommendations are of a universal nature and constitute the fundamental basis for the construction of an organization of the future, including public organizations.

3. Methodology and research methods

The objective of the research presented in this article is to identify the conditions of the change process in city councils in Poland. In order to complete the research objective, the survey method was applied. The non-random - non-probabilistic selection method was used. This method uses a targeted selection technique. It has been assumed that the selection of councils of cities in which the number of inhabitants exceeds 20,000, allows for the implementation of the research objective. The research sample accounted for 29.5% of all cities in Poland (there were 269 such cities in Poland). The number of inhabitants was the only parameter characterizing the research sample. The average size of a city taking part in the research was 77,802 inhabitants, the smallest city had 20,075 inhabitants, and the largest had 756,183 inhabitants. Almost 82% of the cities participating in the research had less than 100,000 residents. Only in the case of eight cities it was over 300,000 residents. Three designated persons were surveyed in each council. Five hundred, twenty-two correctly filled questionnaires from 174 councils were received, which accounted for 64.7% of the population. The research was carried out with the CATI research technique (Computer Assisted Telephone Interview).

4. Results

Changes were introduced in all city councils participating in the research. The analysis of the change implementation process should begin with the assessment of causes of changes because they largely determine the nature of tools and the scope of necessary transformations. Most of them were exogenous in nature, resulting from changes imposed or expected by major external stakeholders. Residents expect efficient and fast service, increasingly associated with e-services. Queues, surly or poorly prepared employees of city councils are elements that cannot be afforded today. Introduction of IT management systems (54.4%), standardization systems (27.2%) and customer satisfaction assessments (15.7%) is the response of public managers to these expectations. Thanks to computerization and related digitalization of document flow in city councils, the processes of task implementation can be accelerated. Among the advantages, in addition to lowering operating costs of city councils, the most frequently indicated are the emancipation of employees and an increase in the sense of independence and responsibility for the processes implemented. In addition, the digitization of the process allows for precise determination of the progress of its implementation, identification of bottlenecks and causes of delays and downtime. On the other hand, it shows potential solutions to identified problems. The standardization systems play a different role in meeting the expectations of stakeholders.

Submitting to the procedure of uniform standard requirements allows service standards to be set, covering not only technical issues, such as the time of order execution, document circulation, etc., and issues related to the manner of communication with the customer, but also emphasizing its leading role in new public management. Changes in the standardization systems were, in the authors' opinion, an important (if not a key) element on the way to the creation of a new cultural model, departing from the Weberian model towards new public management. A summary of changes taking place and stressing their importance was a systematic implementation of customer satisfaction surveys. Feedback obtained directly at the source allows for imperfections in currently functioning solutions to be spotted, at the same time indicating new customers' expectations.

The second group of factors initiating changes are opportunities or possibilities created by the environment. Poland's accession to the European Union opened, also for local governments, many new opportunities, such as financing investments, acquiring new knowledge and experience, or establishing contacts for development and cooperation. The respondents' opinions directly correspond with the diagnosis made. Among the most important aspects in this area, the respondents indicated EU programs (39.1%), changes in the law (34.1%) or the example of partner cities (21.6%). Undoubtedly, the EU funds obtained constituted a factor in many changes in city councils. On the one hand, they forced a new way of thinking and operation of city councils. Applications submitted for EU funds had to take into account the requirements of donors regarding objectives, measurable results, durability of selected solutions, or employing solutions preventing social exclusion. On the other hand, numerous trainings, courses, workshops, or study visits, often financed in 100% with EU funds, favoured and facilitated the implementation of new solutions.

The third group of factors, also constituting an exogenous source of changes, were factors resulting from a change in voters' preferences, disregarding the source of this change – a new vision of the post-election city council's functioning (27.8%) or change of the ruling political option (20.5%). Both changes are often associated with the so-called "carousel of positions" in city councils themselves, as well as in subordinate organizational units. For this reason, changes in organizational structures are often initiated because it facilitates the change of personnel. The effectiveness of the functioning of individuals in this case is rather a secondary, if not a tertiary goal.

In one-third of the studied city councils (33.5%) the strategy was changed. The complexity of the conditions initiating this change is too great to clearly indicate its source. It should be presumed that it resulted from a combination of the conditions already discussed, as well as those of an internal nature, including changes in the organizational culture, ambitions and desires of presidents, mayors and their subordinates.

During the implementation of changes, as expected, organizational resistance appeared, however only in 27% of cases, and in the opinion of respondents it was of low intensity. Such a low level of identified resistance may indicate well-prepared changes, or high passivity

of employees functioning for years in the Weberian reality of city councils and reluctance to express their true opinion about the actions taken. Among the identified causes of resistance, only three were of a universal nature: fear of the unknown, preference for current solutions and reluctance to change. In a vast majority of cases misunderstanding of the purpose and sense of changes (95.7%), fear that new requirements will be greater than employees' abilities or the lack of trust towards those implementing changes were observed. In the theoretical approach, it was pointed out that the fear of the unknown and reluctance to change are among the basic reasons for the occurrence of organizational resistance. A well-designed change, however, allows for a solution to this problem to be found by intensifying the communication process about causes and goals of changes (91.2%), building employee support systems (83.2%), continuous mentoring (86%), organizing training and courses raising qualifications (82%), as well as indication of personal benefits of new solutions (82%) and including modifications in assessment (85.4%) and motivating (75.6%) systems. In analysing the respondents' indications, one can also find activities with high, but rather short-term effectiveness, not conducive to building confidence and independence of employees, such as strengthening direct supervision (67.1%), strengthening discipline (70.01%) or forcing changes despite resistance (71%).

The identified low level of organizational resistance provokes reflection on what caused it. Employees' participation, active participation of beneficiaries of changes in the process of its creation and implementation is one of the most frequently indicated recommendations for managers of contemporary organizations. It is emphasized that the involvement of people affected by change will reduce organizational resistance and create a higher level of mental involvement of employees in the proposed changes. In addition, it is argued that participation leads to better-quality decisions (Lines, 2004, p. 194).

The condition for its implementation is a high level of employees' competencies necessary for active and real inclusion in the change process, combined with the intensification of the provision of reliable and up-to-date information on the causes and needs of the organization. The conducted research indicated that these recommendations are equally valid and important in relation to public organizations. In the opinion of the respondents – public managers – the reason for success of actions taken were primarily: well-prepared change (4.0), including employees in the process of designing and implementing change (4.0) and providing employees with complete information on the causes and objectives of the activities (3.9). Public managers, understanding the need and importance of appropriate competences for employees' participation, also indicated a wide range of employee training (3.9), including before the commencement of changes, as a source of success for the planned activities. Opening new perspectives, broadening the horizons of employees and thus creating an appropriate climate for change was enabled by study visits to partner cities (3.6). It was there that formal and informal leaders could see solutions that were to be implemented in their home city councils in practice. Thanks to this, they were acquired and included in the change process (3.7).

The respondents also pointed out that an important factor was creating an atmosphere of trust and cooperation, so that a climate conducive to the actual exchange of thoughts, ideas and solutions would arise (3.7).

Resistance to changes should be treated as something obvious, something that will occur with a high degree of probability; however, it should not be identified in advance with something bad. Rational, diagnosed and verbalized resistance may indicate imperfections of the conducted assessment and designed and/or implemented solutions but, as a consequence, it enables optimization and improvement of the final variant.

5. Notes in the main text

The change management process, understood as a comprehensive process including design, preparation and implementation of change is one of the most difficult tasks for managers. In modern organizations, the scale of difficulty is accumulated by the complexity, dynamics and unpredictability of the conditions of this process as well as the number and intensity of necessary changes that do not allow the organization and its members to "breathe" for a while. The 21st century is a period of permanent changes. Change institutionalization, entering it into the genetic code of an organization, including in public organizations, has become a basic management task. Public managers, like their colleagues from business organizations, operate in a very complex environment. Despite many similarities, it is necessary to indicate a few, but key differences between them. Among the most important differences, one cannot overlook the existence of many stakeholders, often with mutually exclusive interests; the existence of stakeholders with high impact; functioning in a highly politicized environment; no profit as an assessment of effectiveness with the simultaneous assessment from the point of view of civic preferences, political interests or legislative choices; transparency of intra-organizational activities; functioning under strong public control; term limits; implementation of a strategy in accordance with the logic of the political game and relying on the dominant coalition, or less pressure or lack of it from the competitors. The obtained research results indicate that there is a strong conviction among the respondents about the awareness of the change process dynamics and finding their way in such a complex environment. The changes prepared and implemented by them make use of the achievements of modern management science, which is clearly indicated by the solutions used by them that activate participants of changes. The level of activity, emancipation and, consequently, independence of employees increases. Building a climate of trust, opening up to different views and ideas allows us to move away from the Weberian concept of the functioning of city councils.

The basic limitation of the conducted study and, at the same time, the recommendation for future research is the measurement of the concept at many levels of the organizational hierarchy and among different groups of respondents. It is also the use of a long-term research project to capture change in a dynamic approach, including in the organizational culture of city councils. Undoubtedly, it would be interesting to confront the results of research obtained in Polish city councils with their counterparts in other parts of Europe.

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