

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND IDENTITY AND THE CONFLICT POTENTIAL OF THE ORGANIZATION

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to identify some coordinates necessary to evaluate and control the dynamics of conflict potential of organizations. In order to examine the conflictual potential of organizations, we started from Glasl's (1999) idea according to which, in this approach, attention must be focused mainly on the state and functionality of three main subsystems: the spiritual-cultural subsystem; the social-political subsystem and the instrumental-technical subsystem of the organizations. As a result, the possible vulnerabilities of the organizational system must be looked for, in two major directions. On the one hand, on aspects related to the soft part of the organization, more precisely the organizational identity, and on the other hand, on aspects related to the hard part of the organization, determined by the organizational structure. This paper is not about discovering the sources and factors that determine conflicts in organizations, but about drawing attention to the fact that the organization itself, through the values promoted and the way of organization, can be a source of conflict.*

Keywords: organizational conflict, conflict potential, organizational identity, organizational structure

1. Introduction

The organization is a complex multi-group and multi-departmental system, therefore with great saturation in internal interactions and connections and with numerous openings and contacts with the external social environment. This whole organizational system can determine, through the way it is structured and managed, a multitude of conflicting situations. What is important to specify is the fact that the conflict potential at the level of the organization is not activated suddenly, untimely, but gradually, over time, which gives us the opportunity to intervene prophylactically.

The purpose of this paper is to identify some necessary coordinates to evaluate and control the dynamics of conflict potential of

organizations. As stated by Glasl (1999), the attention must be focused mainly on the state and functionality of three main subsystems: the spiritual-cultural subsystem; the social-political subsystem and the instrumental-technical subsystem [1]. As these three subsystems are made up of several distinct elements, in examining the conflict potential we must analyze two broad directions, namely aspects related to the soft part of the organization, more precisely the organizational identity and the hard part of the organization, determined by the organizational structure.

2. The aim and methodological approach

The purpose of this work is to identify the most relevant aspects related to the influence of the way in which the

organizational structure and the organizational identity can create the premises for the amplification of the organizational potential. For this purpose, we will use a methodological approach focused on the analysis of specialized literature and the synthesis of the revealed information.

3. Organizational conflict

Conflict is a reality of social life, including organizational life. These environments not only generate stimulation, motivation, satisfaction, but also conflict situations. For a long time, they exclusively had a negative connotation, being considered destructive and destabilizing. Over time, their positive side, their constructive effects, began to be realized. As a result, the conflict from an artificial phenomenon became a normal, natural phenomenon and from an accidental one, it became one inherent in any form of social organization, including organizations. Thus, over time, the definition of the conflict as “a struggle between values and claims of statuses, power and resources in which the goals of the opponents are to neutralize or eliminate the rivals” (Coser, 1967, p.8) [2] shifted towards to a different approach, namely: “conflict is inevitable for all natural phenomena [...] an indispensable part of life, of change, of the creation of new forms” (Barron, 1990, p.233) [3].

Mihaela Vlasceanu (1993) summarizes three major perspectives on organizational conflict: the integrative perspective, according to which the existence of organizational conflicts has only negative effects and we must go in the direction of building consensus. The organization should be treated as a community where harmony should be the ultimate goal. The pluralist perspective, which considers conflict as a desirable element in organizations, a way of increasing performance through competition. The limited character of resources and the human nature characterized by

competitiveness make the conflict universal and desirable, as a result it should not be repressed, but managed, used in the interest of the organization. And the third perspective, the radical one, considers the conflict justified due to the imbalance of power and control over resources [4].

Essentially, the definitions of the conflict should take into account the social contexts in which they appear and their psychological burden, for this reason we consider that if we want to form a proper image of them, it is absolutely necessary to see how they were conceptualized at the macrosocial and microsocial level. The sociological or macro-level acceptance of the conflict is interested in the conditions, the mechanisms, but especially in its social functions. The social conflict, according to Coser, is seen as a factor of innovation and social change, contributing to the growth and strengthening of the social cohesion of those in conflict. The general perspective on conflicts x-rays the conflict situations very well, but it has too high a degree of generality, therefore it is important to analyze their individuality. Thus, the need arose for the psychosocial acceptance of conflicts to accompany the sociological one.

This understanding makes the translation from macrosocial to microsocial, the conflict being seen as an expression of the confrontation of forces, interests and energies in the process of achieving goals. The descent of the conflict from the sphere of social generality into the sphere of social-interactional reality allows for its much more nuanced conception.

4. Conflict potential of the organization between identity and organizational structure

The conflict potential of an organization refers to the probability or predisposition for it to appear in that particular organizational context. As mentioned above, the factors that can contribute to the

conflict potential of an organization can be organized on two big dimensions, namely aspects related to the organizational identity and aspects related to the organizational structure.

4.1. Conflict and organizational identity

In order to understand the correlation between the potential for conflicts and how organizational identity can improve this situation, we must understand what organizational identity is, and how it is increasingly used as a tool to obtain desirable organizational behaviors [5]. The analysis of this phenomenon is of particular importance for the understanding and improvement of some psychobehavioral variables, including the conflict.

In a general sense, organizational identity refers to the perception of the extent to which there is an increased congruence between the values of individuals and those of the organization. For Dutton and his collaborators (1994), organizational identity is the degree to which the members of an organization define themselves, through the same attributes with which they define the organization [6]. If an organizational culture of identifying each individual with the organization is developed, individuals will have a sense of belonging to an organizational community/environment where every aspect of work is shared, significant decisions are discussed and organizational strategies are debated.

Existing studies also suggest that employees who identify with the organization receive more organizational support due to their closeness to the organization (Avanzi et al., 2018) [7]. Employees who identify to a greater extent with the organization share a special bond with it, a bond that is based on common goals, norms and values. This connection sets them apart from other employees, allowing them to enjoy privileges based on their proximity to the organization, a fact that has implications for employment in, and conflict escalation [8].

In order to reduce the organizational potential, it is important to build a symbolic world based on common values and beliefs, this does not necessarily mean that homogeneity is the answer to organizational diversity, but only the creation of an organizational culture with which people can identify.

4.2. Conflict and organizational structure

The way in which the variables that define the structure of an organization (complexity, centralization and formalization) [9] determine various types of organizational structures, which can increase or decrease the conflict potential in organizations. The problem that arises is which type of structure creates a favorable terrain for the emergence of conflicts: bureaucratic ones or adhocratic ones? The answer, according to studies that have focused on this topic, is that both structures. On the one hand, the bureaucracy, as a monocratic system with a single point of legitimacy in the hierarchy, ensures specialization, standardization and centralization, but it is exposed to the increasing flexibility and dynamism of organizational life [10]. In turn, adhocracy easily adapts to changes, is personalized, arouses interest and motivation, but exaggerates accidental actions and the almost frenetic pace of changes. Alvin Toffler, who has been announcing the birth of adhocracy since the 80s, characterizes the adhocracy system as an organizational system in constant change [11].

Certainly, these adhocratic structures, compared to bureaucratic ones, are based on more collaboration, innovation and affective commitment of the employees. However, conflicts can easily arise and the lack of a clear hierarchy makes solving them a challenge. The uncertainty and ambiguity that characterize these organizations support a favorable terrain for the emergence of conflicts, especially since they are highly competitive and innovative environments.

On the other hand, bureaucratic systems through the centralization of power and the hierarchy of authority affect the relations between the technocrats (the group of professionals) and those who hold the rational-legal authority. Also, conflict situations may arise due to standardization and control and problems of adaptation to the new of the strategic top. Even the matrix structures that combine the two modes of organization, bureaucratic and adhocratic, considering that they are specific to large and complex organizations as a primary goal, can create confusion regarding roles, responsibilities and can increase the probability of conflicts. Especially in situations where work tasks overlap or where there is ambiguity regarding the decision-making authority [12].

5. Final remarks

When we talk about organizations and implicitly, we are talking about a systemic reality, it is logical to assume that important dysfunctions at the level of a subset or a

part reflect negatively on the functionality of the whole. The monitoring of the elements must be permanent in order to prevent the outbreak of destructive conflicts. The two elements presented above must be viewed in interaction, through the prism of the whole, the goals and status of the organization. It is important to be aware that the identification of the individual with the organizational values creates the conditions for a more collaborative than conflictual work climate and the design of the organizational structure (an organization must know how it wants to be, before there is anything) if it is in agreement with the purpose of the organization, of the need for a certain degree of specialization, differentiation of work, formalization, centralization and size, then the conflict potential of the organization decreases. But all the time, the positive side of conflicts must be taken into account, the fact that they are naturally part of the social context of work, and as a result they must be viewed in their dynamics.

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