

*Organizational Culture in Social Institution
Организационна култура в социални организации*

THE SENIORS: CREATORS AND LEADERS OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

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Abstract. With the progress of civilization engaged in a number of transformations that affect the functioning of modern man. Currently, the dominant trends and lifestyles are focused on the acquisition as soon as possible a number of goods. The symbol of the prevailing culture of instant became a triad: fast food, fast car, fast sex. Today, it just needs young people, assertive, full of energy and enthusiasm to take on new challenges. Individuals who are not afraid to innovate and possess leadership qualities are called leaders. The article is an attempt to demonstrate how the prevailing culture of “fast-paced lifestyle” deal older people who are unable to keep up with the changes, and that among this age group, we can talk about leaders, and if so to what this Leadership Training manifests.

Keywords: instant culture, leader, social change, the elderly, age

Today’s fast paced civilisation requires us to continuously adapt and metamorphosise to keep up with the changes and transformations in the various aspects of social life. The 21st century man, faced with the prevailing trends, has to be a young go-getter, full of energy and zeal to be part of the surrounding culture.

Culture, as a non-uniform concept, is not easy to define or even describe. Nevertheless, every age or epoch had and have their unique culture, to a lesser or greater degree based on the achievements of the previous civilisations. Culture, next to the styles followed in art, science and other spheres of life, is also evident in the way societies live. Culture changes in time and space and to a large extent is created by the social changes initiated by given societies.

The 21st century culture

The 21st culture is described as instant culture, being delaminated by the *fast food, fast sex, fast car* triad (Melosik 2003, p. 72). Emphasis, which is placed on “fast” points to the main trend which the contemporary man should be guided by. Fast food, fast sex, fast car is a certain type of a simplification, which shows, that in today’s world, only those count who are able to keep up with the constant changes and at the same time create and initiate transformations aimed at achieving material and intellectual gratification

as fast as possible. The contemporary man, in the prevailing “instant” culture, cannot allow himself to reflect or ponder, as the omnipresent “race” with time, novelties, the accumulation of material wealth and consumption (ibid. p. 71) somewhat eliminates and suppresses these abilities. Reflection “loses out” to hurry together with the ever-present “liquidity”. Currently, in Poland, young people wish to become independent quickly, buy a flat, own a good car, branded clothes and frequent fashionable places. They are looking for a rapid achievement of all that, regardless of what they stand to lose. This mainly stems from the promoted lifestyle, new social fashion, where “rapid attainment of social prestige” (in a purely material sense, state of possession, accumulation of the best and the newest goods) is what counts most. The values represented by family, friends, dignity or honour have been overshadowed. Profits and benefits are what instant culture is about. Unfortunately there is no time to contemplate what has been lost, only “here and now, right now” count. This immediacy (ibid.) of profits and successes is becoming the determinant for man’s values. The vision of a gradual attainment of status or wealth does not sit well with young people who are taking out long term loans in order to keep up and be part of the prevailing trends.

The focus on “fast life” is evident both in the social as well as family functioning of individuals. The loosening of emotional ties, the family home treated as a “bedroom”, work, which takes up most of the day for those success oriented, no time to stop and contemplate one’s lives (Łukasik, 2013, p. 12), are symptoms of the encroaching instant culture. Individuals, who, for various reasons are becoming lost amongst the prevailing trends, as perceived by other members of the society, are not successful, helpless and without ambitions. The contemporary way of life pays heed to those able to “win” quickly regardless of the price. This material success is identified with happiness, a happy man is a rich man, one who is able to satisfy the multitudes of his needs.

The prevailing trends have led to a situation where individuals who are on the brink of their professional career, whose graduation is looming, are having problems with finding a proper job which will reflect their requirements and qualifications and by that furnishing them with a certain social prestige. Looking at the social changes underway at the moment, we can see that the prevailing belief, that someone who wants to become wealthy and attain an appropriately high social status rapidly has to be of a strong character, exhibit leadership qualities, know how to be a leader who is able to create and mould the changing reality (social, professional and other).

Today leadership is spoken of ever more often not only with reference to those individuals governing countries, but this term refers to functioning in many aspects of everyday life, and a leader does not have to be known to hordes of people. “Whereas today there is no doubt as to the role a leader is to play, for example within formal organisations, theoreticians disagree as to how leaders should act, or which roles to fulfil. These issues become particularly significant when we take into consideration the environment within which and for the benefit of which leaders are condemned to operate. Surrounded by all sorts of organisations, official and unofficial groups,

both the more immediate (local community) and more distant (global community) is becoming ever more “turbulent” and changeable and thus unpredictable” (Madalińska-Michalak, 2012, p. 32). Today the scope and time frame for changes is difficult to pinpoint and determine, therefore the leaders’ role in their environment must be founded on an important quality, being forecasting.

Image of a contemporary leader

In subject related literature it is an individual, who is, to a certain extent, the driving force behind and the perpetrator of change, who pursues a vision with the use of his own facilities as well as those of the environment, leads but does not impose his views onto others in an authoritarian manner, unites people around common ideals and values. An individual assuming the role of a leader should possess qualities like creativity, ability to motivate and integrate as well as ability to induce cooperation (Madalińska-Michalak, 2012, p. 34). Looking at contemporary societies and the direction of transformations, we can state that leaders are young, dynamic individuals, who do not always follow material incentives in the creation of change process but are able to be altruistic (such as some local community leaders). Nevertheless such leaders must skilfully stand up to or co-create with the prevailing instant culture, which, despite the fact that it carries many dangers, also constitutes a certain kind of temptation for young people, who see it as an opportunity to achieve a lot in a short period of time. As noted by J. Szymański “leadership facets also appear in community activities and social work. And without doubt, a leader with another face should be mentioned: a socially active citizen. Poland knows individuals who have held or hold leadership positions in far reaching social undertakings with a large dose of success: Anna Dymna, Marek Kotański, Jerzy Owsiak, Bożena Walter and others. Certainly there is no shortage of such individuals at the voivodship level or in local communities. A socially active citizen as a unique type of a leader also exhibits characteristic qualities” (Szymański, unpublished work). Leaders - socially active citizens exhibit qualities which are somewhat different from the mainstream. Additionally, they do follow the prevalent dogma to the letter, which dictates that what counts is an individuality focused on fast achievement of goals. They are able to “stop and reach out” to a person in need of help and assistance (sick, suffering, poor or homeless). In observing individuals taking up the difficulty which is inherent in social leadership it may be assumed, that long term association of a leader with the world of politics, economics or the economy is a thing of the past. To a large extent this change is the result of the transformation currently underway and social tendencies.

M. Williams considers that contemporary leaders should also possess such qualities and competencies, which will enable them to question conventional knowledge and traditional assumptions. Leaders, in their everyday efforts should exhibit:

– passion, which will be evident in the application of new knowledge to practical tasks;

- a pro-active attitude, which will be expressed in forward thinking and acting;
- appreciation for the value of innovation;
- skilful recognition and use of talents, both one's own and those of individuals comprising part of the team, group, community;
- skilful coordination of the team, through the use of its strengths and quenching those characteristics which are detrimental to the chosen direction (2009. p. 42-43).

Looking at the skills and competencies pertaining to a leader listed above, one may conclude that an individual accepting such a role cannot be guided only by the mainstream trends or style of leadership created by the contemporary world. Such an individual has to skilfully stand on their own two feet in the said world, however it is important for them not to lose their personal dignity, humanity, sense of higher values and timeless ideals in the prevalent culture. Today a leader is not just the one who leads and has power, but someone who is able to initiate change by the strength of their own efforts. Actions and undertakings which they instigate are to become sufficiently attractive and tempting for the environment, so that the environment participates in these initiatives without additional, external prompting. The fact that anyone may become a contemporary leader is also significant, despite the fact that we witness a multitude of factors in the instant culture preventing creators or leaders emerging from some social groups. One of the determinants making it more difficult to take up challenges of leading a group or a community is age. Access to many forms of organised community life is difficult for the elderly, nevertheless the initiatives undertaken by Polish seniors allow one to ascertain that there are many individuals among that generation, who, consciously or otherwise, materialise the leadership role.

Older individuals as leaders - creators of the local community

The ageing of the population process is one of the more important issues broached during political, economic and social debates. In our country people over the age of 64 constitute 14.5% of all Poles, and the same percentage in the structure of the Polish society is represented by the 55-64 year old group (Central Intelligence Agency). According to demographic data Poland is a demographically old country, as people over 60 years old constitute almost 20% of the population of the country (Leszczyńska-Rejchert, 2011, p. 59). The increase in the numbers of people 65 years old and above began in the Polish society in the 19th century. In 1848 people 60 years old and above accounted for just 3.4% of the total population in the Kingdom of Poland, and this percentage increased by 4.4% in 1931. The indicator of the population above 65 years of age was growing together with social and economic changes. In 1950 this indicator was 8.3%, in 1970 13% and in 1990 an increase to 15% was recorded. In 2007 as much as 18% of the entire population in Poland was made up of seniors above 65 years of age (Pikula, 2013, p. 11). According to demographic forecasts in 2050 35.8% of Polish society will be 60 years old and above (see Pikula, 2011, p. 7). The increasing numbers of seniors is somewhat a trend setter and a focus for action

within the scope of social policy as well as economy, education or even culture. Theoretically, these tendencies concentrate on undertaking a series of actions, which are to improve the functioning of the oldest generation in society. From the point of view of its practical application notions which are far from being implementable are being proclaimed. Despite that in some Polish cities development, when it comes to infrastructure, education and culture can be seen.

The changes underway with respect to what is available for the elderly also stem from the fact that the contemporary senior is much different from that of 40-50 years ago. Today most elderly individuals still want to remain active and fully fledged members of society. "They wish to take an active part in social life which will allow them to go through the last stage of life happily. Despite the fact that old age goes hand in hand with numerous natural changes which occur in the biological, psychological, social and spiritual spheres, the elderly are ever more eager to get involved with all sorts of social activities, which for them, in many cases, is a method for experiencing being recognised and needed" (Białożył, 2013, p. 111). The idea of promoting active living of the oldest generation is also conducive for inter-generation integration, which in the era of disintegrating ties between generations is gaining in prominence. The search for and initiation of activities, both by younger as well as older individuals, which will focus on the valorisation of different periods of development will permit for a better understanding of particular age groups and by the same in a positive manner will shape the living space for individual members of the society. However, it should be remembered that the inter-generation integration is to serve development and better understanding, and thus cannot be founded on "project outlines" which are imposed on the participants. In all enterprises of this type, the freedom of choice and good will of the participants is important.

Presence of the elderly in social life refers directly to their participation, and by the same to their ability to shape their own living space. However, it should be pointed out that despite the positive aspects which social involvement of the oldest generation brings, as years go by many elderly people voluntarily withdraw from social life. This fact to a large extent is dictated by the social situation faced by the seniors. In our country, the elderly are exposed to a multi dimensional marginalisation, aversion from the younger generations, age discrimination, ageism, desolation, social exclusion.

The prevailing stereotypes have led to a situation, where the younger generations expect "people to behave accordingly to their age" (Stuart-Hamilton, 2006, p. 148). The poor situation of the oldest generation is further aggravated by the omnipresent cult of youth and physical attractiveness. "Today man concentrates on his own image, accentuating the valours of youth, judges people on the basis of their social and economic usability. The world is trying to escape from the "problem of old age" by turning to cosmetic treatments, plastic surgeries, scientific research leading to prolonging human life" (Olczyk, 2011, 38). As noted by A. Zych, contemporary old age is treated as obesity or an ailment of the body, which should be eliminated

(see 2007, p. 93). Old age and ageing in our country are spoken of in the context of the entire society, the issues which are broached pertaining to economic security for the oldest generation have a very general character and not individual or even local. Old age is practically a taboo subject for the younger generations. To a large extent this tendency is caused by the image of the elderly created by the media. The mass media, and in particular the numerous adverts, brainwash society that using various types of rejuvenation or “anti-ageing” products will protect us from old age and ageing. Such an image of old age, is to a certain extent imposed by the model and lifestyle of the contemporary man, for whom ageing and the associated decrease in vitality “stand in the way” of their race for the spoils of civilisation.

The contemporary world, hand in hand with the culture focused on the promotion of physical beauty, “rushes forward” extremely fast, excluding individuals who are not able to keep up with the changes. Life, especially for the young, is geared for “here and now”, the society must keep up “straight away” with the changes otherwise it is “pushed aside” to make way for those who can. The seniors, despite the fact that they are a group open to innovations, are not able to adapt to the technological advances as well as the pace of life led by the young.

The elderly, as members of the society are in direct contact with the omnipresent instant culture, which does “not permit” its customers to slow down. Together with retirement, many individuals are not able to cope with the automatic and inevitable deceleration of everyday life. An ageing individual is not able to understand nor accept the fact that in old age, despite the fact that in theory there is more free time, it takes more time to do even the simplest tasks. The lack of acceptance and willingness to accept the inevitability of human life affects the way the oldest generation perceives itself. A senior, who is intolerant of the change in himself, after a certain time adopts an image of themselves fed by the society which creates the instant culture. The image of seniors, shaped by that culture is not optimistic, as in the vast majority of cases they are depicted as poor, malcontent and sickly which prevents them from taking advantage of the spoils of the contemporary and developed civilisation. In the context of that culture, an elderly individual is not able to become its fully fledged member, recipient and creator as he does not satisfy its primary assumption which is a hurried, fast life.

In observing the reality we live in we are able to see a certain kind of a paradox: on the one hand the subject of the elderly is raised on the national and international stages, in particular with reference to ensuring the best possible financial security for that generation, and on the other, society on the micro level is not able to nor willing to establish environments conducive to an active and sterling experiencing of old age. The lack of understanding of the needs of the oldest generation is becoming an obstacle in the creation of friendly surroundings for seniors, where they would feel fully accepted and most importantly, useful.

Despite the fact that the social situation of the elderly in Poland is not easy, it should be pointed out that contemporary seniors are more conscious of their rights

and opportunities. Individuals who are crossing the 60 or 65 years old threshold have significantly different aspirations and expectations that their peers 20 years ago. The contemporary senior is able to shape their own living space independently and as such to become an integral element of culture, which, despite being geared towards life constantly chasing after something, has to “slow down” gradually as in the near future it will be predominantly shaped by old people. Taking into consideration the demographic forecasts and the growing awareness and involvement of seniors in social life, it may be said that the elderly are successively becoming leaders and creators of the environment within which they live.

Seniors as leaders are significantly different from their younger colleagues. An elderly person who is becoming involved with any type of activity or initiative with the aim of social integration and to break down the prevailing stereotypes, is already, in part, becoming a leader, as they are striving to make a positive change, which perhaps will not be a global transformation, but may “spark off” the awakening of their peers and motivate them to take up various activities in their local communities. Seniors - leaders are not always guided by an elaborate vision of the future, but more often focus on a wise and optimal use of their own individual abilities, will, fervour and passion. An ageing person is not always polypathological in their last stage of life and thus we can identify a senior-leader with a person who, despite their natural subsidence of health continues to care and look after their own health, so that the long period of old age can be enjoyed to the maximum, and not with reference to material goods. That person is able to come to terms with that which is inevitable and at the same time does not become passive in old age just waiting for their life to come to an end. An elderly person, who desires to be considered a leader in their age group, should not be afraid of what people are going to say, but be guided by inner beliefs and abilities, take up challenges adequate to their age, demand their rights and by that demonstrate their full participation in the life of their local community.

Talking about leadership with reference to the elderly we should not forget that the said creation and initiation of transformation may be a group and long term process. And here it is worth pointing out the popularity of the idea of the University of the Third Age in Poland. Currently, 13.6 million people who are more than 55 years old attend 451 universities in our country (see *Założenia długotrwałej polityki senioralnej*, 2013, p. 43). Seniors who are actively involved in the life of the universities are voluntarily and consciously creating their living space. And that is important, particularly today, when people’s lives are getting longer, and by the same old age is being extended. As humans are living for longer, average life expectancy is also on the rise. Currently in Poland average life expectancy for men is 72.53 years and 80.62 for women (see Central Intelligence Agency). In accordance with the Polish Central Statistical Office (GUS) forecasts, in 2010 - 2035 the number of people 65 year old and above will increase from 5 135 thousand to 8 358 thousand, and the 80 plus age group will grow from 1 314 thousand to 2 574 thousand (see GUS). In light of such forecasts

it is becoming impossible to follow the instant culture doctrine in the long run. An awakened awareness of the elderly, to the effect that despite signs of unkindness and aversion, that the image and experience of old age to them, permits to state that next to the instant culture a certain type of fringe ideology is developing, which is focuses on the elderly, is created by them and at the same time allows them to take up initiatives adequate to their abilities and skills.

The elderly are slowly but surely undertaking initiatives, predominantly local, which allow them to take advantage of the blessings of contemporary civilisation without fear that they will be “pushed aside” or excluded by the younger generations. In the leadership of the elderly the fact that it is founded on worldly wisdom, attachment to tradition and customs is significant, whereas at the same time an element of openness to novelties appears, if no other than just technological. “The oldest family or local community members. It is them who are able to recreate situations, behaviours, elements, artefacts or cultural norms which are seemingly non-existent or defunct appropriate for a given community (...) The elderly are very often the proverbial wells of knowledge on the life of local communities. On life, which comprises customs, rituals, songs, dances, cuisine, legends, traditions, beliefs, superstitions and magic - as well as many others. These are elements which build inter-generational continuity and the identity of subsequent members of the community” (Banach, Matejek, 2013, p. 82).

Older Poles are independently looking for places where they are able to participate in cultural events without disturbing the overriding values. From the point of view of functioning of society this is significant, as seniors should be viewed as the “carriers and guarantors” of continuity of traditions and history. Unfortunately they are often marginalised by the younger generations oriented towards a life “on the run”.

In Poland transformations to the mentality and awareness of the elderly are slowly taking place, and they are less likely to complain about their desperate situations and more likely to initiate changes for the better. The elderly, and also the younger generations, are ever more often noticing the value which may be brought by that age group doing voluntary work. Active involvement in pro-community work allows the potential of the oldest generation to be noticed and managed. Seniors are becoming more willing to set up clubs, associations, foundations and academies which focus on fulfilling the needs and requirements of that age group. The need to create more jobs accessible by the elderly, to a large extent stems the insufficient facilities of organisations supporting the seniors ageing in a propitious or natural way. “In performing an analysis of national non-profit sector organisations, certain “gaps” are evident when it comes to what is on offer to the oldest generation. Most institutions within their statutes include an entry on supporting the elderly, nevertheless this objective very often is not a priority and most services and benefits are available for those elderly who are sick or living on the brink of poverty. In light of such a state of things, the fact that the number of associations creating an active old age on the local level is pleasing. Associations and foundations with a local reach are growing

ever more dynamically in larger Polish cities, which is facilitating the creation of a positive image of old age both in the elderly as well as the younger generation (Białożył, 2012, p. 97).

Conclusions

The term “leader” with respect to the elderly may not be considered subject to being a leader or managing a group of people in the context of management theory. This term takes on a new meaning when applied to seniors and focuses to leading one’s own self. A leader-senior is one, who overcomes internal barriers and inhibitions in relation to modern technologies and innovative solutions, in trying to live in harmony with their immediate surroundings without losing respect and pride on account of being an experienced individual possessing worldly wisdom. Such an individual breaks the shackles of rigid stereotypes or stereotypical thinking and depiction of old age, pursues their passions even once retired, tries to “infect” other people with them, does not identify the last stage of life with a disaster or even a waiting room at death’s door, but with a period where development is possible, affording an opportunity to further and acquire new knowledge, skills and competencies. However the acquisition of new skills does not assume the form of a “rat race” and rivalry destroying relations between people, but of promoting active living and motivating peers to get involved in the life of the local community and take advantage of what that community is able to offer the oldest generation. By getting involved in organising the life of the local community, seniors demonstrate to the other members, that they are fully fledged members of society, who create and will not stand to be ignored or snubbed as its oldest members.

An elderly person who becomes an example to be followed by others, through constructive adaptation to old age is a leader and creator of contemporary reality. The increasing number of Universities of the Third Age and Seniors’ Clubs, the growing cultural and educational facilities available to the older generation, various discounts at museums, cinemas, theatres, shops, swimming pools, sports clubs or fitness clubs are an indication that an ever larger group of the elderly wants to fully take advantage of the period of old age shattering the existing stereotypes and overcoming the numerous barriers encountered on the way. The increase of the various possibilities on offer to this age group may be identified with a growing demand and as such with an ever larger group of seniors who are becoming leaders and promoters of active old age. The old age created by them does not have to comply with the mainstream culture but afford satisfaction and improve the quality of life.

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