COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN LOCAL PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

Intra-organizational conflict within public institutions represents a topic that, until recently, has been rather ignored in Romania. This article is trying to present the multiple role of communication in solving, controlling and preventing conflicts in local public organizations. The paper presents a set of theoretical models (of conflict and communication in organizations) and, based on the data offered by an organizational diagnosis-type research, analyzes the role of communication processes in conflict management and prevention.

1. Introduction

Conflict management has developed into an important sub-field of organizational behavior within a short time period (Kozan, 2002, pp. 89-95). This trend underlines the greater acceptance of conflict as an organizational phenomenon and as a result, concern over its management. This paper will focus upon one particular set of conflicts – intra-organizational conflicts in the public sector in Romania; I will also concentrate on the influence that communication has upon conflict resolution processes.

Reforming Romania's public administration introduced many structural and methodical changes inside Romanian public organizations. Due to these changes and to public servants' resistance to these changes, several conflict situations appeared.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the multiple role of communication in conflict management, both as a mean to control/solve or even prevent conflicts and (if defective) as a source for intra-organizational conflicts. The analysis will be based upon empirical data gathered in a diagnose-type research of the Cluj-Napoca City Hall in 2008.

Before analyzing these two items – communication and conflict, a short presentation of theoretical models of conflict management and communication would be necessary, in order to better understand their relationship when dealing with public organization diagnosis.

2. Models of intra-organizational conflict

Intra-organizational conflicts deal with the 'structural makeup of an organization' (Stojkovic, Kalinich and Klofas, 2003, p. 269). The authors consider that there are four types of intra-organizational conflict: vertical conflict, horizontal conflict, line-staff and role conflict.

Vertical conflicts could occur because your supervisor is always telling you what to do and tries to micromanage instead of letting you do your job. This conflict involves two hierarchical levels and an employee and his/her immediate boss. This type of conflict exists mainly within police agencies, state and city agencies, where the organizational structure has a high degree of formality.

Horizontal conflicts occur between employees within the same unit, on the same hierarchical level. Horizontal conflicts can manifest themselves for many reasons, including ideas, decisions about which units or individuals do not agree or the distribution of resources.

Line-Staff conflicts occur between support staff and 'actual units' within a department. The example used by the authors, analyzing the police system, would be between a police file clerk and an officer who is looking for a cold case file about the administration of documents, files, evidence, etc.

Role conflicts can stem from an incomplete or otherwise fallacious understanding of the assignment given to an employee at a specific moment in time.

Another model of intra-organizational conflict is the structural model of conflict, which is built upon four variables. These are: behavioral predispositions, social pressures, incentive structures and rules (Thomas, 2010, pp. 49-65).

Behavioral predispositions: attitudes, needs, personality traits, attitudinal dissimilarities, competitive needs, gain motivation, incompetence, and socially devalued personal qualities breed conflict.

Social pressures are of two types: *constituent social pressure* that flows from the groups which the parties in the conflict represent. Typically, notes Thomas, constituent social pressures are directed towards competitive stances, although the reasons for this are not always clear. The second type, *ambient social pressure*, flows from outsiders, and includes larger social systems than those which encompass the conflicting parties. Ambient pressures tend to channel the conflict generated by constituent pressure into socially acceptable forms.

The third element in the model, *incentive structure*, refers to the distribution of rewards following cooperative and non-cooperative transactions. Of crucial importance here are the conflicts of interest that occur when two or more subsystems (for example, the crew and mission control) pursue mutually exclusive goals. Conflicts of interest may be minimized or eliminated by super ordinate goals which are of overriding importance to both groups and factions (Sherif *apud* Robert and Lloyd, 2002, pp. 75-95). It is therefore important to identify and incorporate goals which can be shared by all subsystems (and by each individual within a given subsystem) and which override separatist or special-interest goals.

Rules and procedures refer to laws, customs, conventions and the like which govern ongoing negotiations. Decision rules provide advance codes regarding specific conflicts of interest; procedural rules provide guidelines for bargaining, negotiation, and reaching resolutions in instances not covered by the decision rules. To the extent that such rules are effective, each party accepts the outcomes or constraints imposed by the rules and bear the expense in terms of decreased discretionary power. Reliance on rules generates less hostility than the exercise of coercive power, a common response to conflict situations (Stark, 2007, p. 70).

In the organizational conflict model (Robbins, 2005, pp. 45-60) conflict has as main sources: communication, structure and the factors of personal behavior.

Communication. As Robbins says, although there is no classification of the sources of conflict according to their importance, it is considered that most of the conflicts are due to communication problems. There are several situations that can be considered failed communication: when communication includes only a part of the necessary information, when it incorporates ambiguous or threatening information or when it offers too much information (either in terms of quantity or too highly coded for the recipient).

Structure. The same author considers that structural variables, such as the bureaucratic elements, reward systems, interdependence of the tasks and the heterogeneity of the personnel can create conflicts both between individuals and between groups.

Factors of personal behavior. Each factor of personal behavior (personality, satisfaction, the status or the objectives) can favor or diminish the probability of

conflicts occurring in organizations. For example, the reaction of the individual confronted with incompatible objectives.

3. Communication models

The organizational communication structure is defined as the 'system of pathways through which messages flow' or as 'patterns of interaction among people who comprise the organization' (Nica, 1998, pp. 188-191).

Communications is important in solving conflicts because it can increase understanding and reduce the risk of jumping to conclusions or making generalizations. It is important to understand first the sources of most conflict situations.

There are many types and forms of communication within organizations. Two of the most important ones are formal and informal communication, especially for the public institutions, where the degree of formality is (either by necessity or tradition) higher than in many of the other types of organizations.

1. *Formal communication* is that type of communication that sends information through the officially designated channels between different organization positions. There are three types of formal communication: downward, upward and horizontal communication (Nica, 1998, pp. 188-191).

1.1. *Downward communication* is the one that flows from upper to lower (from managers to their subordinates). The types of messages transmitted are job instructions, job rationales, information on procedures and practices, feedback, and indoctrination. It is considered to be efficient, but it is the expression of the managerial control and it frequently generates vertical conflicts.

1.2. *Upward communication* is the transmission of messages from lower levels to the higher ones (such as communication initiated by subordinates with their superiors). Types of messages sent through this type of communication could be, for example, about performance on the job, about job related problems, about fellow employees and their problems, about subordinates' perceptions of organization policies and practices, tasks and procedures.

1.3. *Horizontal communication* is that flow of messages across functional areas at a given level of an organization (this permits people at the same level to communicate directly). The messages exchanged are those that facilitate problem solving, information sharing across different work groups, task coordination between departments and project teams. It is effective, but not efficient (time consuming) and of course it can generate horizontal conflicts.

2. *Informal communication* contains those episodes of interaction that do not have a place within the officially designated channels of communication. It is a necessary and unavoidable aspect of organization life; it creates a relaxed, comfortable climate and addresses problems not accessible to the formal communication, thus aiding the functioning of the organization. Nevertheless, it should never substitute formal communication.

The authors Krauss and Morsella have found four models of communication analyzing the interplay between communication and conflict (Krauss and Morsella *apud* Deutsch *et al.*, 2006, pp. 144-158): the Encoding – Decoding model, the Intentionalist Model, the Perspective-Taking Model and the Dialog Model.

The Encoding-Decoding model refers to communication as a transfer of information via codes, an example for this model being the Morse code. This is the simplest model and it refers to the process through which an encoded message is sent from the sender to the receiver (who has the codes necessary for decoding it) through a channel of communication. But the received message can be different from the message initially transmitted; because of the noise contribution that can affect every channel of communication (the children game of telephone, for example).

The Intentionalist Model. In different circumstances, a transmitted message can have one or more meanings, requiring a necessary distinction between the literal meaning and the actual, true meaning (the meaning intended by the sender) of the message. If the model above focused upon the 'how', the methods used for transmitting of the message the Intentionalist model considers as the most important part of any communication process the 'what', the (true) content of the message. Therefore, the sender should try to consider what meaning would the receiver give to the message and the listener should also try to understand the intended meaning of the message. Example: when the parties to the conflict use different languages to communicate and even if translation is made, sometimes there are sentences that lose their intended meaning when translated, the situation of intercultural conflicts.

The Perspective-Taking Model refers to the fact that each individual perceives the world in a particular way, due to each individual's life experiences and culture, so that when transmitted, messages should be formulated in such ways as to include this factor into its composition. The 'multiple auditor problem' is a serious complication that seemingly will generate many conflicts since it appears quite impossible to design 'universal messages', messages that will suit to every receiver's experience. Therefore, misunderstanding will occur – thus conflicts.

The Dialog Model. If the three models already listed are more individually oriented, this model focuses on collaborative communication; participants try to understand one another and they also try to get to the same conceptions of the meaning of every message before transmitting a new one. Active listening makes communication effective at this level. It is important that conditions are from the beginning well established and well understood by all parties to a conflict situation, in order to allow effective communication.

These four communication models focus on the inherent complexity of the communication and how the outcomes of its misuse could accelerate a conflict instead of helping to solve it.

4. Communication's role in managing conflicts in organizations

Communication where potential conflict is entirely missing is unauthentic, so it doesn't fulfill the attributes of efficiency (Pănişoara *apud* Bocoş, 2008, p. 139). From conflicts preventing, avoiding, managing or solving perspective, interpersonal communication is very important; it can play multiple roles in any conflict (the first one being that it can create conflicts by itself). In the following part of the present paper we will focus on the role communication can play in solving conflicts.

According to the authors above, for solving conflicts communication uses three functions. The first is referring to the understanding and knowing of ourselves and of the others we interact with, so we can know what to expect from them and how we can influence them and, on the other hand, to make our own position known so they can react to it. The second function of communication is about developing a consistent relationship with the others, so that we could give significance to our reality – the individual socializing function. The third function refers to the dimension of communication influence and persuasion, developing further the idea of common effort and collaboration.

Communication and conflict are in an interdependent relationship; communication can engender conflicts, can escalate conflicts and it also can prevent conflicts, help in conflict management and resolution activities. When dealing with any conflict (or potential conflict) communication represents a very important factor. Next, we will present a theoretical model that will detail the negative role of communication within a conflict situation, how can communication generate conflicts.

Perturbing and blocking communication is an important source of conflict so it is necessary to identify those factors that are considered impediments to the communication process (Mathis et al., 2004, p. 100). The authors are offering a set of these disruptive factors (barriers in communication) within any organizational systems:

- The issue of *trust or mistrust* of the message recipient in the content of the message and the sender's opinions and intentions;
- The issue of developing *personal interdependencies*, common goals and collaborative patterns in order to reach those goals;
- The issue of a *correct rewards distribution system*. This will raise the individuals' motivation at their work place; and
- The issue of a true collective understanding of the *group's structure* as it is – type of activities, way of action, type of group, the status quo and type of interrelations inside the group.

5. Organizational diagnosis and research

As already mentioned, this analysis will be based on the empirical research on Cluj-Napoca City Hall in 2008, within an organizational diagnosis built upon several directions: scope and structure of the institution, its leadership, organizational culture, decision making, strategic management, human resourcing and informational system.

Being a local public institution, still organized by Weber's bureaucratic model, Cluj-Napoca City Hall should have a rather strict *scope*, clear objectives and a more formal *structure*, in comparison to a non-profit organization or a private institution. In the diagnosis analyzed it seems that findings point into a rather different direction, so that the objectives to be achieved are not clearly established, attributions are not well shared, decision making is not well planned and hierarchies are not clearly defined.

In such organizations, having a diffuse scope and structure, we could confront with conflicts not only on a horizontal level, between employees belonging to the same department or to different ones, because of the interdependence of tasks and their possible incompatibilities, but also between different hierarchical levels, when issuing more tasks to be fulfilled, without being able to establish a list of priorities. How can communication help managing these conflict situations? Formal model of communication could have the key-answer to this question: communication flows in two different directions: downward and upward. The first direction of communication should be working from one level to another, step by step, so that tasks would be clearer for every individual in that chain of communication process, each receiver having one source of message sending. The upward communication could be used by the leaders of the organization when receiving a feedback from their subordinates in order to evaluate how well the downward communication is working and if tasks are now better fulfilled or not by their subordinates.

In what concerns the organizational culture, it seems that the City Hall of Cluj-Napoca has a strong organizational culture that, in the ongoing process of public administration reform, is rather a barrier to the reform, because of the personnel resistance to change. Conflict situations could easily be generated at different levels of the organization, between those who implement the new directions and the executants. These situations could be avoided using a transparent formal communication coming from the management level, in this way these situations could be better kept under control by the management level and, on the other side, transparency of this process will give trust and motivation to the employees.

Managing organizational culture resistance in times of public sector reform, there is strong relationship between organizational culture and strategic management that in our case is rather incoherent on medium and long terms. This is due to the political influence upon public institutions, the 'color' of the leading party changing every four years, during elections; every new party when starting its mandate will establish their own programs and projects and most of the former ones would remain unfinished. These could be identified as social pressures that can generate conflict situations, due to the conflict models. New individuals with new ideas and behaviors will join the organization along with the new leader and will meet the strong organizational culture mentioned above. In this case, the horizontal communication is very important, allowing these two groups to know each other by changing information, experiences and ideas, reducing the probability of conflict appearance, by increasing the organization homogeneity, when sharing the same values.

The organizational diagnosis results show that leadership in Cluj-Napoca City Hall is more oriented toward achieving objectives (even if these are not well established as outlined above), than on the human resource, such as a rather authoritarian organization. Neglecting the human resource in an institution, could lead to employee less job satisfaction on a long term and moreover to conflicts between them and their leadership. In order to prevent these situations, it is important that in organizations of this type (especially when there is a strong horizontal and informal communication, as in the analyzed organization) personal interdependencies, common goals and collaborative patterns should be a priority, team and group working would reduce interpersonal differences and make individuals focus on themselves too, in order to achieve the institution objectives.

Speaking of the human resources management of the organization, the recruiting and evaluation processes are both important for the study. The diagnosis findings show that when a person leaves the institution, the process needed to replace that person is not well planned; in this situation his/her attributions would necessary be distributed to other employees, who already have their tasks and duties, so that conflicts could appear, generated by factors of personal behavior and predispositions or attitudes. In this situation, I consider that informal and line-staff communication could be an option, trying to be closer to the group that shares the distributed attributions for that period of time and show empathy to that group and trying to raise self motivation of the employees.

On the other side, results of the evaluation process in the organization analyzed express that most of the employees have received the qualification 'very well'. In such organizations, this might have a dual influence upon employees: those who are under evaluated would lose their self motivation; and those over evaluated will not make any progresses in their jobs and so, their activity will not help the organization in its growth. We also speak about how correctly or incorrectly rewards are distributed in a public organization that develops this system of evaluation. Conflicts between under evaluated employees and those over evaluated could occur (because of the unequal distribution of rewards), but also between the first ones and their superiors/leaders etc. What model of communication could prevent or solve these possible situations of conflicts? I consider that those models presented by Krauss and Morsella would better suit – the message that the human resources management should send to the employees is not that of an unequal evaluation results treatment, no matter of the tasks one fulfilled, but that of an objective evaluation based on each employee's activity, behavior, results on a certain period of time.

Referring to the informational system, the data in the diagnosis show that technical equipment is not sufficient for the entire body of the employees and it doesn't answer the needs of the organization. In such cases, conflict situations could easily occur; having as sources the way resources are distributed. When this is about to happen, organizations could develop a system of personal interdependencies, using formal

communication in order to establish different tasks to the employees, at distinct periods of time, so that the technical equipment could be used by every individual in the organization.

6. Conclusions

As presented in the theoretical models, communication could play different roles when dealing with intra-organizational conflicts. First of all, it is an important source of conflict situations, but what is most important for this study is that communication can prevent, avoid, manage, control and solve conflicts.

Communication models presented could be used in accordance to different models and types of conflicts and proper to one organization type. In the example chosen – the organizational diagnosis of Cluj-Napoca City Hall, a certain type of public organization could be identified, analyzing those directions chosen by the authors – scope, structure and decision making, leadership and strategic management, organizational culture and human resources management and informational system. In these types of local public organizations, because of the particularities presented above, certain conflict situations could occur and in order to face them, I proposed those models of communication for each different conflict situation that would better fit for each case or situation.

The suggested models of communication for the different conflict situations could be applied to other local public organizations that meet similarities in decision making system and structure, leadership and strategic management, human resource management in recruiting and evaluation process, strong organizational culture and of course the same particularities within the information technology system.

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