

Organizational Climate: Prelude to Change

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SCHOLARS hold that in a dynamic, pluralistic society such as the one in which we live, change is one of the few universals. Institutions such as the public school are creations of society and came into existence to serve a particular or special role.

Current unrest on the campuses of both high schools and universities across the land indicates, among other things, that all is not well with the educational program currently in existence. The questions before us are: "How does one bring about change in an organization, and are there ways and means of bringing about planned, deliberate, rational change by evolution rather than revolution?"

Any significant change in education will be related closely to change in people—teachers, pupils, and administrators. Further, it is suggested that change in perception is basic to behavioral change, change in the way each role incumbent views himself. Basic to all of these concerns is the question, "What is the proper role of the public school in this society?" Many organizational changes are in vogue today, for example, team teaching, nongrading, independent study, flexible scheduling, and computer-aided instruction. However, each of these so-called "trends" is merely an attempt to individualize instruction and will not change a teacher with a limited, traditional perception of his role as the teller, the child's role as a sponge, and

the school's role as conveyer of knowledge and the cultural heritage.

The Change Model

A model should be viewed as: (a) a means for synthesis of related parts; and (b) a theoretical basis for decision making.

The model presented in Figure 1 is a synthesis of ideas from social psychology and sociology, as well as the writer's own thoughts. It includes the elements of organizational climate; disequilibrium; input alternatives; selection and adaptation; trial and evaluation; and adoption, rejection, or revision and trial. The latter three phases may well be viewed as somewhat parallel to curriculum planning, curriculum design, curriculum implementation, and curriculum evaluation.

This particular model is essentially concerned with the specific topic of change, however, and does not include the totality of curriculum development. Historical, philosophical, psychological, and sociological considerations would certainly enter into the picture in selection and adaptation, while design factors would be of much concern at this point. The model should be viewed, then, as prelude to full-scale curriculum development.

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Following is a description of each of the categories depicted in the model.

Organizational Climate

The climate of an organization is the first and most important concern in initiating and sustaining change. People simply do not change in a threatening atmosphere—they become defensive and entrench. They may change surface behaviors—conform—receive and respond at the lowest level possible and acceptable to the powers that be; but attitudinal change and subsequent behavioral change must be preceded by perceptual change. This implies a willingness to accept new information. It is here that the stage for change is set.

It appears that climate is often neglected by status leaders in their eagerness to move the organization toward a predetermined goal. To do this is to neglect the fact that organizations are peopled and can accomplish goals only through people. People have needs and ways of disposing of those needs which must be given priority in organizational development. Organizational climate

always exists. It is not either absent or present. It is good or bad, open or closed, supportive or not, authoritarian or democratic, perhaps more frequently ambivalent. Regardless of its state, it exists. The task is first to define it and then bring the climate into a state of readiness or openness for the objective examination and selection of alternative approaches. Too frequently status leaders assume that there is a readiness or openness for change, while more often this proves to be a false assumption.

A significant aspect of organizational climate relates to goal formulation. Social psychologists repeatedly have documented that cohesive groups have well defined goals. In fact, by definition groups do not exist in the absence of goals. Without well defined goals there exists only a collection of individuals, perhaps each of whom is spending much effort and energy in meeting individual goals which may either be in conflict or in harmony with other goals. This is not to say that there is not a place in an organization for individual goals. Rather, the implication is that if institutional goals are identified in operational terms, personal and

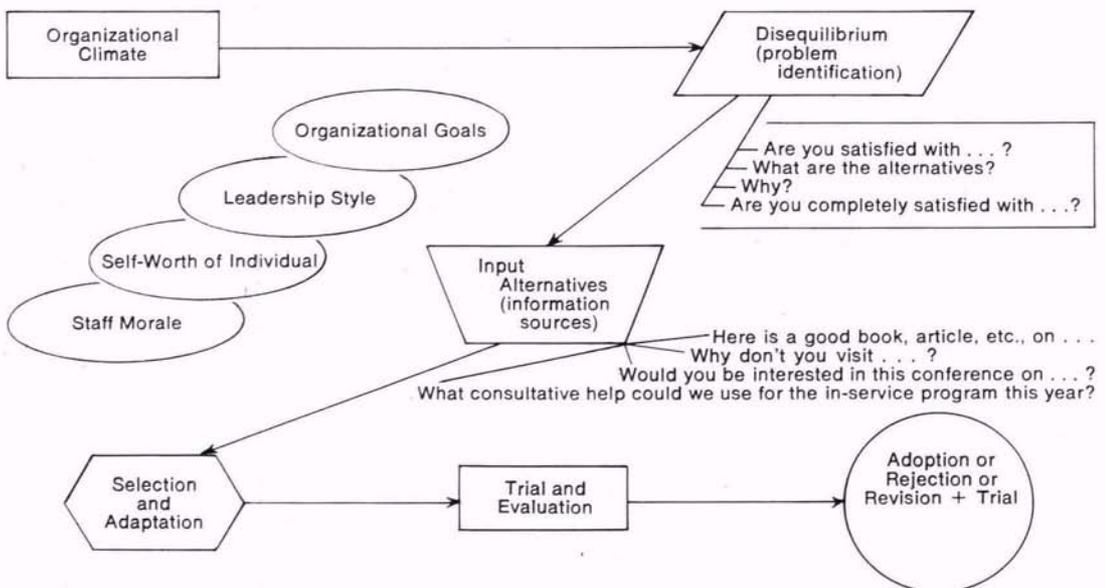


Figure 1. Organizational Factors Related to Change

institutional needs may be served concurrently. Clearly, the extent to which there is congruence of organizational and individual goals is a direct reflection of the health of the organization.

Leadership is a dimension which is crucial in development of a climate for change or, perhaps better stated, a climate for openness—openness to examine objectively the alternatives. Guba and Getzels¹ suggest that the primary role of a status leader is to bring about a blending of the institution, its roles, and expectations with the individual, his personality, and needs disposition. Such a leadership style denies that organization and individual are natural enemies. It suggests that ultimately organizational goals can best be accomplished through self-actualizing individuals.

Two additional concerns complete the primary ideas related to organizational climate. These two ideas, morale and self-worth of the individual, are closely interrelated. An individual cannot have high morale in an organization unless he feels that he is a worthy, contributing member of that organization. This suggests that roles and institutional expectations toward that role must be made explicit from the outset and that individuals must be allowed the freedom or opportunity to fulfill a role in which he is most competent. Such freedom places the responsibility to become a contributing member of the group clearly in the hands of the individual.

At maturity, self-worth derives essentially from interaction with others, so interactive situations must be abundant. This, together with the fact that persons who are valued members of a group feel much greater cohesiveness for that group, activates the process whereby individual and group goals become somewhat congruent. Cohesiveness results in the openness that can lead to responsible activity in examining alternatives, which eventually produces organizational change. Morale may well be defined as agreement with goals, a positive feeling about in-

stitutional roles and expectations, and self-worth. Guba and Getzels² add another dimension which they refer to as rationality—the extent to which an individual is in agreement with the means being used for goal attainment.

These factors then determine organizational climate: goal definition, leadership style, morale, and self-worth. They must receive prime attention in planning for change.

Disequilibrium

The emphasis in the climate stage of organizational development is upon people. The emphasis in the disequilibrium stage is upon organizational goals. It is essentially one of problem identification, for out of problems identified come the ideas and commitment for goal setting activities. If the climate has become an open one, then people can candidly identify problems without fear of misinterpretation or reprisal. And problems must be identified in view of established goals. "How well are we doing what we have specified we want to do?" "In what areas are we falling short of the target goals?"

This suggests rather strongly that problem identification comes from goal *evaluation* and this conclusion is essentially correct, as program development progresses. Yet what are the sources of problem identification at the outset? Hopefully, problem identification activates alternative-seeking behaviors. If so, then any point of departure would appear to be appropriate. It is believed that persons tend to follow a "hierarchy of needs" approach, somewhat related to Maslow's ideas, in the identification of problems. That is, a person will first identify as problems those "other" oriented *things*—physical concerns—before he will identify problems related to himself, the program, and the implementation of program.

Perhaps this approach, moving from impersonal to personal concerns, from micro to macro views of problems, may be explained in the same way we would explain the searching, probing, testing of the antenna of the insect. A person may sense that the climate

² *Ibid.*

¹ Egon G. Guba and Jacob W. Getzels. "Social Behavior and Administrative Process." *The School Review* 65: 429; Winter 1957.

of the organization is such that he may very openly search for alternatives. He may want to collect additional, more objective data in a relatively non-threatening domain, those "other" oriented problems, to substantiate his feelings. And, as Maslow suggests, until these lower order needs or, in this case, problems are met, moving to higher order needs is most difficult, if not impossible. The thrust in this stage, then, is one of helping people to become uncomfortable with the status quo and activated toward establishing direction—priorities—and in seeking alternative modes of behavior.

Remaining Cycle

What remains is more typical of the areas usually given consideration in the change process. Frequently the climate and the disequilibrium stages are omitted or given only incidental treatment. Often the status leader has identified problems and solutions to these problems for the organization and begins the change process with an attempt to input alternatives. He wonders why this information or these attempts to funnel new information into the system fall on non-receptive ears.

What has happened is that he has supplied possible answers to questions that do not yet exist in the mind of the practitioner. Until the practitioner feels a need for answers, why should he receive information? Such information is only a small sampling of the masses of data that he must continually sift and sort for what is relevant.

Once need is identified, a rather automatic step is the search for alternatives. The leadership role then is one of helping to identify sources of information, making in-service education possible, and identifying consultants and conferences which are concerned with the specific problem(s) under study. This is the awareness stage, that is, awareness of a wide range of alternatives. The seeking of information related to the solution of a particular problem should not be viewed as an attempt to find a tailor-made solution but as a point of departure. Creative activity frequently results from interaction with the

ideas of others. Selection from among alternatives results in creative action, either in choosing the appropriate parts and synthesizing these parts into a composite or in the origination of a completely new concept.

Steps which follow are trial, evaluation, and adoption or revision. Frequently, educational innovations are evaluated in contrast with the traditional approach which has been utilized. The assumption inherent in this approach is that the innovation will do everything done by traditional approach—better, and that it will do other things in addition. Perhaps a superior approach is to evaluate an innovation in light of the specified goals or objectives of the project. Data collected toward this end are then functional for both diagnostic and summary evaluation purposes.

The model described has the unique feature of basic and initially strong consideration for organizational climate. This climate is the cornerstone for educational change. It provides the openness which allows psychological disequilibrium rather than defensive behavior. Without a supportive climate much time and effort will be spent in building high walls of defense, always to view alternative approaches to status quo as the enemy. What is desired instead is an openness and the courage to admit that clear, pat answers to highly complex issues do not now exist.

With this admission comes the challenge to examine other approaches. And in searching lies the excitement of teaching that makes one's pulse pound and tempts one to shout, "Eureka!" Is this the idea that will end the search? Or is this the idea that will open another intellectual door of clarity and insight which leads us still further on a journey which is, perhaps, never ending so long as professional life is with us?

What is your "climate" for change? Can you live with uncertainty? Or does ambiguity "bug" you to the point that you must freeze in an idea or practice so rigidly that you are not psychologically comfortable enough to periodically submit that idea for examination and appraisal? Can education afford such a luxury?

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