

ORGANISATIONAL COMMUNICATION IN THE FIELD OF CHILD PROTECTION. PASSING FROM FATALISM TO ORGANISATIONAL DEMOCRACY IN THE ROMANIAN PUBLIC SPACE

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Abstract

Considered a fundamental element of human existence, communication has been used since ancient times for the purpose of "transmitting something to the others also". Although the term of "communication" has Latin origin, the first practical preoccupations for this issue are found in the Ancient Greeks' works and were related to oratory which, in its turn, was promoted as "art of the word". Even if in the literature the notion of "communication" was defined in a complex manner, being assigned numerous valences. Theoreticians found that, on the level of human communication, two common elements clearly appear for each of the meanings of this term. Thus, on the one hand, communication is perceived as a true process of information transmission, and on the other hand no human action, irrespective of the level of its realisation, can be conceived outside this process. Beyond the completion of the main theoretical models for the phenomena of organisational communication, the present article attempts to forward the author's personal diagnosis of a child protection institution, more precisely the General Division for Social Work/Assistance and Child Protection Caraș-Severin (DGASPC), valuing a wide-range methodology (analysis of social documents, interview, and structured observation). Thus, by combining the quantitative endeavour with the qualitative one, we highlighted the existence of a formal ascendant vertical communication, opposed or complementary to the descendant vertical one characterising most of Romanian organisational practices. The special institutional specificity of DGASPC turns this organisational territory into a possible model of interpersonal relationing, different from the general specificity existing in Romanian public institutions where the boss dictates.

Keywords: organisational communication, social work, child protection, vertical communication, organisational democracy

1. Introduction: General aspects about communication

Nowadays one talks a lot in social sciences and humanities about communication and about the great art of communication. In the book *Social work practice*, published by three American authors, when discussing the participative approach of social work and assistance, in the section dedicated to the dialogue stage we read: "For the success of social work and assistance conversation is needed, a continual dialogue with the clients about their situations, objectives and strengths. By this exchange of information practitioners define their relations with clients as collaboration partnerships to which both parties contribute. In this stage, social workers and clients clarify the purpose of their relation and define the core objective of their cooperation. In the dialogue stage, practitioners and clients collaborate for:

- Building partnerships based on acceptance, respect and trust;
- Defining each party's role;
- Discussing clients' experiences in difficult situations;
- Defining the purpose of collaboration;
- Activating the client's motivation for change
- Satisfying immediate crisis needs.

In the dialogue phase, social worker and client talk to each other in order to evaluate what is happening and to develop a primary vision on the manner in which clients would like things to be" (Miley, O'Melia, DuBois, 2006, pp. 138-139). Is the social worker willing to be successful in his professional effort of aiding the person in need? If he is, he needs communication.

All the definitions of human communication, irrespective of the school of thinking or trend to which they belong, have at least the following common elements: communication is the process of conveying information, ideas, opinions, either from an individual to another, or from a group to another. No type of activity - from the mere activities of daily routine we each experience daily to the complex activities deployed in organisations, societies, cultures - may be conceived outside the process of communication (Tran, Stănciugelu, 2001).

Communication gains more and more the status of a very valuable and even indispensable managerial tool, together with the obligations this status supposes. Communication managers nowadays are no longer considered mere "information channels", but are rather strategic counsellors of the top management. Along with financial management and production management, communication must contribute to the achievement of the organisation's mission. The role of communication in this process may be synthetically rendered by the phrase "professional fulfilment of the functions of window and mirror" (Iacob, Cismaru, 2005, p. 10.).

From this idea related to organisation communication we shall look briefly at what communication truly means. The verb to communicate and the noun communication are both polysemantic. Those who deal with the field of communication encounter thus, since the very beginning, a major difficulty: they do not deal with a well-determined operation, but with a multitude of operations, about which it is difficult to say with certainty to which extent they are similar.

We ask ourselves: What is communication? And we may answer: All the authors in the literature attempted to forward answers to such a question. The definitions are numerous and diverse.

"The word communication has a very wide meaning, it comprises all procedures by which a spirit may affect another spirit. Obviously, it includes not only the written or oral language, but also music, visual arts, theatre, ballet and in fact all human behaviours. In certain cases, it is perhaps desirable to expand the definition of communication even further in order to include all procedures by which a mechanism affects another mechanism" (Shannon and Weaver, 1948).

When a word is in fashion, like today's case with the word "communication" (Dinu, 1997), when the activities or events it represents are multiplied, its meaning tends to expand due to the very interest it enjoys. Thus, along with the communication diversification and massification (Fiske, 2003), political people, heads of companies, known artists, even any person whose career depends more or less on the opinion the public makes about it, resort to the services of specialists called communication advisors (Marinescu, 2003). In this case, we must understand by communication the transmission of an image, transmission realised especially through mass media (Marshall, coord., 2003; Johnson, 2007; Doron, Parot, 2006; Drăgan, 1996). Naturally, this image, or in other words representation we make about the person in cause should be powerful and at the same time favorable; otherwise, we shall say that the respective person "is not popular", "fails to communicate". His or her image is not the image that the person intends to offer. Instead of leaving it to chance, it is in the person's interest to consolidate it and make it positive. However, it depends on a multitude of factors, such as clothes, physical aspect, voice, elements which often have nothing to do with the real personality of the respective person.

The term communication "designates any process by which a piece of information is conveyed from one element to another, these elements being of diverse nature, more precisely biologic (communications in the nervous system), technological (telecommunication procedures) or social. IN its strict sense, it is limited to this latter aspect and may be defined as a process by which the congeners interact within the finalities of survival of the group, by means of more or less specific signals" (Doron, Parot, 2006, p. 157). The process of communication is always performed in a behavioural episode (Peretti, Legrand, Boniface, 2000; Abric, 1999): a (triggering) act produced by a member of the group engages a change of behaviour for a congener. In order to differentiate the communication episode from other forms of conduct interaction, two criteria must be taken into consideration: the social status of interaction and the degree of specificity of the triggering behaviour. We shall talk about communication only when a behavioural episode falls within the frame of collective finalities directed by rules of

organisation of the species or the group. "For most animals, communication behaviour contributes to survival in a direct and evident manner (nutrition, reproduction, danger avoidance) and the rules of interaction are generated by the genetic potential of the species ("pheromones" for ants, "dance" for bees etc.). For superior mammals, the genetically written capacity of communication is realized in behavioural sequences which constitute the object of learning. The system of rules is, since that moment, directed by the group and acquires the status of conventional code. For man, finally, the capacity of species is realised in diverse conventional codes with socio-historic character that are in addition the object to individual representations: communication is from that moment one simultaneously directed by the group and by individuals" (Doron, Parot, 2006, p. 158).

Communication also represents, from the sociological viewpoint, the process of establishing significances, encountered in all social situations and consequently a great preoccupation of specialists in social sciences in general. It is conventionally studied by psychologists, sociologists, mass media researchers and linguists (Edelman, 2000; Stoiciu, 2000; Pop, 2000; Haineș, 2000); the studies on communication have become more and more an autonomous field of preoccupations (for instance, in communication departments), being often associated to cultural studies.

Communication is of at least five types. "Intra-personal communication regards the interior conversation with the inner Self. Interpersonal communication refers to the face-to-face interaction. Group communication involves the study of the group dynamics, whereas mass communication supposes messages sent from mass sources, by mass channels, to a mass audience, often for the purpose of mass money obtaining. A fifth form of communication, more and more frequent, is extrapersonal communication and regards communication with entities other than people; this may mean "talking to animals" but most frequently it describes the way in which we communicate with machines, with computers and top-notch technologies (for instance, in the case of video games and of bank ATMs)." (Marshall, coord., 2003, pp. 117-118).

2. Organisational communication

Organisational communication is a process, usually intentional, of exchange of messages among persons, groups and organisational levels within the organisation, in order to reach both individual objectives and collective goals. We may say this organisational communication is related also to the organisational culture (Ionescu, Toma, 2001). What is essential is that within the organisation one realises an efficient communication which "appears when the right people receive the right information in due time" (Cândeș, 1996, pp. 182-183).

In organisational communication, the term is used with the following meanings:

- a.) direct or mediated interpersonal communication among the members of the organisation: employees, managers, specialists, collaborators;
- b.) communication among organisational structures: among departments, individuals, branches, divisions, compartments;
- c.) the manner by which the abstracted organisation communicates by the transmission of meanings to the own employees, to clients / customers and other organisations: through personnel policies, internal marketing, publicity, public communication, market policies.

Another approach is that taking place in the current managerial practice, where the following phenomenon is remarked:

- a.) when we speak about organisational communication, each person in the organisation will understand something else, having a different perception (personal and subjective) on what this means;
- b.) it is difficult to define any issue within an organisation that is not grounded on deficiencies in organisational communication or where communication deficiencies are not an aggravating factor!

The moment when one uses phrases such as: "we have communication issues in the organisation", "we must improve organisational communication" or "the goal is the increase of interdepartmental communication", one rather involuntarily creates a divergence of the nature of issues and implicitly of the optimisation purposes and intentions. We must not be surprised by the fact that for certain particular cases (and more to the liking of managers) one uses the

system "communication flow between ... and...". One creates thus a clear perception of the concept of communication, of dynamic process easily identifiable between two definite entities, process that may be designed and coordinated and where it is easier to establish the desirable quality and frequency of feedbacks (Petrică, 2010).

Organisational communication is often analysed through the following components :

- a.) formal (official) and informal;
- b.) horizontal (on the same hierarchic level), ascendant (from subordinates to supervisors) or descendant;
- c.) internal (within the organisation), external (with partners, customers, collaborators, suppliers etc.)

In modern management, organisational communication has acquired an additional dimension due to the information technology having created serious mutations in the use of the concept. For example, interaction is fundamental in defining communication, but more and more stress is laid on the communication channel, on information processing, its coding and decoding in the communication process. New concepts are developed, such as: communication in networks or virtual teams..

The quality of organisational communication, both formal and informal, is the key factor in shaping what we call organisational culture.

Communication plays an essential role in the work process, as any socio-technical system supposes the existence of an informational flow, which makes it possible its operation as a whole. Work within an organisational frame requires the coordination of participants' efforts in realising a performance. The top management communicate their decision to the employees, control their execution, and decisions are based, in their turn, on the afferent flux of information.

"The organisational functions of communication are the following:

- a) control: - to clarify duties, to set authority and liabilities responsibilities;
- b) information: - to supply the foundation of decisions;
- c) coordination: - to make efficient common action possible;
- d) motivation: - to stimulate cooperation and commitment in reaching the goals;
- e) emotional: - to allow the expression of experiences, feelings etc." (Luca, 2005, p. 75).

In an organisation, communication is done interpersonally (among the participants in the common activity), intra-organisationally (among sub-units of the same organisation) and extra-organisationally (with persons or organisations functionally related to the activity of the organisation: suppliers, customers, public etc.). "Each of these levels has different complexity degrees and supposes rules and restrictions related to the organisational roles (supervisor / subordinate, compartment of decision / execution, provider/customer, supplier/beneficiary), the specific norms and structure of the organisation." (Luca, 2005, p. 76).

Organisational communication occurs on all levels of management and leadership, is done on all hierarchic steps and among them, both on the horizontal and on the vertical. The complexity of communication, the purposes, objectives and implications imposed a series of particularities to managerial communication (compared to communication in other fields, such as journalism, art, medicine etc.), that must observe a series of norms imposed by the managerial culture and the organisation policy.

Organisational communication has been much debated lately and not only (Mattelart, A., Mattelart, M., 2000). For organisations, communication plays an extremely important part. The perfection of organisational communication in an institution may offer it a long life.

In the next chapter we shall refer to an especially important situation for the Romanian public space. In the Romanian collective mentality we know the boss is the person who dictates. Looking at the type of vertical communication that may be ascendant (from worker to boss) or descendant (from boss to workers) we shall remark that in the research we conducted in a social work public institution the particularity of vertical ascendant communication exists as empirical value.

3. Organisational communication in DGASPC CS. Research on organisational democracy in the Romanian public space through the ascendant vertical communication

Any institution or organisation has and should have a self image. Self images (the self perceived in its collective from) (Chelcea, 2008), in this case, are components of the belonging

to the organisation and suppose comparisons, return to the self, enrichment through the image about the other and the elements of our image from another person's perspective. They involve to the highest extent the adhesion to the organisational values, interiorisation of organisational culture and awareness of the importance of the organisation's identity elements (organisational purpose, objectives, structure, personnel of the organisation, organisational culture). An organisation's self image largely depends on the modalities by which the organisation aims at identifying itself, but also the way in which it can interact with other institutions.

3.1. General presentation of the DGASPC organisation. Argument for the research

The General Division for Social Work/Assistance and Child Protection (DGASPC) represents the institution dealing with the child issues in a certain county. Its main goal is to promote children's rights and to watch to the observance of these rights.

Each county has such an institution of social protection directly subordinated to the County Council (CJ). All these county divisions are coordinated by the National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights (ANPDC) led by a deputy minister (Petrică, 2012).

We conducted this research out of the desire to observe and highlight the characteristics of the communication process in a child protection organisation, where we subjected to research the less usual phenomenon in Romanian public institutions as regards communication, i.e. that of ascendant vertical communication.

By default, in the (County) General Divisions for Social Assistance and Child Protection we talk about communication. The entire activity here is based on communication. We may say that one encounters many types of communication: formal communication, informal communication, intrapersonal communication, interpersonal communication etc. If we study either the institution's organisational chart or the job position charts of the employees, or the files instrumented by social workers dedicated to the child in need, we see that all lead toward organisational communication.

From among diverse types of communication, we chose to research the interpersonal communication in the DGASPC CS institution, where many types of conflicts may occur because of the lack of communication. (Bogathy, 1999; Bogathy 2002). The entire activity of the organisation may take place in an exceptional manner, if this interpersonal communication really exists and if it is viable. In this interpersonal communication we talk about three situations:

1. communication between manager and employee;
2. communication between employee and employee;
3. communication between employee and client; (Moscovici, 1998; Gavreliuc, 2006).

3.2. Methodological design

In order to study an aspect of organisational communication and more precisely interpersonal communication, we shall dwell on a very important aspect: formal communication, where we are interested in vertical communication. In the chapter related to vertical communication, we are interested not in descendant communication, but only in ascendant communication, i.e. communication starting from the employee and going up to the decision-makers of the institution. The DGASPC employee (the social worker inspector) works the cases of children in difficulty, but also of those who have been subjected to a protection measure. Based on the information collected by the social worker either in the field, from the neighbours of the child in need, from the child's extended natural family, from school, police etc., the social worker forwards a proposal of protection measure, measure that he/she presents first of all to the head of the service to which he /she belongs, then to the DGASPC executive director, and if after these meetings the proposal stays valid, the social worker will present it officially in the Commission for the Child Protection (CPC) for validation. We are interested in conducting a research where we may scientifically observe if in a totally exceptional manner the formal communication network, i.e. ascendant communication, functions very well. In this situation, the social worker may feel the satisfaction of his/her activity related to the instrumenting of the cases he has been assigned for resolution.

We shall propose as hypothesis of our research: There is a significant connection between formal communication and the social worker's job satisfaction.

3.3. Objectives of our research:

Main objective:

Og. Exploration of the relations between employee and unit manager as regards ascendant vertical communication as image of overcoming fatalism at the place of work in the Romanian public space

Specific objectives :

(Os 1) The way in which interpersonal communication takes place between the executive director, deputy executive directors, heads of services and the other employees (social workers as clerks in public office and contractual staff members of the institution);

(Os 2) The manner in which interpersonal communication is realised among the other employees, who most of the times cooperate in working teams (for instance: a social worker, a psychologist, a legal advisor, a specialised educator, a priest etc.);

(Os 3) The modality of the communication between employee and client or beneficiary of social services;

3.4. Collection of the necessary and appropriate data

3.4.1 Methodology

Based on the method of participative observation we made up an observation chart.

Our research shall grant a special attention to the network of formal communication in the DGASPC CS institution, the interest being for the ascendant communication, where, if it is functional, the social worker may enjoy the satisfaction for his activity in relation with the instrumenting of the cases he is assigned. If this aspect of research is validated, we may claim that on the organisational level, in the Romanian public space, we are in the presence of the overcoming of fatalism where only the boss is right.

The subjects of our research were 110 in number. The selection was made according to the institution organisational chart: inspectors (social workers) from the SERVICE OF RESIDENTIAL CHILD PROTECTION; from the FAMILY CHILD PROTECTION; from the EMERGENCY SERVICE... AND CHILDREN'S TELEPHONE - 983; from the ADOPTION SERVICE; contractual employees for determined and undetermined periods that carry on social work activities within the DGASPC CS institution

The age of the subjects having participating in the realisation of this research ranges between 23 and 60. The subjects are university graduates, social work majors.

Presentation of the Observation Chart.

The Observation Chart comprises: 1. Affective mood; 2. Emotional balance; 3. Language; 4. Communication; 5. Interest and cooperation; 6. Initiative; 7. Work values; 8. Getting results / performance; 9. Other observations. The first four entries are connected to the principle of communication.

3.5. Presentation of the case study conducted

1. Affective mood: Of the 110 subjects, in the chapter dedicated to the affective mood after the return from the meeting with the executive director, 80% described to be in a good mood affectively. The aforementioned 80% of the subjects were more incisive in the act of solving the cases, which proves that for them the ascendant communication in the relation with the executive director put them in the positive mood. The other 20% had lower commitment and less achievements, and this brought them an affective discomfort.

2. Emotional balance: We remarked a slight drop, only 75%, the subjects continued to be in a positive affective mood, but with small instabilities on the emotional level.

3. Language: As regards language, we also saw a certain drop, only 60% used a positive-constructive language, criticism – "why this way and not that way" – in the relation with the executive director, and this was one of the phrases used.

4. Communication: In the problem of communication, in fact one of the core points mentioned also in the hypothesis, what we remarked was the subjects' accuracy in expressing their ideas by the subjects of our research. This could be observed for 90% of them. When they prepare to present a case for meetings with the executive director, and then for the presentation of the case in the CPC, each inspector (social worker) prepares his or her speech so that he/she could convince the supervisors to issue decision(s) in the matter of the proposal he or she forwarded as protection measure.

5. and 6. Interest and cooperation; Initiative: As the subjects are inspectors (social workers) with a rather extended length of services (some of them were employed back in 1997, when the General (County) Division for Child Protection was established; later on, in 2005, the institution changed its name to DGASPC), in these problems 95% exhibited openness, flexibility, although they also described some discontents, such as "I believe that my way would have been better".

7. Work values: As regards work values, as mentioned before, first of all each and every one of the subjects has a certain amount of professional experience in the institution, and each and every one of them proved stability at the place of work, and thus they show interest and skills in their activity, expertise, experience etc.

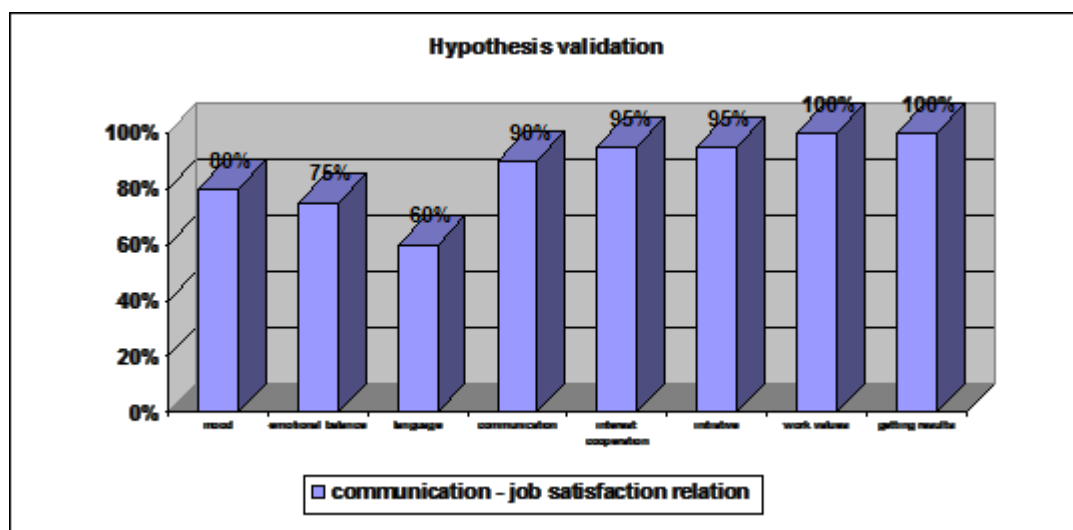
8. Getting results / performance: We refer to an increase of the performance level. All the subjects observed, 100% of them in fact, exhibited a substantial growth in their work efficiency. The heads of service of the services to which the subjects of our research belong, developed a professional career and were selected from among the oldest employees of DGASPC.

3.6. Data interpretation and hypothesis validation

Communication is very important in the child protection institution. In the Observation Chart we could find that the percentage recorded in the language chapter was much lower than in the other items. In exchange, certain hypotheses were confirmed in relation with the communication in the child protection institution, such as: affective mood, power and will to communicate, stability at the place of work and desire to increase the performance level. By closely following the entire process we researched, we could remark that in a rather high number and percentage, the ascendant vertical communication in the institution of child protection operates and even brings about a job satisfaction for the inspectors (social workers). Thus, the hypothesis of this study is confirmed.

We consider that there is a significant connection between formal communication and social workers' job satisfaction, as is was valid with the research conducted.

Graph 1. Validation of the Hypothesis



3.7. Some limitations of our research

a.) absence of standardised methods;

The absence of standardised methods may easily leave the impression of a less perfectionist research. What could have been different, had I used standardised methods, would have been only the percentage, in my opinion, which may have yielded other results, somehow lower than those displayed in our research, but I doubt they would have triggered major changes in the results of my scientific endeavours.

b.) one single observer;

This second aspect is related to the first, more precisely there is one single observer, and the research may be influenced by subjectivity. It is possible that the existence of another observer could confer a higher objectivity to the collection of data and their interpretation.

4. Conclusions

Our research showed that in a social work organisation we may talk about an ascendant vertical communication and not only about a descendant vertical communication, where the decisions are not made only from the level of the executive director, in the case of our institution. Furthermore, we may also understand the idea that such a communication (formal ascendant vertical communication) that may be achieved in an institution such as DGASPC brings much satisfaction in the employee's activity. The role of the employee, when this type of communication functions in the institution, becomes very important and is not neglected, and work does not offer the social worker a state of monotony, routine and professional limitation. Our research also highlights the importance of the length of service at the place of work, which brings about a rather high knowledge of the science of organisational science.

As it represents a necessary beginning, our research intends to be also an urge addressed to those that feed an entire rhetoric of lamentation in the Romanian public space in relation with the deficit of organisational democracy, fatalism and lack of commitment, suggesting that "things may be done differently". By moral commitment, honesty and perseverance we may remodel, around us and through each of us, a "world" that seemed "lost" for ever.

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