Ethics in Organizational Change in a Crisis Context

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Abstract

Ethics is inseparable from leadership, either at personal or organizational levels. Without ethics in leadership, organizations may take on a role that could negatively impact the entire world. Ethics can be used to provide organizational leaders with guidelines to promote them as good role models. Since change is unavoidable, an organizational change without aiming at organizational development leads to uncertain results because not all changes produce positive results. Ethical leadership matters in the context of organizational change due to the need for followers to trust the integrity of their leaders. Using literature review method, this study explores the role of ethics in the process of organizational change and development, particularly in the contexts of multiple and extended crises where the leader needs to take into account the human consideration of each decision.

Keywords: *Ethics, Organizational Change, Crisis Context*

1.0 Introduction

Ethics is at the very core of leadership. As Thornton (2020) notes, "Ethics is an ongoing individual and organizational journey." All means that ethics is inseparable from leadership, either at personal or organizational levels. Gini cited by (Stouten et al., 2012) defined ethical leaders as people who use their social power in their decisions, their actions, and their influence on others in such a way that they act in the best interest of followers. Lakshmi (2014) notes that in the present global context, unethical conduct by leaders has brought ethics to the center of discussion on leadership and its role in today's world. He says that the absence of respect, honesty, integrity, and trust at the leadership level would be catastrophic for any institution, organization, or company (Lakshmi, 2014).

As observed by Hartog (2015), high-profile cases of leaders' ethical failures in different settings and sectors have led to increased attention to ethical leadership in organizations. Without ethics in leadership, organizations may take on a role that could negatively impact the entire world. Ethics can be used to provide organizational leaders with guidelines to promote them as good role models (Cammi, 2012).

This paper explores the role of ethics in the process of organizational change and development, particularly in the contexts of multiple and extended crises where the leader needs to take into account the human consideration of each decision. An organizational change without aiming at organizational development leads to uncertain results because not all changes produce

positive results. Therefore, any successful organizational change process needs to consider ethical conduct and principles.

2.0 Leadership and Ethics

Wells and Walker (2016) say that in any organization, one constant thing is change. Ethical leadership matters in the context of organizational change due to the need for followers to trust the integrity of their leaders. Keselman and Saxe-Braithwaite (2021) observe that the costs of unethical behavior can be even greater for followers. When one assumes the responsibilities of leadership, they also assume ethical burdens. Unethical leadership may lead to "follower disappointment and distrust, leading to lack of interest and commitment, consequently negatively impacting patient outcomes and organizational effectiveness" (Keselman & Saxe-Braithwaite, 2021). That means leaders should be a key source of ethical guidance for employees (Brown et al., 2005). Yet, there have been few studies investigating ethical leadership and organizational change (Sharif & Scandura, 2014). This is another way to say that the study of ethics and leadership is a very vacant area that needs much attention from researchers.

Ethical Leadership

Sankar (2003), as cited by Prinsloo & Klerk (2020), claims that there is a global crisis of moral character in leadership and that moral failures can, at least partly, be attributed to the absence of integrity and moral character. It appears that leaders are often appointed or selected based on their track record of results, charisma, and functional management competencies, at the possible cost of sacrificing integrity and moral character. Although charisma and competencies are important, they do not guarantee a morally upstanding leader (Prinsloo & Klerk, 2020). An individual can be highly intelligent in one or more fields but fail miserably as a moral agent (Nhedzi & Gombarume, 2021).

Ethical leaders are seen as being responsible for inspiring moral values and ethical standards among their followers and serve as role models who promote ethical behavior and good morals by fostering employee-organization relationships, which, in turn, lead followers to be emotionally attached to their organization (Mitonga-Monga & Cilliers, 2016). In short, ethical leaders have been described as honest, caring, and principled individuals who make fair and balanced decisions (Knox et al., 2022).

A study conducted by Brown et al. (2005) concludes that ethical leadership is characterized by considerate behavior, honesty, trustworthiness, and interactional fairness. Additionally, concludes the study, ethical leadership predicts outcomes such as the perceived effectiveness of leaders, followers' job satisfaction and dedication, and the followers' willingness to report problems to management (Brown et al., 2005).

Brunner (2017) argues that the organization's leadership establishes the moral compass/direction of the organization as a whole. Given the complexity of working within an organization, leaders often face various stakeholders who may consider compromising the organization's values during a crisis, which should be considered when making ethical decisions. However, the responsible exercise of moral action requires careful consideration of the circumstances, especially from the point of view of all relevant stakeholders; it is the duty of moral agents to foresee the possible consequences during their deliberations. Nhedzi and Gombarume (2021) quote Tao and Kim (2017:698) asserting that without an ethical compass to guide its decisions, an organization could adopt strategies that oppose stakeholder expectations, strain its relationships with stakeholders and risk its legitimacy. A study

conducted by Mitonga-Monga and Cilliers (2016) indicates that ethical leadership perceptions have a significant influence on the level of organizational commitment.

Ethical Leadership During Crisis

Coombs (2014) defines crisis as the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders related to health, safety, environmental, and economic issues, and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes. Knox et al. (2022) add that crises are complex and dynamic events that test even the most ethical leaders at all levels. During crises, leaders must make decisions quickly to react to the scenarios presented at a given moment. The need to make quick decisions in a rapidly changing crisis often causes leaders to satisfice, making decisions that are satisfactory for the situation. However, when satisficing, leaders do not consider all potential alternatives nor do they fully consider the ethicality of their decisions. This way can be particularly dangerous during a compounding crisis where two or more crises occur simultaneously, such as war and a pandemic (Knox et al., 2022).

Crises, varying from an organization's wrongdoings to natural catastrophes, often result in destruction and even death, which interrupt the organization's business routine, threaten public safety, or cause reputational and financial loss. During a crisis, when the feasibility and sustainability of an organization are enormously threatened, ethical decision-making is crucial, as stakeholders' trust is frequently at its lowest (Nhedzi & Gombarume, 2021). The same authors also assert that when the impact of a crisis is high, and its consequences are deemed severe, the public expects organizations to handle the crisis with high moral principles. Nhedzi & Gombarume (2021) suggest that when leading in crisis, the leader needs to be authentic, empathetic, and truthful about how the organization is handling the crisis. When things go wrong, the leader needs to be honest, own up to mistakes, and be ready to give an apology. During a crisis, successful leaders are open and transparent about what happened during a crisis. They are sensitive to stakeholders' urgent needs in a crisis even at the expense of profits. Finally, the leader needs to be truthful and not mislead stakeholders. In other words, the effect of a particular crisis on the organization often depends on the leader's ethical conduct and decisions.

Organizational Change

Organizational change is a concept of great importance that has attracted researchers' interest for many years, and without doubt, is crucial for enhancing and improving organizational effectiveness and/or ensuring organizational growth (Aravopoulou, 2015). According to Burnes (2004), change is an ever-present feature of organizational life, both at an operational and strategic level. Therefore, there should be no doubt regarding the importance to any organization of its ability to identify where it needs to be in the future, and how to manage the changes required to get there (Rune, 2005). The word *change* could be characterized as multidimensional with multiple meanings because it refers to and is synonymous with concepts such as "transformation, development, metamorphosis, transmutation, evolution, regeneration, innovation, revolution, and transition" (Aravopoulou, 2015).

The Process of Change

There are many different models for the change process in the literature. The following is a simple, straightforward one proposed by Egan (1988, p. 5). He delineates three steps. The first step is the assessment of the current scenario, which provides the necessary information on the forces that can facilitate the desired change and the forces that will resist and deter the change. The creation of a preferred scenario is the second step, which is often accomplished through a

team effort in brainstorming and developing alternative futures. It is important to examine the various alternatives thoroughly. The third step is designing a plan that moves the system from the current to the preferred scenario: this includes the strategies and plans that the leader must develop to overcome the restraining forces in an organization. It is difficult to attain positive change without thorough assessment, examining the various alternatives, then designing a plan. These steps are political processes, requiring individuals to harness and utilize power. Power is necessary for change to occur. It is neither inherently good nor bad; it simply assists individuals in accomplishing their goals. However, power without ethical considerations can easily conduct the leader to coercion and fail to lead the required and expected change.

Key Roles in the Change Process

During the planning stage of organizational change, it is useful to distinguish the differences that the leader play associated with the change process. These roles must remain distinctive to implement planned change effectively. The various roles that individuals can play, as described by Conner (1990) are Change Sponsor: the individual or group who legitimizes the change. Conner says that one of the crucial tasks for the leader in implementing change is to "harness the support of an effective change sponsor" (Conner, 1990) since he is in a position to legitimize the change. In case of certain limitations, Conner suggests that weak sponsors should be educated or replaced, even by someone at a lower level in the organization, or, he emphasizes, failure will be inevitable (Conner, 1990).

Another role is Change Advocate: the individual or group who wants to achieve a change but does not possess legitimization power. They perceive the need for change and desire and advocate the change, but they do not have the necessary organizational power to implement it. The third role, which may be filled by multiple individuals is change agents. These are individuals or groups of people who are responsible for implementing the change. Finally, there is a Change Target: the individual or group who must change. Alternatively, change advocate individuals may function as the change agent, with the responsibility (but again, not the power) to implement change. And, of course, in an organizational change effort, the leadership team may be part of the group affected by the change, or the change target. It is useful to consider each of these roles in planning strategies not only for implementation but for gathering support for the change effort.

Organizational Change Models

Implementation of changes in an organization can be realized by using one of the several elaborated models of change. These change models are Lewin's Model of Change, Action Research Model, Positive Model of Change, and Donaldson's SARFIT Model.

Lewin's Model of Change

Lewin's Model of Change is a planned change in which the change agent (a person who facilitates change through group interventions) must follow three steps before change became a part of the system (Cummings & Worley, 2015). These three steps are: unfreeze, change, and freeze. Unfreezing takes place when the change agent convinces the members of one group to change, in this way, people become aware of the necessity of change. In the change step the change agent identifies, plans, and implements appropriate strategies, making him/her assure that strong powers in the organization are more than repressed ones. The freezing step is based on the change agent's help in the stabilization of change. If the freeze step is incomplete, change will be ineffective. The change agent in this last step must be very supportive and he has to strengthen the adaptation effort of individuals who are affected by the change (Cummings & Worley, 2009). Ignoring these three steps can lead to a linear process of change where the

change process becomes endless. Consequently, it is difficult to see the importance of the desired change. Additionally, it will be difficult to evaluate the change itself as well as its processes.

Action Research Model

Another classical model of change is referred to as the Action Research Model, which, according to Dalati (2017), examines change as a process starting with diagnoses of the organization and data collection, action planning and implementation, as well as careful evaluation of outcomes of change. The model comprises eight stages starting with problem identification, then consulting with an organizational development practitioner, who will eventually and in conjunction with the organization perform data collection and preliminary diagnoses. This will be followed by providing feedback to the client organization, which will consequently be discussed and examined as joint diagnoses of the problem where a client–consultant effective joint diagnosis is performed. The next stage examines the development of a joint action plan, which will be implemented subsequently. Finally, data will be collected after the action has been implemented to evaluate the outcomes of the action and provide further feedback to the organization (Dalati, 2017). There is a correlation between the two authors (Dalati, 2017; Egan, 1988). The first author examines change as a process starting with diagnoses of the organization and data collection, action planning and implementation, as well as careful evaluation of outcomes of change. The second author, when talking about models for the change process, mentions thorough assessment, examining the various alternatives, then designing a plan. The key concepts they use indicate that change does not just happen, it's a process and needs particular attention for its success. This process does not concern just an individual but all the members of the entire organization.

The Positive Model of Change

The third model of change, the positive model, represents an important departure from Lewin's model and the action research process. Those models focus on the organization's problems and how they can be solved so it functions better. The positive model focuses on what the organization is doing right. It helps members understand their organization when it is working at its best and builds off those capabilities to achieve even better results (Cummings & Worley, 2015). This model contains several steps, such as initiation of inquiry, a step that facilitates people's involvement in problem identification. Inquiry into best practices, as another step, means information gathering about what is going well in the organization. Themes discovery is taken place under several discussions among the members of the organization. The discussions aim to identify those themes/subjects which have a common impact on each member of the organization. Envisioning a preferred future is based on the previous successes of the organization. In this step, the members of the organization describe the future identifying the stakeholders and the critical procedures of the organization, procedures that need improvement. In the last step, those activities which help the organization to achieve its aims are described and implemented (Cummings & Worley, 2009). The positive model of change is about involving everyone in the process, particularly when identifying the problem. It is important to note that if the problem identification is not done by everyone in the organization, the results can be resistance, negligence, and absenteeism in the change process.

SARFIT Model of Organizational Change

SARFIT (structural adaptation to regain fit) Model of Organizational Change was elaborated by Donaldson (2001) and it is based on performance and structural features of the organization. This model contains two main structural features and three main unpredictable situations which

affect the organizational structure. The two structural elements are bureaucracy and differentiation, and the three contingencies are organization size, task uncertainty, and task interdependence. These three contingencies are identified by Donaldson (2001) as unpredictable situations. The structural feature of bureaucracy has three main elements: specialization, formalization, and centralization/decentralization. Differentiation means activity grouping with the aim of division and contrasting the structures. SARFIT Model of Change is a theoretical model of change, that shows the direction of change, and how changes in structural features of an organization react to performance changes (Cummings & Worley, 2009). It is important to note that ethics is the hub of all the different change models. There is no change model which does not need attention to ethical behaviors and decisions.

Resistance to Change

With every major and minor change, resistance typically occurs. In every implementation process of change could appear a so-called resistance to change. According to Marinescu (2004), resistance to change is a positive phenomenon because it proves stability and permits the prediction of organizational behavior. The effects of resistance to change could be negative because it generates conflicts inside the organization.

Individual Resistance

The primary reason for resistance to change is that people fear change. They are not usually eager to forego the familiar, safe, routine ways of conducting their business in favor of unknown and possibly unsafe territory (Marinescu, 2004). Humans tend to prefer routines and accumulate habits easily; however, fear of change may be attributed to more than a tendency toward regularity. In agreement with Marinescu (2004), change represents the unknown. It could mean the possibility of failure, the relinquishing or diminishing of one's span of control and authority, or the possibility of success creating further change. It might be that the planned change has little or no effect on the organization whatsoever. Any one of these possibilities can cause doubt and thus fear, understandably causing resistance to the change efforts.

Organizational Resistance

With even this very brief discussion on the difficulties involved in individual change, it should be apparent that this phenomenon occurs at the organizational level as well. Organizations, regardless of size, are composed of individuals. The extent to which individuals within the organization can appropriately manage change represents the overall organizational capacity for change. However, according to Bridges (1980), there are other factors peculiar to the organizational setting that can act as barriers to implementing change. Inertia, as one of the factors, causes the day-to-day demands of work to diminish the urgency of implementing the change effort until it slowly vanishes within the organization. This factor can lead to an organizational status quo. Lack of clear communication is another factor. If information concerning the change is not communicated clearly throughout the organization, individuals will have different perceptions and expectations of the change. Consequently, confusion can take place during the change process. The low-risk environment constitutes another factor. In an organization that does not promote change and tends to punish mistakes, individuals develop a resistance to change, preferring instead to continue in safe, low-risk behaviors. This factor can lead to organizational stagnation. The lack of sufficient resources forms the final factor. If the organization does not have sufficient time, staff, funds, or other resources to fully implement the change, the change efforts will be sabotaged. These factors, combined with other characteristics of the specific organization, can undermine the change effort and create resistance (Bridges, 1980). A wise change agent will spend the necessary time to anticipate and

plan for ways to manage resistance. Any change agent, sponsor, or advocate who does not consider ethics in handling change resistance can easily fall into coercion. Thus, the failure to change is obvious.

Ethical Response to Change Resistance

Marinescu (2004), suggests some methods to reduce resistance to change: Involvement of people from the organization in the process of change. This method is the most important method to reduce resistance to change, because it determines a direct and open confrontation of people, and also creates an opportunity to open discussions among them about the nature of change. Identification of the inconvenience sources is the other method to reduce resistance to change. Those people from the organization who are afraid of change do not have to be threatened and sanctioned. The other method to reduce resistance to change, according to Marinescu (2004), is communication with people from the organization. Communication as a method to reduce resistance to change is efficient only when the main cause of resistance is the lack of information regarding the change. Manipulation is the last method to reduce resistance to change. This method consists of misinformation of the facts so that these appear more attractive by hiding the unpleasant information (Sveda, 2012). The manipulation can become an ethical dilemma if not handled with care and ethical principles. It highly depends on the leader in charge of the change. Partiality and self-ambitions can mislead the processes.

Hutton A. in *The Change Agent's Handbook: a survival guide for quality improvement champions* presents people's expectations regarding change and what they get in reality. In the change process, people want to be listened to, to influence the events, and to be involved in the planning. At the same time is important for them to receive information about what will happen and how the change will influence their life. despite these, they don't get all the time what they expect. Most of the time they met authoritative behaviors and too busy management to explain the necessity and the consequences of change (Sveda, 2012).

Ethical Leadership in Organizational Change

Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005), as cited by Wells & Walker (2016), described ethical leadership as the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision making (p. 120). While the first portion of the definition aligns with the moral behavior of a leader, the second portion goes beyond this judgment to the responsibility of reinforcing ethical behavior in followers (Wells & Walker, 2016).

An ethical leader guiding the change effort has been found to positively impact employees' work-related attitudes and performance (Sharif & Scandura, 2013, as cited by Wells & Walker (2016). Ethical leaders who plan organizational change want the change to be ethical and transparent, which provides a positive orientation toward a change agent and influences an employee's response, whether reluctant or not, to the change process. When employees are encouraged to participate, they perceive their leader to be ethical (Wells & Walker, 2016).

Ethical Dilemma in organizational change

Although adherence to statements of ethics helps prevent the occurrence of ethical problems, organization changes and development practitioners still encounter ethical dilemmas (Cummings & Worley, 2015). The entry and contracting phase of planned change is intended to address and clarify these differences. As a practical matter, however, it is unreasonable to assume that all of the differences will be identified and resolved. Under such circumstances,

suggest Cummings & Worley (2015), the subsequent intervention process or role episode is almost certainly subject to role conflict and role ambiguity. Neither the follower nor the leader is clear about their respective responsibilities. Each party is pursuing different goals, and each is using different skills and values to achieve those goals. Role conflict and ambiguity may produce five types of ethical dilemmas: misrepresentation, misuse of data, coercion, value and goal conflict, and technical ineptness (Cummings & Worley, 2015).

3.0 Conclusion

Change is inevitable, and mastering change is, therefore, fundamental to the success of any organization. Organizations which can cope with change and harness its energy will be vital and effective. In agreement with Sveda (2012), the objectives of organizational change are to improve organizational efficiency and to adapt the organization to external factors. In order words, organizational change without aiming at organizational development leads to worse conditions or stagnation. Organizational change involves most of the time a redesign of organizational structure, cultural changes, and clarification of roles and responsibilities. Particularly when talking about organizational change in a crisis context, ethical decisions are highly recommended because any change affects individuals working within the organization. Consequently, ethical decisions are key for leading to successful change and development.

4.0 Recommendation

As discussed in this article, organizational change is the hub of organizational development. One of the main components of a successful organizational change is ethics. It is particularly very important when the leader is leading change in a crisis context because stakeholders need to own the change processes. Leaders should remember that human resources are more valuable than any other organizational asset. Therefore, ethical leadership, characterized by considerate behavior, honesty, trustworthiness, and interactional fairness is most needed when leading organizational change in a crisis context.

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