

# Modern School Principals: Leadership in the Context of Social Changes

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**Abstract** Our paper presents the results of a study of leadership in school leaders. Intensive social changes have activated the subject-activity principle in all spheres of professional and everyday human life, which actualizes the problem of studying the phenomenon of leadership. In the context of social transformations, the leadership phenomenon becomes socially relevant, which determines the search for new approaches to its scientific understanding.

The paper was addressed to the personal and professional qualities of leaders of educational organizations. It provides and interprets diagnostic data on the degree of readiness of school leaders to change, potential and real risks, strategic and operational responses to changes, and emotional stability. The experiment was attended by principals of different age categories of the Tyumen and Omsk regions.

Our results demonstrated that the role of a leader in a changing world is on the rise with the changes impacting on the development of leadership qualities.

## 1 Introduction

According to modern scholars, this phenomenon becomes particularly relevant in various crisis situations of the development of society, since in its essence social projections are personified in a meaningful and active relationship. Actually, the leadership phenomenon has retained scientific interest for more than a hundred years, and over this period the approaches and methods of its research, concepts and theoretical foundations of its interpretation have repeatedly changed.

However, it is precisely the contemporary social changes that are taking place everywhere in public life and in the social order that have caused a new round of scientific interest in this phenomenon. Modern education as a social sphere more than other professional spheres is affected by the changes that are caused by factors of globalization, informatization, digitalization, processes of migration, stratification, and other economic, social and cultural factors. A multivariate, multicultural educational space, as in a mirror and often refracting, reflects all changes in life. At the same time, the main mission of education is to prepare the younger generation for the future life by modern means, forms and methods. This contradiction causes professional difficulties for teachers who are forced to adapt to the ongoing social changes, to master new ways of professional activity and to provide a buffer character of interaction with students. In these conditions, the main hopes are assigned to the head of the educational organization. Teachers, parents and students should trust a leader who, like a helmsman, leads his ship into a sea of social transformations, uncertainties and risks.

The modern world at all levels of understanding is characterized as a world of dynamic and systemic changes. The social changes taking place today in all spheres of human life are initiated by technological, technical, economic transformations, discoveries in science, the change of political paradigms, globalization factors, the dominant influence of the electronic-digital format on information exchange, transformations and the rapid change of production processes, many other factors. Under the influence of rapid and large-scale changes, a person finds himself in a difficult situation of constant adaptation, loses, as Schütz aptly puts it “*social navigation*”, constantly seeks social support (Schütz 2004). Systemic dynamic changes occurring in all spheres of human life give rise to objective and potential risks, the totality of the impact of which is often described in science as a crisis state. Consequently, risk and crisis are the inherent characteristics of social change.

Since the current period of the development of society, according to many sociologists, has signs of large-scale risks and crises in various spheres of human life, the problem of leadership in conditions of social change is gaining new relevance. It is in these conditions, in the context of systemic social changes, globalization, and in the search for a solution to professional and everyday crises, the concept of leadership not only does not recede into the background, but, on the contrary, is actively developed in modern interdisciplinary research. Life gives rise to objective and potential risks, the totality of the impact of which is often described in science as a crisis state. Consequently, risk and crisis are the inherent characteristics of social change.

At the same time, modern leadership concepts increasingly turn to the anthropological component of this phenomenon, which reflects an understanding of *“the fact that all changes are realized through the joint activity of people and, above all, the most talented and strong-willed of them - leaders”* (Men 2013). Men emphasizes that the actualization of the leadership problem in modern science is also due to the obvious social context of the leadership phenomenon, since in crisis social situations caused by widespread changes, it is not only social, but also economic, professional hopes and expectations that are assigned to leadership (Men 2013).

The educational sphere and the phenomenon of leadership of the head of an educational organization deserve special scientific and public attention, since the implementation of modernization processes taking place in modern Russian education primarily depends on the innovative, creative, and organizational potential of the head of an educational organization. Support for social innovations, the introduction of scientific, technological, technical innovations in the educational sphere, the need for changes in educational services under the influence of the public, are caused, first of all, by the potential and resources of the leader - the head of the educational organization, his willingness and desire to master innovations, risk appetite, responsible independence and activity.

It is well known that leadership, as a set of personal qualities of a person, is formed, developed and manifests itself in direct social interaction. Moreover, according to Men (2013), leadership does not arise on its own, leaders need to be nurtured, educated, which society should take care of. At the same time, modern crises in all areas confirm that the problem of successfully preparing a leader (leader) for changing conditions, being able to make responsible decisions, possessing strategic thinking, creativity, innovativeness, unfortunately, remains relevant for all areas of activity. Of course, the problem of leadership is not new and has a sufficient theoretical and methodological basis in the scientific literature, an analysis of which, however, allows us to conclude that foreign and domestic approaches to understanding and studying the phenomenon of leadership do not have a common conceptual platform and are often contradictory.

Education as a social sphere today is subject to all ongoing social changes, is included in the active processes of modernization, renewal and is in crisis. An appeal to the leadership potential of the head of an educational organization during a period of significant, dynamic social changes presupposes considering leadership as a personality-related and socially demanded phenomenon, which gives new impetus to the study and development of this quality among heads of educational organizations.

## **2 Socially and personality-driven phenomenon of leadership**

The study and understanding of leadership as a socially and personally determined phenomenon, of course, has a significant history in foreign and domestic science, starting from ancient times: in philosophy, psychology, economics, management, sociology, pedagogy. This interdisciplinary position of the problem is quite justified, since the personality of a person is at the center of a scientific problem, which, on the one hand, determines the interdisciplinary nature of a scientific problem, and on the other hand, does not allow developing a unified theoretical and methodological conceptualization of the phenomenon itself.

So, without turning to a retrospective history of the issue, we briefly note that, for example, philosophical research of the twentieth century, mainly relied on psychological empirical data, and had an obvious psychologized character. At the same time, a surge of scientific interest in the leadership problem during this period was also due to the stage of rapid social changes: the complexity of bourgeois society during the period of active development of a market economy, increased competition, changes in technological, political, and economic structures. For this period, the works of Freud (1921) turned out to be significant, turning to the psychological foundations of leadership; Adler (2002), who advanced the theory of compensation; Weber (1990) with his concept of charismatic leadership that arises just in times of crisis in history. Of great importance for the development of leadership issues were the major Western schools of the Yale and Frankfurt schools. In the 20th century, the phenomenon of leadership, for example in the USA, was studied at more than forty universities and research centers. As a result, the scientific problems of leadership were enriched by theoretical provisions on the role of a leader in social interaction, in particular on leadership in the educational system, leadership in the system of religious institutions, on the value basis of social, political, organizational leadership, and others.

The results of studies of the leadership problem of the second half of the 20th century are models of leadership thinking developed in line with humanistic psychology (democratization of management, delegation of management, development of human capital, others).

At the same time, during this period in domestic science the problem of leadership was ideologically shifted towards the study of the scientific organization of labor and the psychology of management. Only in the 90s of the last century in Russian science do studies of personality traits and the character of a leader appear (Andreev 1993; Ilyin and Koval 1991; Sautkina 1991; Smolnikov 1991; Shimov 1992 and others), initiated by the ideology of the post-perestroika period in the development of society (Berezovsky and Chervyakov 1993; Pugachev 1991; Malyutin 1992; Myasnikov 1993 and others).

Thus, a generalization of research allows us to conclude that leadership is a personality and socially determined phenomenon, manifested in the organization of joint activities (in social interaction), under the influence of which a social association of people is formed. This understanding of leadership distinguishes it from a number of such concepts as “leadership” and “management” by the characteristics of universality, interactivity, ideality (Men 2011).

The personal conditionality of the leadership phenomenon requires an appeal to personal qualities and characteristics. As Men (2011) notes: *“often a leader is characterized as aggressive, striving for power, however, these characteristics are associated more with functions than with personal qualities”*. A content analysis of the sources revealed that leaders are mainly characterized by pronounced charisma, a high degree of professional competence, vivid creativity, strategic thinking, speed and flexibility of managerial decisions, sociability, perseverance, a high level of reflexivity, and a focus on results.

The social conditionality of the leadership phenomenon is determined by the specific social situation (social demand, social expectations). According to scientists, due to personal qualities, the leader has greater flexibility, mobility, excess activity and a high potential for adaptability to social changes. It is in conditions of social change, when people pin their expectations and hopes in the face of uncertainty on the leader, when the external situation enhances the effect of the leader’s influence on people, the leader’s personality undergoes a “test and test of strength”. It is in such situations, such as situations of social change, crises, that the leader is not much different from other people subordinate to him, *“except for experience, competence and charisma”* (Men 2013).

Thus, the personal and social conditioning of leadership are interconnected. Social changes necessitate the actualization and activation of the personal qualities of a leader, and an adequate manifestation of leadership qualities and abilities, in turn, changes the social situation. Leader, according to Men (2013) is the only one *“who can change the ‘rules of the game’ and establish their own”*. A strategic vision of the situation of changes, a willingness to take risks, supported by charisma, an energetic emotional-volitional upsurge allows the leader to successfully solve various problems and make effective managerial decisions. Today, in the context of large-scale and dynamic social changes, the leadership problem is considered in the aspects of motivation for change, development of the leader’s readiness for change, risk preparedness for changes, strategic management in the face of change, building future scenarios in the face of change, overcoming resistance to change among employees and others. In the conditions of constant changes, the development of leadership qualities is a new strategic task for the development of society, and the most important characteristic of an effective modern leader is readiness for any changes.

According to Scott (2014), an effective leader should not seek higher social roles, but work in an increasingly uncertain environment. It is a situation of uncertainty, a situation of risk, as accompanying any change, that gives an impetus to the development of new capabilities of a leader, since they require finding and mastering new methods of work, new ways of thinking, quick decision-making in situations of uncertainty, which, of course, expands personal, social and professional the leader’s experience increases his level of competence. Extreme experience, like leaving a comfort zone, facing uncertainty, experiencing risk, not only enhances a person’s adaptive personal qualities, but also initiates him to reveal previously unclaimed abilities and reserves, developing a leader’s self-effectiveness potential.

It is no accident that the work of the modern leader of an educational organization in the conditions of total changes in the educational space against the backdrop of the rapid growth of digital solutions in popular science literature is referred to as “transformational leadership”, where the leader is charged with responsibility for changes, in contrast to the “transactional leadership” described in the literature. Thus, the study of leadership in conditions of social change changes the research vector from the study of personal qualities as determining the formation of a leader towards a social situation that determines the manifestation of leadership qualities.

The first indicator for assessing the leadership potential of leaders of educational organizations in the context of social change is logical to consider the indicator of readiness for change. Evaluation of this indicator was carried out using the diagnostic method “Assessment of tolerance to uncertainty” (Kornilova 2010). This questionnaire is a Russian-language version of an integrated methodology designed to measure personality characteristics, as tolerance to uncertainty. As a broad understanding, “tolerance to uncertainty” in foreign psychology is interpreted as “the ability of a person to accept the conflict and tension that arise in a situation of duality, to resist incoherence and inconsistency of information, to accept the unknown, not to feel uncomfortable with uncertainty” (Kornilova 2010). In domestic studies, tolerance to uncertainty as an integral personality characteristic was developed in cognitive psychology in the study of psychological stability, self-regulation,

decision psychology in situations of uncertainty, and others. Tolerance of uncertainty is of scientific interest in the formation of ideas about the relationship of personality traits and preferred forms of social interaction, as well as on the specifics of acceptance and non-acceptance by people of uncertainty / change conditions. It was in the mainstream of cognitive psychology that a tolerant person began to be described as a person who accepts changes, novelty and uncertainty of situations and is able to continue to act productively under changed conditions, while an intolerant personality is characterized as not accepting changes, novelty of situations and the diversity of the world, experiencing constant stress with the possibility of multiple interpretation of incentives. Structurally, the technique includes three jackals: tolerance for uncertainty, intolerance and interpersonal intolerance to uncertainty.

From the point of view of a meaningful interpretation, depending on the prevailing number of raw points scored on one of three scales, a person is characterized as striving for change, novelty and originality, ready to go the wrong way, prefer more complex tasks, strive for maximum independence, go beyond traditional restrictions (tolerance to uncertainty).

Intolerance of a person to uncertainty lies in the desire for clarity, orderliness in everything; in the rejection of uncertainty, changes, in the desire to comply with the usual social rules and principles, to avoid the dichotomous separation of right and wrong ways, opinions and values, decisions.

Interpersonal intolerance to uncertainty characterizes a person striving for clarity and control in interpersonal relationships, experiencing acute discomfort in case of uncertainty in interpersonal relationships with others. Intolerant in interpersonal relationships, the personality is generally unstable, monologous, static in relations with others.

Psychological studies have shown a positive correlation of the variable "tolerance to uncertainty" with a tendency to risk, a willingness to take risks and a negative correlation with rationality in decisions and actions (Kornilova 2007).

The second methodology for assessing the readiness of managers of educational organizations for changes was the "Personal change readiness survey (PCRS), in the adaptation of Bazhanova (2005) This PCRS technique is successfully applied in the United States when working with personnel of organizations, in particular, in personnel assessment procedures. The authors note the particular effectiveness of the methodology in assessing the impact of stressful situations, situations of uncertainty and risk arising in connection with innovations, since no one is able to fully cope with the changes. Understanding the characteristics of resisting change helps people protect themselves from stress in those situations in which they are most vulnerable. The standardization procedures of the methodology showed the most common three levels of quality manifestation (low level (less than 21 points), average level (from 22 to 26 points), high level (over 27 points).

The second indicator of assessing leadership potential among leaders of educational organizations in our study substantiates the indicator of risk preparedness.

In a changing world, a person, being an active activity subject, not only changes the world, he changes himself. At the same time, in sociology, in social psychology, it has been proved that any activity of a person is inevitably associated with risk, and therefore, today only a leader who is not just socially adaptive, but who is ready for change, ready for risks, can be successful, effective, understands their nature and can control them. In the modern world, the question of the negativity of risk, its minimization or elimination already sounds incorrect, the question regarding risks today is posed differently: how to understand, predict, take into account and manage risks?

The belief that the modern world is a generator of risk, and a person through his activity generates an increasing number of risks, has firmly established itself in society. According to Ustyantsev (2006), this confidence is supported not only by publications of domestic and foreign researchers of risk, riskogenic factors and processes. A person himself, in conditions of total social changes, acts as a spectator, screenwriter and actor of risky situations almost daily, since any change entails the risk of choosing a decision in relation to action, behavior; modern man is increasingly finding himself in a situation of calling and searching for an answer in the accelerating rhythms of life (Ustyantsev 2006). Abchuk (2002) confirms: "risk is the inevitable companion of any decision made by a person".

The transfer of the problem of studying social risk into the field of subjective risk management and the decision-making process in a social risk situation determines the development of a psychological and pedagogical direction in the theory of social risk, where risk is considered as a specific assessment of the state of the environment by the subject (Afanasyev 2004; Arlamov 2010; Vandyshev 2005; Ustyantsev 2006, etc.). Our research interest is in assessing the risk management of educational institutions as an indicator of their leadership potential. Assessment of risk appetite was carried out using the Shmelev questionnaire (2013), the purpose of which is to diagnose risk appetite as a character trait. Instrumentally, this indicator is estimated by the number of matches of the signs of the consent-disagreement responses to the approval of the risk appetite scale. The risk appetite for the leader is an important personal quality in forecasting situations, in the decision-making process and in situations of uncertainty. According to this methodology, the risk appetite indicator can vary from 0 to 40 points, and the higher the indicator value, the subject shows a greater risk appetite: a value of 30 or more points

indicates a high level of risk appetite; an indicator from 11 to 29 points is typical for the average level; an indicator less than 11 points indicates a high caution and discretion of the subject. It should be noted that a high risk appetite may indicate not so much the subject's decisiveness as his risk appetite.

Of course, the third indicator was included in the experimental research program - the actual assessment of leadership qualities among leaders of educational organizations, using the methodology "Diagnostics of leadership abilities" by Zharikov, Krushelnikov (Fetiskin and Manuylov 2002) and the methodology "Leadership Efficiency" (Nemov 2008). Both methods make it possible to identify a person's propensity for leadership in the aggregate of organizational and communicative qualities. According to the methodology of Zharikov,

Krushelnikov, the severity of this quality can be weak (less than 25 points), medium (from 26 to 35 points), strong (from 36 to 40 points). If the total score is more than 40, then this person as a leader is characterized as prone to dictatorship. According to Nemov's technique (2008), a diagnostic result of 30 to 40 points indicates a highly effective leader style; from 11 to 29 points - medium effective; if the total amount of points turned out to be 10 or less, then the leadership style of this person is considered as ineffective.

### **3 The results of assessing the leadership potential of leaders of educational organizations in the context of social change**

A theoretical analysis of the results of studying the leadership problem, understanding the current social situation as a situation of systemic social changes, substantiating the personal and social components of the leadership phenomenon, as well as a theoretical justification for the connection between leadership manifestations and such indicators as willingness to change, willingness to take risks, tolerance for uncertainty, allowed to build a research program. The study involved 322 directors of educational organizations of the Tyumen and Omsk regions.

The first indicator was the indicator of readiness for change. According to the applied methodology, the diagnostic construct of which has six scales (passion - energy, tirelessness, increased vitality; resourcefulness - the ability to find ways out of difficult situations, turn to new sources to solve new problems; optimism - these are high hopes, faith in success, reluctance to focus on the worst development of events, the desire to fixate not on problems, but on the possibilities for solving them; courage, enterprise (adventurousness) - a craving for a new, unknown, refusal to use knowledge and reliability; adaptability - the ability to change one's plans and decisions, to rebuild in new situations, not to insist on one's own if the situation requires it; confidence based on belief in oneself, one's strengths and one's own strengths, that everything is possible, you just want to), the following results were obtained:

The leaders of educational organizations in the majority (65.8%) showed a low level of readiness for changes, gaining an average of less than 21 points on all scales; 27.4% showed an average level of readiness for changes, and only 22 directors out of 322 respondents showed an optimal level of readiness for changes, which amounted to 6.8%. It should be noted that the principal scored the maximum points on the scales of resourcefulness and confidence, while on the scale of "optimism" the results were minimal.

The results of the assessment of tolerance to uncertainty by the method of Kornilova (2010) showed a low level in 52% of school principals, who on average scored no more than 27 points; while intolerance was demonstrated by 37% of respondents. It is worth emphasizing that not a single participant in the study showed a high indicator on the "Interpersonal Intolerance to Uncertainty" scale, which allows us to speak about the formation of a professional position and the development of communicative qualities of school principals as leaders.

The theory of change substantiates the objectivity of the process of resistance to change on the part of employees, and often managers. Traditionally, in the theory of changes, three groups of personal resistance stand out among resistances:

- informational (poor knowledge of changes, their meaning and importance, as well as the procedure by which they should occur);
- personal and psychological personal interest (fear of the unknown, satisfaction with the current state of affairs, non-obviousness of personal benefits and advantages that will bring about changes, surprise, fear of losing control over what is happening and authority);
- organizational (low level of work safety, insufficient organizational and financial support, lack of time, excessive uncertainty of the future, increase in workload, disconnection from the decision-making process).

In our research, organizational reasons are the dominant type of personal resistance for school principals. Social changes, changes in pedagogical activity, changes in education as in the social sphere as a whole cause almost half of school directors (48%) emotional stress, anxiety, a sense of uncertainty, a sense of risk, contribute to burnout. A detailed review of resistance to changes by the leaders of educational organizations

showed that the overwhelming reasons for resistance are organizational (80% of respondents), information (15%) and personality-psychological (5%).

The second diagnosed indicator was the indicator of risk preparedness. This indicator is associated with the effectiveness of decision-making in situations of change, with the ability to manage risks in their professional activities. In psychological literature, it has been proved that a person who demonstrates high risk appetite strives to preserve his own self and identity in a changing world (Elagina 2011). Therefore, risk appetite is determined by an active social position, ability to withstand stress, optimism, openness to new experience. In the studies of Elagina (2011) it is proved that school principals' risk appetite correlates with psychological well-being parameters, which include “positive relationships with others” ( $r = 0.26$ ), “autonomy” ( $r = 0.28$ ), and “personal growth” ( $r = 0.28$ ), “goals in life” ( $r = 0.45$ ), “self-acceptance” ( $r = 0.26$ ), “meaningfulness of life” ( $r = 0.35$ ), “man is an open system” ( $r = 0.43$ )”(2011).

According to the results of our research, only 29% of the surveyed school principals ( $n = 322$ ) showed risk appetite, scoring from 18 to 25 points, the rest did not show a pronounced risk appetite.

Evaluation of the next indicator based on the results of the two methods used showed a rather high level of leadership development among the majority of respondents (67%). The result is not in doubt, because the respondents are directors of schools, performing leadership, managerial functions for more than one year, more than 200 people are subordinate to many of them.

At the same time, the results of self-assessment of leadership qualities are somewhat different. So, school principals themselves evaluated their leadership abilities in the conditions of social changes as follows:

- a high level of development of leadership abilities - 24.2%;
- a sufficient level of leadership development - 51.3%;
- insufficient level of development of leadership abilities - 20.2%;
- low (critical) development of leadership abilities - 4.3%.

At the same time, school principals emphasized that the lack of their leadership resources has been acutely felt recently, when changes, transformations and the social and educational environment are happening too quickly. Many say that they no longer feel like an absolute leader, because they do not keep pace with the updating of technologies, regulatory frameworks and other innovations in education.

The research program included age-related assessment and analysis of the studied indicators. Thus, the sample of respondents was divided into three strata according to the age criterion. Table 1 shows the data obtained in bringing them to the age criterion.

**Table 1.** Development of leadership skills among leaders of educational organizations depending on age ( $n = 322$ )

Age of respondents	Leadership skills (state of the art self-esteem)		Risk appetite (power)		Readiness for change (level)	
	Tall		High		Optimal	
30 to 40 years old	Sufficient	70%	Average	87%	Average	100%
	Insufficient	30 %	Low	13%	Low	-
	Low (critical)	-		-		-
40 to 50 years old	Tall	65%	High	64%	Optimal	59%
	Sufficient	27%	Average	29%	Average	36%
	Insufficient	8%	Low	7%	Low	5%
	Low (critical)	-				
More than 50 years	Tall	46%	High	-	Optimal	32%
	Sufficient	38%	Average	73%	Average	56%
	Insufficient	12%	Low	27%	Low	12%
	Low (critical)	4%				

Source: Own results

## 4 Conclusions

Our paper actualizes the problem of leadership of the heads of educational institutions (school principals) in a situation of systemic social changes. The dynamism of a changing world places new demands on the leader, subordinates pin hopes on their leader in situations of uncertainty, and the leader himself does not always feel confident in the future.

The paper confirmed the theoretical assumptions about the increased role of a leader in a changing world, about the impact of changes on the development of leadership qualities. The results of the study also showed a

negative relationship between willingness to change, risk preparedness as mechanisms for developing leadership qualities in conditions of social change with the age and pedagogical experience of the leaders of educational organizations: the older and more experienced the leader, the less he is willing to take risks in a situation of uncertainty, the more often he appeals to own experience.

At the same time, young leaders in educational organizations showed a high willingness to take risks, to change, and highly appreciated their leadership qualities.

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