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The role of leadership in organizational transformation

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Abstract

Organizational change is a complex and inevitable process in the life of any institution. This process requires strong leadership and active participation in group decision-making. Leadership goes beyond directing; it includes inspiring, motivating, and guiding members in navigating the dynamics of transformation. An effective leader is expected to articulate a clear and inspiring vision, communicate it effectively, and make courageous decisions in the face of uncertainty. This study employs a qualitative approach through literature analysis to explore leadership roles in organizational change. Findings indicate that transformational, transactional, and situational leadership styles contribute significantly to successful change management. Moreover, the ability to build collaborative teams and manage resistance plays a vital role. Leadership not only initiates change but also facilitates organizational adaptation, ensuring long-term sustainability and competitiveness.

Keywords: organizational change; leadership; vision; team collaboration; decision making

INTRODUCTION

Organizational change requires strong leadership and active involvement in group decision-making (Muktamar et al., 2023). Leadership refers to a process by which a leader influences followers to interpret circumstances, select organizational goals, organize tasks, and motivate members, while maintaining internal cooperation and external collaboration (Nurwardah et al., 2023).

Organizational change often involves deep structural or cultural transformations, not merely superficial improvements or temporary adjustments. Such change may include shifts in work practices, mindset, and operational processes, which significantly impact how the organization functions and interacts with its environment. Hence, organizational change is not merely a reaction to external developments but also a proactive effort toward innovation and achieving long-term goals (Ambarwati, 2003).

In today's dynamic landscape—shaped by market volatility, technological advancement, and socio-economic shifts—organizations must adapt swiftly to remain relevant and competitive. Changes are not only triggered externally, but also internally, aiming to improve efficiency, performance, and innovation capacity (Armiyanti et al., 2023). Consequently, organizational change is not an option but a strategic necessity for sustainability and development.

The urgency of change can be seen through its impact on organizational competitiveness. Organizations that adapt effectively acquire competitive advantages, while those that resist transformation face stagnation or decline (Hayadi et al., 2024). In this regard, leadership plays an essential role. Leaders must not only initiate change, but also inspire, guide, and communicate a compelling vision to align organizational members toward shared goals (Helmi et al., 2023).

Leadership is at the core of every organizational transformation process—whether it concerns structure, culture, or strategy. Effective leaders must not only present a clear vision but also possess the ability to inspire and empower team members to embrace and implement change. Leadership, therefore, is the art of influencing behavior and directing people toward common objectives (Sagala, 2018).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach with a focus on literature analysis. This approach was selected to obtain an in-depth understanding of the role of leadership in organizational change. A qualitative design allows researchers to explore the context, dynamics, and complexity of leadership roles during periods of transformation (Creswell, 2014).

The primary data sources in this study are scholarly literature related to leadership roles, supporting theoretical frameworks, and recent studies examining the relationship between leadership styles and organizational transformation. The materials reviewed include books, journal articles, and relevant research studies used to construct a conceptual framework and gain comprehensive insights.

Data were collected through systematic and extensive literature searches from credible academic sources such as academic databases, university libraries, and electronic platforms. The study falls within the scope of a literature review, which, according to Creswell (2014), is a written summary of journal articles, books, and other documents describing both past and current theoretical insights, organized into topics and necessary references.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Leadership can be defined as the ability of an individual to influence, direct, and motivate others—either individually or collectively—toward the achievement of shared goals. In organizational contexts, leadership focuses on a leader's influence in fulfilling the organization's vision and mission, particularly in navigating change (Sagala, 2018). Leadership involves behavior aimed at influencing followers to effectively and efficiently attain common objectives.

Leadership is not solely about issuing directives or maintaining control; it fundamentally entails motivating, inspiring, and guiding others to overcome challenges and realize shared aspirations. During periods of organizational change, the role of leadership becomes increasingly critical, as leaders must ensure that all elements of the

organization are able to adapt and move forward in unison (Asiri et al., 2024). A capable leader must possess the motivational capacity to influence followers' behaviors, including those related to learning and development (Farihin et al., 2021).

Various leadership approaches can be applied to manage organizational change more effectively. These approaches emphasize leadership styles most suitable for a given context or the specific nature of the change. Among the most discussed models in organizational change are transactional leadership, transformational leadership, and situational leadership.

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership is centered on the exchange or transactional relationship between leaders and followers. In the context of organizational change, transactional leaders emphasize rules, procedures, and tight control to ensure orderly and consistent execution of change processes. Rewards or sanctions are applied based on performance outcomes (Insan, 2017). This style is particularly effective in technical and structured change efforts, such as improving workflows or implementing new policies that do not necessitate cultural transformation. However, it is often insufficient to drive innovation or facilitate radical transformation in complex change environments.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership focuses on creating a compelling vision that inspires and motivates followers to pursue goals beyond routine expectations. Transformational leaders foster a culture of innovation and growth by empowering team members and cultivating strong emotional bonds (Tucunan et al., 2014). This leadership style is highly relevant in change contexts that require cultural shifts, new ways of thinking, and creative problem-solving. Transformational leaders also encourage commitment to organizational goals and enable greater autonomy in decision-making (Armiyanti et al., 2023).

Situational Leadership

Situational leadership underscores the need for leaders to adapt their leadership style to the specific demands of each change scenario. Leaders must assess whether the transformation pertains to structural, cultural, or strategic aspects and then apply the most suitable leadership approach (Nasir, 2020). For instance, decisive and directive leadership may be necessary in urgent circumstances, while a more participatory and empowering approach may be better suited for innovation-driven change initiatives. Situational leadership offers the flexibility required to confront a range of organizational challenges effectively (Ramadhan et al., 2024).

Essential Leadership Qualities in Change Management

Effective leaders in organizational change exhibit several essential qualities that enable them to successfully facilitate and manage transformation. Organizational change frequently presents significant challenges, ranging from internal resistance to external uncertainty. Therefore, leaders must be resilient, adaptive, and inspirational (Putri et al., 2024). The following are the core leadership qualities necessary for navigating organizational change:

1. A Clear and Inspirational Vision

Vision is a critical element in any organizational change initiative. Leaders who can articulate a realistic and compelling vision help organizational members understand the broader purpose of change and the long-term benefits it aims to achieve. A clear vision provides direction, coherence, and motivation, aligning the organization toward common goals (Calam et al., 2020; Kusumaputri, 2015). Without a strong vision, organizational change risks becoming unfocused and ineffective.

2. Effective Communication Skills

Clear and consistent communication is essential for leading change. Leaders must be capable of conveying the vision, goals, and roadmap for change to all levels of the organization. Transparent communication reduces uncertainty, builds trust, and prevents misinformation during periods of transformation (Helmi et al., 2023). Effective leaders communicate through multiple channels and tailor their messaging to resonate with diverse stakeholders.

3. Courage to Take Risks

Change processes inherently involve risk and uncertainty. Effective leaders must demonstrate the courage to make difficult decisions—even those that deviate from the status quo—when those decisions support long-term organizational improvement. Risk-taking includes the willingness to challenge existing norms and embrace innovative solutions (Tucunan et al., 2014; Rachman et al., 2023).

4. Capacity to Build Strong and Collaborative Teams

Resistance to change is one of the most common barriers in organizational transformation. Effective leaders must identify sources of resistance, whether they stem from individuals, groups, or organizational structures, and develop strategies to address them constructively. Building a strong, collaborative team that supports the change initiative is essential for overcoming resistance and sustaining momentum (Hayadi et al., 2024; Jambak et al., 2023).

Strategic Leadership Approaches in Driving Change

Effective leadership in driving organizational change requires a strategic approach that guides the organization through complex and often challenging transformation processes. Two fundamental aspects of strategic leadership are (1) developing and articulating a compelling vision for change, and (2) building commitment and support from the organizational team (Maliki et al., 2025; Patmawati et al., 2023).

The Importance of Vision in Organizational Change

Vision serves as a foundational element in the change process. Without a clear and inspirational vision, organizations may struggle to define the direction and purpose of change. A strong vision provides guidance to leaders and members alike, defining the desired future state and the rationale for undergoing transformation. It creates a sense of shared purpose and helps mitigate uncertainty, which is often a source of anxiety during periods of change (Kusumaputri, 2015; Calam et al., 2020).

A powerful vision helps individuals understand how the change will benefit them and the organization in the long run. When employees recognize the broader significance of transformation, they are more likely to be engaged, proactive, and motivated to contribute to the process (Lutfi, 2024).

Communicating the Vision to Organizational Members

Effectively communicating the vision for change is a critical task that must be handled thoughtfully. Even the most compelling vision will fail to generate impact without strategic and inclusive communication. Leaders must ensure that the message is clearly delivered, emotionally resonant, and capable of inspiring commitment at all levels of the organization (Helmi et al., 2023; Rachman et al., 2023).

Communication must be simple and accessible to all organizational members, from senior management to operational staff. It should be consistent across multiple platforms—such as meetings, email bulletins, intranet postings, and one-on-one sessions—so that the message is reinforced and internalized. Moreover, effective leaders connect the organizational vision to individual goals and values, enhancing personal relevance and fostering stronger emotional buy-in (Ramadani et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

Organizational change requires strong leadership and active involvement in collective decision-making processes. Leadership is not limited to directing and controlling, but also encompasses the ability to motivate, inspire, and guide organizational members toward the achievement of shared goals—particularly when navigating complex changes.

In managing organizational transformation, various leadership approaches—such as transactional, transformational, and situational leadership—can be employed depending on the context and needs of the organization. While each approach has its own strengths and limitations, all aim to ensure that change is implemented effectively and that organizational objectives are met.

Successful change-oriented leaders demonstrate essential qualities, including a clear and compelling vision, effective communication skills, courage in decision-making, and the ability to build strong, collaborative teams. In addition, managing resistance to change is crucial, as it represents a nearly inevitable challenge in any transformation process.

Overall, organizational change is an unavoidable and strategic necessity for ensuring continued relevance and competitiveness in a dynamic environment. Effective leadership is a key determinant in whether such changes succeed or fail. Leaders who can inspire and guide their organizations through change using thoughtful, strategic approaches will be better equipped to achieve sustainable success in the face of ongoing challenges and evolving demands.

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