

# **Personal Losses And Bereavement In Technological And Organizational Changes**

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## **Abstract**

This work deals with the application of the complicated mourning as a tool for the analysis of the symbolic losses experienced by Brazilian bank employees after the implementation of a restructuring plan that had as one of its main actions technology and business policy changes.

A questionnaire was developed to evaluate the existence of bereavement traits among employees that underwent change situations based on a ethological approach for conceptualizing personal losses and mourning processes. The purpose was to consider both psychological and biological aspects for analysing human behaviors in situations of attachment disruption where the bereavement feeling is presented as a generic answer for the separation. The study tries to identify employees perceptions as Loss or Gain, after technological and organizational changes, considering three basic dimensions: Human Resources Practices, Group Affiliation and Organizational Commitment during the 1995-1998 period as well as employees mood and the possible existence of somatic symptoms among them in the twelve months previous to the field research. The data provides a real picture of employees psychological states involved in change processes, including technological changes, showing organizational commitment loss, lack of happiness and joy among work teams, a negative mood followed by somatic symptoms, and attachment to past organizational policies, technologies and procedures. The research findings can serve as inputs for the development of motivational programs in the organization, as well as raise the attention of other researchers for broader studies on related commitment behaviors and feelings of loss in the organizational life.

**Keywords:** Technological And Cultural Changes; Loss and Bereavement in Organization Technology: Cultural, Social and Human Issues.

## **Introduction: Considerations about Technological Innovation**

The man of the century XX has been living together with an enormous challenge: to accompany the speed of the technological changes, mainly starting from the second half of this century, because it is spoken that there was never, in the human history, something that could be compared to the deep changes that are being processed.

These technological progresses have been happening in several levels, not always meaning rupture processes and according to Freeman (1991) they can be classified in incremental innovations that constantly happen and they represent small changes; radical innovations that represent significant changes in the product and in the process; and technological revolutions characterized by great changes.

Tunzelmann (1997), when doing a long term comparison between innovation and industrialization, verifies that in the industrial era, characterized by the last 250 years, the change in the industrial processes alternated moments of rupture of philosophical presuppositions and consequent revolution of the scientific method, with others where the evolution of the knowledge was developed in a continuous way; although it is argued that the scientific revolution has contributed with the experimental method, this author defends that the technology - in the "know-why " sense - was the responsible for this progress more than the scientific paradigms.

Lovelock (1995), in the same reasoning line, also affirms that technology doesn't just mean innovation, in so far as that there are a lot of inventions that generated durable technologies, having an erroneous tendency of use of the term technology to describe generically the practical application of tools and procedures of last generation to production processes or services rendered. It is observed that the discussion on technology and innovation brings the idea of change as a constant flow, alternating transformation situations and permanence, whose effects on the society become larger and faster; could be said that the economy, the national security, the environment and even the birth and death are affected for these changes.

On the other hand, although the technological innovation is considered as an important factor of competitiveness, it is known that its implantation, by itself, does not guarantee better positioning in the market (Walton31). The performance of an organization is also associated to the adopted structural model and the people's capability for the new competencies required in the introduction of new technologies. Under this focus, the competitiveness is also dependent of a body of employees that tends to accept the changes and to live with the moments of transition since new situations generate fear and anxiety for their uncertainties.

### **Technological Changes and Organizational Realignment**

One of the first aspects that should be considered in the introduction of changes, among them technological innovations, is the strategy and the structure of the organizations. The authors of Organizational Development propose, in scenarios of complex changes, the development of strategies that lead to a balance between stability and flexibility. Regarding the organizational structures, it is known that the traditional models are not able to offer an organization of the work that makes possible fast response, therefore new models are drawn proposing decentralization of the decision process, delegation and consequently larger involvement. Morrisson (1997) considers this change as the passage of a growth curve to another it means the creation of a new life cycle for the organization.

Inside of this idea of life cycle Adizes (1988) considers that the development of the organizations goes by the stages of generation, birth, development and death and that is influenced by the external and internal environment to the organization. The companies face the collisions and the normal difficulties to each stage of development as well as the usual problems of transition when entering in each new phase of the cycle. The introduction of new technologies appears as a possibility of ransom of the company in its phase of maturity, prolonging your life cycle or even allowing the beginning of a new cycle. Under this focus Owen (1990), who just considers the death of the organization as the end of a stage that enables resignifieds, and that the end of a process or technology

is inherent to the own existence of itself and its substitution can mean new possibilities for the organizations.

What is observed in those several visions or strategies for performance in scenarios of changes is that the proposals are hardly ever radical to the point of they suggest a real paradigm break in the organizational structure. Most part of what is proposed as change is still under the functionalist paradigm that emphasizes the search of stability and integration (1994). Few times a company can be redrawn for new technologies to be introduced. There is a need to work with that body no longer so young, tired, exhausted until, represented by the organization in its phase of maturity and the implantation of technological changes finds several obstacles going from resistances of political and social character up to employees' psychological difficulties for its acceptance.

In the several proposals for organizational realignment it is observed that the duramen of the change is in the rupture situations, justified for the resulting demands of the downfall of borders among markets and of the customers' new expectations. In this scenario, the competitive capacity is not associated to induce people to work in an arduous way in the company but to induce them to learn how to work in a different way, unlearning principles and ingrained techniques were responsible for the success of the company for a long time.

In practice, what have been verified are the collateral effects of the changes, as downsizing and situations of loss of referentials – resulting from moments of transition - among others that can be noticed by the employees as threatening situations. It is invested in training programs, in sensibilization programs or others of technical-behavioural nature being sought the adaptation of the man to the new routines or to the new technologies, but the expected results do not come. Why?

### **Technological Changes and Cultural Realignment**

McDonald and Siegall (1996) studied the reactions of the employees in front of the technological changes; while for some people changes are considered as an opportunity for development, for others they are rupture situations that take to the feeling of incapacity to learn the new routines or tasks made necessary and this difference of perception is associated to self efficiency, it means to the faith that the employees have in their aptitudes to carry out new tasks with success.

Ho (1997), in study developed in Singapura about programs of life quality in the work, has found suggestive data that the technological changes and the tough competition among the organizations, in global and domestic level, have negative effects on the worker's health, reflected in stress, dissatisfaction in the work and accidents.

Another of the possible effects of programs of organizational realignment, gone back to changes in the manpower and changes in the work in itself resulting of the implantation of new technologies, is the increase of the incidence of depression processes that cause an enormous shortfall to companies, in number of discharges as in costs, reaching in the United States the figure of US\$ 43 billion per year (JOHNSON and INDIVIK, 1997).

As different authors show not always organizational changes are developed in a continuous or evolutionary way respecting a time for maturity of actions and in most of the cases there are rupture of

states and in an irreversible way once the phases that are going to be followed are qualitatively different, one from another. The transition periods, marked by uncertainties, may causing anxiety in the people for the loss of the referential in so far as that the meanings get altered and in an irreversible way or through attachment disruption without giving time for the creation of new ties. It seems to have perception of the transition phase as a period where the losses prevail.

Considering that culture is an emotional concept (in so far as it acts as a defense mechanism for the anxiety) as much as cognitive (once it involves values, beliefs and norms that generate attitudes and action outlines) it is assumed as a whole relatively stable that cannot be modified in a simplistic way. If the fundamental factor for the existence of a culture is the collective identity, as it detaches Aktouf (In Chanlat 8), when introducing new technologies and programs of organizational changes there is a stage of " intermediate chaos" where the previous cultural patterns are in phase of abandonment and the new ones are not still absorbed totally and commitment to the company is threatened once the employees of the organizations do not know anymore to which company they belong.

It is discussed that the organizational culture needs to be adjusted for the introduction of new technologies, being introduced values, norms, and procedures that motivate the creativity, the initiative, the innovation. But will it be that all the people are prepared to abandon the old practices or to break attachments?

### **Necessary Personal Losses in Processes of Organizational Changes**

In this analysis of processes of implantation of new technologies under the focus of the rupture of affective attachments, it is raised the discussion that perhaps one of the difficulties of acceptance of the changes is in the fact that the people live them as symbolic deaths that generate fears and bereavement with the same force and expression of the physical death. In this work the concept of death in an enlarged way is discussed, settling down parallel between physical and symbolic death. Sievers (1994) comments that the administrators lose of view the fact that although is thought that the companies should survive forever, the men working in them will be replaced by their successors and unavoidably " they will die ". This denial of the organizational death permits the administrators to identify themselves with the immortality of their companies (heroes) while the workers are seen as nonmortals, machines that are adaptable to any situation and without affective attachments of any kind.

A first important question to be raised in the discussion about losses and bereavement in the organization is that **to break with established situations** or **to break affective attachments** is painful. The rupture of previous situations generates in the people a bereavement for the loss once they live the development of the organization in an interlinked way to their own development (OWEN, 1990). Bleger (1975) reinforces this idea by affirming that a change in the organization can generate a disaggregation in the people's personality that compose it, therefore " the group and the organization are the personality of their members ".

In the models of change analysis where a parallel is made between human and organizacional lives it contains implicit the concept of "small death" , it means the irreversible rupture of conquered situations in so far as that the new stage of development is qualitatively different from the previous one. To accept the existence of a life cycle presupposes the acceptance of its end. Perhaps it can be said

that when the technological innovations happen incrementally the changes are noticeable as the evolution of a technological life cycle, perhaps generating less fear of the end than radical innovations where great organizational changes are necessary for its implementation with great loss of previous situations.

In the organizations people develop attachment not only to those whom they have a relationship but also to the company in so far as they identify their own lives with the life of the organization. During the implantation of technological changes there is loss of attachments with the rupture of interpersonal connections in so far as that there are people in movement as much as the loss of routines, faiths and ingrained values (BROMBERG, 1994) and this aspect of rupture of attachments has not been receiving great attention from part of the administrators. There is not any working out of bereavement after the losses and this not working out can generate symptoms associated to the process of complicated grief that frequently leads to psychological and somatic disturbances generating high costs for the companies and decrease of their competitiveness.

Another important question to be raised in the discussion about losses and bereavement is that **man is conscious of his own physical death anticipating it in several ways through the imagination.** This anticipation generates the fear for the end that reaches people of different cultures, religions, social classes, ages, among other discriminating factors. It can be summoned other countless versions for death (BECKER, 1995) but what it is noticed in myths, legends, tales is that man has an omnipresent desire to be immortal, challenging and winning the death usually through the figure of the hero. The man knows that the death is the only constant presence in his life what generates the fear as the most frequent psychological answer in the cultures where death is defined as an aversive incentive. This fear of the death varies along an individual's life as well as it depends on variables such as socioeconomic class, personality structure and the context of the person's life. In our century and in the western culture, the representation of the death is in the "inverted death", it means the one that is hidden. The rituals are linked to the concealment of the death and in the organizations. The symbolic deaths are also hidden and not always are recognized or the due value is given to the attributes to them associated like pain, rupture, interruption, unknown and grief. There are situations of separation, of changes of stage of development and other situations followed by pain and suffering that have in common the end of a situation, it means the own definition of the death.

A third important question in this discussion is that **the symbolic death frequently is noticed as ambivalent** remarkably in the resulting situations of rupture derived from the personal or professional development. At the same time when the previous stage was good for the fact of being known and not to generate anxiety it needs to be abandoned on behalf of a personal or professional progress; the on-coming stage, the new, generates fear once is completely unknown even if it is presented as a longed for situation. When technological innovation is introduced the concept of small death can be observed under the form of the separation of the colleagues or even of the family in cases of changes in the processes or in the transfer for other units of work. This separation requires cares once the individual can notice it as the loss of the meaning of his own life mainly if this meaning is based in the other or in the position in that the person occupies in the organization (KOVÁCS, 1992). Other possible forms of ambivalent symbolic death concern to the passage of a professional stage to another with the abandonment of practices and rituals of the previous phase or to the own organization change of technological development stage that demands ruptures of old routines, new plants, new systems, new instrumental.

One of the aspects always mentioned is that the introduction of new processes or technologies are followed by incentive programs to the retirement. This one also brings death connotations and under two aspects: “the death in life” by the loss of the meaning of the work or “the self death” by the meaning of the retirement as a sign of the on-coming own death. In “death in life” the individual can deny the on-coming end of his professional life and alienated himself, stagnating his development process and not preparing his successor. In this case psychosomatic diseases can appear acting as the possibility of materialization of the symbolic death. In the case of “self death” the individual can notice the irreversibility of the situation by developing a fear process caused by the imminence of the loss of the job and of the own life. But what can be alarming it is that these symptoms reach not only the target public of the incentive programs to the retirement but also the others that witness the death of the other anticipating symbolically their own death.

Fourth and last question to be observed in this discussion is that **although the personal progress is associated to some type of loss, bereavement is an adaptative psychological response** and it is present in all of the human race. The problem is in the healthy or pathological experience of bereavement. Healthy experienced bereavement is appropriated to soften the loss and to strengthen the individual after it. The problem is in the unappropriated cicatrization of the loss. According to Engel (mentioned by BOLWBY, 1985) the loss of a person is as traumatic as a serious wound and the working out of this loss pass through stages similar to the cicatrization process. Bereavement, as equal process of cure of a wound, can take a direction that leads to the complete or almost complete recovery of the function, it means recovery and maintenance of attachments or to another direction that leads to the weakness or loss of the function, it means life deadness. The loss generates a psychological unbalance and it is considered that balance only comes back after bereavement has been worked out. The depression and low self esteem are reactions frequently found in bereavement and its association to the low self confidence generates difficulty to overcome the loss.

Bereavement goes by several phases varying from three to five according to the different authors' vision(5, 14). From a general point of view it can be said that the first phase is the one where the person that suffered the loss enters in shock state that can be alternate with periods of rage or despair. Somatic symptoms can appear such as disturbances in the breathing and rigidity in the neck and the person tends to live as if nothing had happened. In the second phase the protest appear. There are strong emotions, psychological suffering and physical restlessness; the bereaved person tries to meet again the dead (or the lost object) having crisis of depression and cry. It is also present the feeling of rage, driven for himself (by the blame feeling regarding to the dead or to the loss of the object) against those who offer comfort or against to the dead itself (or the lost object) for the feeling of having being abandoned by the dead (or lost). In the third phase the despair appears. It is the phase where the person notices the irreversibility of the loss; the bereaved person does not find joy in the life and depression symptoms and apathy start to happen as well as physical symptoms such as insomnia, loss of appetite and of weight and gastric-intestine disturbances. In the fourth phase there is the appearance of the recovery and restitution, with the re-establishment of the interest for the life. There is decrease of the present symptoms in the previous phases and the bereaved person begins to accept the changes that happened in itself and in the situation. Independence and initiative reappear and in this phase the individual begins to look for new attachments. What makes different the regular and complicated bereavement are distortions of the process (BROMBERG, 1996).

What this study proposes for reflection is that part of the difficulties experienced in the implantation of organizational changes, among them the resulting of technological innovation, can be explained by the complicated bereavement due to experienced small symbolic deaths but not worked out. As restriction to the analysis model it is convenient to mention a study of Moss et al. (1997) that distinguishes the reactions of bereavement between men and women in the western culture, discussing that in the studies of the Psychology of the Death the feminine models are predominant and the masculine styles are depreciated as emotionally or relationshiply unappropriated. Although it is considered that those authors' studies are provocative and offer possibilities for research, in the present work there is not distinction between bereavement under the masculine or feminine point of view adopting the concepts presented in the current literature about the theme and in the western context.

Another important safeguard is that although the literature discusses the death and bereavement in the several phases of the human development, in this study it is only considered the considerations to the adult phase once it is in this development phase, between youth adult and the maturity, where the organization's employees are present. Data about bereavement experienced by elderly people (more than 65 years old) considered as belonging to the third age according to the classification presented by Novaes (1995) were despised. These people although part of the adult population do not appear in great proportion among the active employees of the companies in Brazil and their reactions to the proximity of the death or the loss are very specific.

## **Methodology of the Study**

A descriptive research about the perception, if Gain or Loss, that employees of a state-owned bank have in relation of several dimensions after the introduction of a reorganization program, was developed. Such a program contained the introduction of new technologies in the banking sector (self attendance service and systems more and more computerized among others) and business policy changes generating break of paradigms in the organizational culture and requiring a new profile of employees to perform in the new scenario.

The bank has roughly 75.000 employees, distributed in about 3.000 centers of attendance dispersed for the whole Brazil. It was chosen as population to be studied the employees of the State of São Paulo which had more than three years in company, totalizing 11.485 employees.

A choice for a quantitative research was adopted, once there is already enough theoretical body in the Psychology of the Death, for searching the variables. It was collected data for 400 employees who had background activity or development in the Training Center of São Paulo, during the period from August to November/98, being all the applications done by the researcher. The research instrument was a questionnaire with closed questions especially developed for the research and divided in three parts: a) data about the qualification of the respondent; b) fitting of the perception of the respondent, if Gain or Loss in relation to the changes occurred in the company in three dimensions (Practices of Human Resources, Group Affiliation and Organizational Commitment), using a balanced scale with 6 points without a neutral point; c) characterization of the mood using a list of feelings for choice of the most present feelings and of the existence of psychosomatic symptoms associated to the bereavement, considering in both cases the last twelve months previous to the research. The questionnaire offered alternatives to fit what could be Gain or Loss (example:

improvement or condition worsening, increase or level decrease, greater or smaller clarity, etc..). It was discussed in the methodology the definition and delimitation of the concepts Human Resources Practices, Group Affiliation and Organizational Commitment for foundation of the development of the indicators that compose the second part of the questionnaire. Seventy eight variables were dealt and the data were tabulated by using the statistical software SPSS (Statistical Program for Social Sciences), professional version.

## **Presentation and Discussion of the Results**

Data collected in interviews with two psychologists responsible for the employees' development project indicate that they fear the new and the search of the professional development represents for many the medicine against the largest rupture: the dismissal. Also it is identified a lot of attachment to previous stages of the organization considered by several employees as better in so far as more stable.

The data obtained from the psychologists were confirmed by the data found in the quantitative research whose results point predominant perception of Loss in relation to the changes occurred in the Organizational Commitment dimension; in Group Affiliation and Human Resources Practices dimensions there is discreet prevalence of Gain. Though, when the magnitude of these losses is considered, it means the consideration of the fitting in Loss for the chosen indicators as excessive or a lot of Loss, and as Gain, for excessive or much Gain, the frame is altered. There are 23,9% of respondents with profiles of Loss against 14,2% with profiles of Gain considering that the sum of points for the three dimensions; the other respondents are fitted in the profile which was called Neutral once their perceptions are situated in a transition zone between Gain or Loss. Splitting up these profiles of dominant perception as Gain or Loss for a studied dimension, it was found a larger percentile of Neutral in the Human Resources Practices dimension (74,5%) and larger profile of Loss in the Organizational Commitment dimension (9,2%). These data suggest loss of the involvement with the company, what can be reflected in loss of beliefs and favorable attitudes and consequently loss of interest. Perhaps it can be said that the employees have become less committed to the adhesion to the culture of the company. These data are more preoccupying when associated to the fact that 90% of the respondents are employees responsible for some administration level (medium or high), it means they should exercise the leadership in their work teams.

Regarding the mood of those researched, it was found prevalence of negative feelings such as anxiety (suggesting the presence of the fear), fatigues, emptiness and frustration in opposition to positive feelings as courage and hope. These data suggest some degree of psychological fragility of the respondents, jeopardizing the affective aspect in the creation of favorable attitudes to changes. Correlating the mood found with level of functional responsibility and time in the company, it is found the prevalence of negative feelings among managers, between 13 and 22 years in the company (the tactical segment), responsible for the routines of implementation of new technologies or of new practices of businesses management, it means employees that should transform the speech of the company in practice.

Regarding the existence of somatic symptoms, of the 16 symptoms presented for choice, 4 were chosen by less than 10% of the respondents (vomits, weight loss, tremors and nauseas). Insomnia (56%) and headaches (52%) were the most frequent ones followed by weight increase (38%), knot in the throat and sighs (34%), heartburn (30%), palpitations (26%), fall of hair (25%), breathing tans

(22%), dry and bitter mouth (16%) and cramps (14%). These symptoms are present in several stress situations and their appearances, at this time of transition of the company, can be associated to bereavement due to losses (real or symbolic) noticed by the respondent. These data become more preoccupying when associated to the psychological fragility found in the mood and to the perception of the changes as Losses.

## **Conclusions**

The found data suggest the existence of bereavement among the employees of the bank but it cannot be identified in which of the possible phases of the bereavement they are in relation to the working out of the losses generated by the organizational changes that have happened. The goals reached by the company indicate that the employees probably already went through the initial phase of bereavement, in so far as they are reaching the goals proposed by the company after the technological and organizational restructuring. However, with the identified mood, they are not probably so close of the recovery phase and restitution which would be characterized by the largest frequency of positive feelings in the mood and for giving up of the attempt to recover the lost situation.

As it mentions Rosemberg (In KOVÁCS, 1992), no one walks calmly to meet death because that would mean to deny the life. One can only accept calmly the death if there is a working out process. Accepting this argument, it is believed that is not enough to advise the people, inside of the organizations, that the changes are coming and are inevitable, they must be prepared to face the new but also to allow them to work out the feeling of loss for the previous situation which even having to get rid of, it existed, it was noticed as real and it was part of the people's life. The perception is totally subjective and it involves apprehension and judgement of a reality. It doesn't matter how much the company considers innovations as Gain, if people notice them as Losses they will be experiencing bereavement which can be softened if appropriated attention is given to them therefore they can be worked out. Just after the farewell the past will have been revered properly and buried.

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