ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH CHECK. A COMPARATIVE INVESTIGATION INTO ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION PATTERNS

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Abstract: *This paper presents some of the conclusions of a research endeavour undertaken in two different institutions: a private company (PO) and a state- financed organization (SO). Its purpose was the comparative investigation into the similarities and differences characterizing them in terms of the communication patterns underlying their organizational behavior. Hence, the research method employed was based on the comparison and contrast techniques, whereas the paradigm it adopted was that of organizational communication patterns. Thus, out of the five dimensions describing the concept of organizational communication, namely vertical, horizontal, informal, formal and organizational outward communication this article will only present the findings related to* **informal, formal and horizontal communication patterns.** *Based on these, the paper will then focus on the prospective challenges for the two organizations in terms of micro-organizational behavior and also on the way the two dimensions of organizational communication can inform on the future decision-making process. In the end, the conclusions will highlight the role of organizational communication patterns in conducting an organizational health check and the way ahead from such an assessment.*

Keywords: *communication patterns, horizontal communication, informal/formal communication, organizational behavior*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on a study that focused on the following research hypothesis: *Organizational behavior can be investigated from the perspective of the organizational communication patterns underlying it.* As a result, the aim of the overall research endeavour was the investigation of organizational life through the conceptual lens of organizational behavior. In addition, taking into account the complexity of such a concept, the latter was tackled by resorting to the paradigm of organizational communication patterns underlying the concept proper. The method considered as best fitting both the paradigm and the concept was the comparison and contrast one.

All of the above considered, the aims established for undertaking this endeavor were three-fold. First, the research described the

theoretical concepts to be operationalized, namely "*organizational behavior*", and "*communication*" by drawing on specialized literature in the fields of organizational behavior (Johns, 1998:4, Cole, 1995:4, R.M. Steers and J.S. Black, 1994, Miner, 2002, Mullins, 2006), group theory (Barth, 1992:19, Jenkins, 1996:80, Cooley, 1909, Radu, 1994:112-113), communication theories (Bougnoux, 1998, Muchielli et al., 2006,Auroux, 1997, Wilson et al., 1986:6) and organization theory (Hackman and morris, 1975:49). Second, it moved on to the exploration of organizational life through the attitudes expressed by the sample units selected to account for it. In this respect, an important input from a theoretical point of view was provided by the psychological theories in the field of attitude and behavior change (Ilut, 2004:43, Stanciu,S., Ionescu, Mihaela Alexandra, 2004:13, Allport, 1971:19,

ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH CHECK. A COMPARATIVE INVESTIGATION INTO ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION PATTERNS

Stoetzel, 1963:167, Popescu-Neveanu, 1987:71, Katz, 1960:163-204, Gross,1987:134, Azjen and Fischbein, 1977). Moreover, another exploration was carried out in order to investigate how a paradigm drawing upon communication studies can better describe the concept of organizational behavior. Hence, an underlying aim was that of attempting to make a contribution towards better describing this concept from the perspectives suggested since it is the communication techniques that determine the structure and the scope of an organization (Barnard:1938).

The nominal definitions for the noun phrases "organizational behavior" and "communication patterns" employed in the operationalization effort of the aforementioned concept were as follows:

Organizational behavior is individuals' behavior among themselves and within groups, groups' behavior between and among them, and organization's behavior towards individuals and groups within it, as well as its behavior within its environment.

As for the **formal communication patterns**, the latter were described by the variables of:

upward communication, namely communication that flows towards the top of the hierarchical ladder and that involves problems and exceptions presented to the manager, performance reports, grievances, disputes, accounting and financial reports;

downward communication (…) employed by managers in order to direct and control the activities of those in the chain of command, and

horizontal communication, designating the inter-departmental and intradepartmental activities carried out in order to ensure completion of projects and tasks assigned to departments or workgroups.

In terms of the informal communication patterns, the latter emerge from the *complexity of networks established among people because of their psychological needs, the frequency of interactions among them, age, gender similarities and its inherent information flows in all directons regardless of hierarchy.*

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

For a better understanding of the way organizational communication patterns inform on overall organizational behavior and, inherently, on the decisions made, this sub-chapter will briefly focus on the research hypothesis of interest for the aims of this paper, on the identification of the dimensions and variables underlying the communication patterns of interest for the current endeavor, types of instruments, sample description and ethical considerations.

2.1. Current paper research hypothesis. Out of the initial ten questions and 15 alternative hypotheses (Baker: 1998, 9.139) established for the overall study, this paper will only focus on the hypotheses according to which:

H.1. Organizational behavior can be investigated from the perspective of the organizational communication patterns underlying it.

H.2. There are underlying causes that can account for the differences and similarities between the organizations investigated.

H.3. The findings of this research can be used to the benefit of the organizations under investigation.

H.4. The findings of this research can be used to the benefit of organizations at large.

2.2. Research dimensions and variables. Based on the identification of the dimensions and variables describing the two concepts of interest for the initial research endeavor, this paper will provide de framework by which the data interpretation will be carried out by taking a look at the dependent and independent variables.Thus, the dependent variable of the study was "organizational behavior", whereas the independent variables informing on the former were grouped under the generic heading of "organizational communication patterns". Out of the two broad interrelated categories established by the initial research, namely inter-organizational communication and organizational outward communication, the paper will only focus on the former and on the variables of interest for this paper:

ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH CHECK. A COMPARATIVE INVESTIGATION INTO ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION PATTERNS

V1. Formal communication
V2. Informal communication
V3.Horizontal communication

The interpretation of the data obtained from the respondents took into account the following concept-defining variables:

V1. Formal communication

V1.0. Communication in terms of organization processes

V1.0.1. Formal communication of objectives and strategies (C-FCOS)

V1.0.2. Formal channels of communication (C-FChC)

V1.0.3. Lessons-learned follow-up (C-LLFU)

V1.0.4. Employment of lessons learned (C-ELL)

V1.0.5. formal communication of change (C-FCC)

V1.0.6. Individual attitude to formal communication channels (C-IAOHSC)

V1.1. Organization design

V1.1.1. Individual attitudes to organizational hierarchy and span of control (C-IAOHSC)

V1.1.2. Communication facilitated by knowledge of the hierarchical structure (C-KHS)

V1.2. Job policies and procedures

V1.2.1. Individual attitude to performance assessment procedures (C-IAPAP)

V1.2.2. Solutions for performance improvement

V1.2.3. Downward communication of assessment criteria (C-DCAC)

V1.2.4. Job procedures and work performance (C-JPWP)

V1.2.5. Job security (C-JS)

V1.2.6. Individual perception of job incentives (C-IPJI)

V1.2.7. Responsibilities/tasks assignment (C-RA)

V1.2.8. Deelgation of responsibilities (C-DR)

V1.2.9. Delegation of customer-focused responsibilities (C-CFR)

V1.2.10. Job-related resources availability

V1.2.11. Job-related information availability

V1.3. Career

V1.3.1. Training opportunities (C-TO)

V1.3.2. Employees' on the job opportunity to apply knowledge gained from training

V1.3.3. Development of non-specific job skills (C-DNSJS)

V1.3.4. Career opportunities (C-CO)

V1.3.5. Professional goals (C-PG)

V1.4. Leadership (i.e. management communication)

V1.4.1. Management style (C-MS)

V1.4.2. Flexibility (C-F)

V1.5. Work environment

V1.5.1. Work conditions (C-WC)

V1.5.2. Respect and appreciation (C-R)

V1.5.3. Freedom of speech (C-FS)

V1.5.4. Equal opportunities (C-EO)

V1.5.5. Individual perception of work-related stress (C-S)

V1.5.6. Stress factors (C-SF)

V1.6. Conflict

V1.6.1. Conflict sources (C-CS)

V1.6.2. Conflict approach (C-CA)

V2. Informal communication

V2.0. Communication at informal group level

V2.0.1. Informal channels of communication(C-IChC)

V2.1. Informal communication emerging from organizational behavior

V2.1.1. Informal communication facilitated by organizational policies (C-ICOP)

V2.1.2. Individual attitudes towards informal communication facilitated by organizational policies (C-IAICOP)

V2.2. Power relationships

V2.2.1. Informal leaders (C-IL)

V2.2.2. Hidden agendas (C-HA)

V2.2.3. Rites of passage for new comers (C-RPNC)

V3. Horizontal communication

V3.0. Communication at formal group level

V3.0.1. Inter-department communication (CInterDC)

V3.0.2. Work team/group-other departments communication (C-WGDC)

V3.0.3. Intra-workgroup communication (C-IntraWGC)

V3.0.4. Team Work (C-TW)

V3.0.5. Team work and responsibilities (CTWR)

V3.0.6. Team work and equity (C-TWE)

V3.1. Conflict (measured through the category of "conflict sources")

2.3. Types of instruments, sample description and sampling methods. The instrument used for focusing on the hypotheses listed in this paper consisted in an attitudes-related questionnaire made up of 82 closed ended questions and it was administered in the Romanian language. Some of the questions listed mutually exclusive alternatives: yes, no, don't now, whereas others were multiple choice ones listing several alternatives, the others category included, and allowing for multiple answers.

The reasons that led to choosing the questionnaire as an instrument were thre-fold. First, there was the large sample of respondents that made impossible the employment of interviews to elicit their opinions and attitudes identified in the previous sub-chapter. Second, the time constraints (the time period for designing and writing the research report was not more than one year) did not allow for another instrument such as observation or recording employees' behavior, which required of the researcher not only time to do the observation, but also to process the data obtained. Moreover, related to this instrument of investigation, there was also the likelihood of not obtaining permission from the directors of the two institutions identified as providers of the sample of respondents to observe organizational behavior in vivo.

2.4. Sample description, sampling methods. The sampling decisions concerning the group of informants were taken in accordance with two major criteria.

First, there was the scope of the investigation: a comparative exploration and description of organizational behavior through the communication patterns underlying it and as acknowledged by the employees of two educational institutions from the public and private fields in Romania. The latter contributed to the identification of the population (Baker, 1988:144) of likely informants in terms of field of activity: informants from the public sector (i.e. institution's orientation towards the benefit of community) and from the private sector (i.e. the institution's for-profit nature of activities).

Second, in deciding upon the sampling frame to be drawn from this population, a major role was played by the features of the two institutions. Thus, I tried to identify organizations as similar as possible not only from the point of view of their major field of activity, target audience, number of employees, but also from the point of view of their subordination or not to a central structure.

Thus, the sampling frame consisted of twenty seven (employees) working with public sector institution on a full time basis, and thirteen (13) people employed by the private institution both part time and full time. On the primary sampling units further reductions were carried out. First, I decided to leave out of the available population the top, the middle and line managers from both institutions since the research aimed at investigating employees' attitudes, perceptions and cognitions of the organization as a whole and not decision makers' position on the topic under scrutiny. Consequently, the short listed sample reached eighteen (18) people working full time with the public organization, and twelve (12) part time and full time employees working with the private organization.

Next, I employed non-probability sampling methods, namely convenience, quota and dimensional sampling (Cohen, 1994: 88) in order to comply with the requisite of representativeness of the population under investigation.

Taking into account the researcher-respondents relationship (i.e. the researcher worked both part time with the private organization and with the public organization when the research was conducted) convenience sampling was employed in terms of "the nearest individuals" (Cohen, 1994: 88)

to be investigated until obtaining the necessary sample size as established through the quota and dimensional sampling methods.

Quota sampling involved taking into account the gender and the department the respondents worked in. Decisions on the male/ female and department quotas were not a problem in the case of the private company due to the small number of employees in each department (i.e. three in the administrative and nine in the teaching department) and to the absence of any males among the private school's staff. Thus, the questionnaire was administered to all employees and the response rate was 91.66%.

In the case of the public institution I identified eleven (11) possible respondents working in administrative departments out of which eight (8) females and three (3) males, and seven (7) in the teaching department of which four (4) females and three (3) males.

Even though the quotas of males and females within the sampling frame were

unequal, considering some of the variables of the research (i.e. gender discrimination, equal opportunities, respect, level of formality), as well as the type of organization under investigation, I decided to have equal quotas of male and female respondents. Moreover, the above reasons added to the research aim led to a similar decision in terms of the quotas of informants per department. Dimensional sampling was further resorted to in order to identify the years of employment of the respondents. However, the prerequisite of this method (1994:90), namely that of obtaining at least one respondent for every category, was met indirectly by applying the convenience and quota sampling methods as previously described. With a view to this, the following 'features' of the respondents were set out: employed for less than a year; employed between 1-2 years; 3-5 years; 6-10 years; for more than 10 years.

Table 1: Sample Frame and Dimensional Sampling

	Public organization: sampling frame: 18 employees	No. of respondents: 12 out of 14 (85.71%)	Private organization: sampling frame: 12 employees	No. of respondents: 11 out of 12 (91.66%)
Employment period				
Less than one year		8.33%		9.09%
1-2 years		8.33%		27.27%
3-5 years		25%		27.27%
6-10 years		58.33%		27.27%
More than 10 years	-	-		9.09%
Department				
		50% administrative 50% teaching department		27.27% administrative 72,72% teaching department
Gender		50% males 50% females		100% females

All this considered, the table below reviews the quotas of respondents per department, as well as the quotas of respondents in terms of gender and their

employment period and it will be further referred to when interpreting the data collected after the survey administration.

2.5. Data interpretation. Referring back to the number of respondents having completed the questionnaires and by relying on the thorough analysis of the differences and similarities in the answers provided by the respondents from the two organizations, the percentages were interpreted in the following manner:

• half and above was referred to as majority, unless majority (i.e. 50%) was also recorded in the case of the same question when the interpretation viewed the position of the respondents as divided over the issue and tried to account for it as much as possible;

• 46.66% was referred to as almost half and counted as significant if the rest of the answers was equally or almost equally divided between the other alternatives provided.

• 33.33% or 36.36%, as well as 25% was regarded as significant as long as they brought any light into the issue investigated in contrast with a majority expressed on the same issue. 16.16%, 18.18%, 8.33% and 9.09% were also referred to but left aside if the information they provided was not significant compared to the information provided by the majority of the respondents.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

In terms of **horizontal communication** the findings can be concluded upon as follows:

• Even though inter-department communication suffers in both organizations, the answers of the respondents from the public organization point out a rather worrying situation in this respect.

• In terms of the communication between respondents' workteam/group-other depart-ments both organizations confront with communication problems;

• In both organizations communication within workgroups or departments is very good because clear norms and roles are assigned to individuals.

• Even though team work is encouraged in both organizations, the way work tasks are distributed among employees seems to be fairer in the public organization compared to the private organization.

• Assessing whether the other employees carry out their job-related tasks is felt as a sensitive issue by the majority of the respondents from the public organization who prefers to refrain from answering the question related to this issue.

• Even though not reaching majority, most of the employees from the private organization are divided between remaining neutral and agreeing that their colleagues do their share of jobs.

• In both organizations formal communication of objectives and strategy is done well taking into account the impressive majority recorded when it comes to agreeing that cooperation underlies work relationships.

• If the majority from the public organization agrees that interpersonal exchanges are based on mutual trust, the respondents from the private organization are quite divided on the issue.

• Formal communication seems to fail in conveying the feeling of trust in the employees within the private organization (considering the answers recorded for the question related to the category of 'mutual trust'), whereas within the public institution the situation is quite encouraging even though leaving room for improvement.

• A merger between professional and friendship relationships may be noticed within the private organization, even if in the case of less than half of the employees;

• The informal relationships go deeper than the professional level for the majority of the respondents from the public organization, which sets out the increased likelihood of informal groups' and leaders' presence and activities.

• In both organizations there is a high focus on behalf of the employees on work performance and final results despite potential disturbing factors such as conflict with colleagues.

• The majority of the respondents from the public organization claim neither to have

witnessed, nor to have experienced discrimination within their company. However, the voices of some of the respondents from the administrative departments, point out discrimination because of employees' education, as well as position related discrimination which makes it obvious that some of the peer-to peer relationships are built up along the roles and status of the individual within the organization.

In terms of **informal communication** two major interrelated aspects need to be mentioned: the role of informal leaders within the two organizations under investigation and the way formal channels of communication are paralleled by informal ones. Thus the conclusions that can be drawn are as follows:

• The public organization seems to succeed better in facilitating employees' interaction at an informal level compared to the private organization where it seems that communication at an informal level, outside the organizational framework, needs to be encouraged by top management. However, despite the public organization's apparent strength in terms of informal communication opportunities outside the formal organizational activities, work relationships are still one of the causes leading to stress within the public institution, as highlighted by the variable of formal communication.

• In both organizations the premises for the appearance of informal leaders are high since professionalism and personality are considered to be representative features of some of the colleagues of the respondents

• Rumors are not by far the core of information sharing at an informal level within the private organization. Consequently, power relationships in terms of who has access to and shares information are not likely to appear. That testifies to a good communication flow downward which rules out the likelihood of informal leaders emergence from this point of view.

• Informal communication within the public organization relies to a certain extent on rumors which may point out those timely actions towards informing employees on work-related issues need to be taken by top management.

Considering the complexity of the variable of **formal communication** this paper is to list only the most important findings related to this variable. Thus, they are as follows:

• While the for-profit nature of the private organization imposes good formal communication of organizational objectives and strategy, as well of changes directly affecting the employees, the public organization needs to work on these aspects in order to avoid individuals' and groups' passive resistance to organizational goals and future activities.

• Within the private organization unwritten rules by which employees communicate well in terms of task-related conclusions exchange seem to be in place, whereas the public organization seems to convey contradictory messages in this respect to the employees. Consequently, what the public organization needs to do is to encourage employees to exchange their conclusions at the end of projects by reinforcing organizational objectives and by working on the relationship among work groups or departments that does not seem to excel from this point of view.

• The private organization is more likely to solve complex problems faster and more accurately because of its 'all-channels' communication network as contrasted with the public organization where it is the simple problems that are solved faster and more accurately as a consequence of its 'chain'-like communication flow. Moreover, within the public organization the employees are less likely to have a positive attitude towards their jobs because of lack of participation, while in the PO the members take on a more active role in the decisions to be made.

• While in both organizations almost all respondents feel that vertical communication from the point of view of bottom-up communication is ensured through organizational design, there are clear differences when assessment of organizational design efficiency is at stake since the respondents form both organizations do not

reach majority in agreeing on how organizational design affects organizational results.

• Both organizations seem to represent satisfactory work places for their employees

• The public organization needs to work towards meeting staff's esteem needs as well in order to have them happy about their work environment. On the other hand, the private organization meets only partially these needs and it has a long way to go (if it is ever to take it considering its for-profit nature) to meet the safety needs of its employees in terms of the incentives offered.

• Within the public organization employment of resources will never represent a reason for communication breakdown. However, there is the likelihood for the same organization's formal communication pattern underlying organizational behavior to lead to the development of informal communication channels through which people to try and compensate for the information the formal path does not make ready for them to carry out their activities

• The private organization is the most prone to encountering difficulties in ensuring employees' commitment if the latter's extrinsic motivation is stronger than the intrinsic one as the research seems to unveil.

• Even though managers form both organizations show flexibility to employees' problems, the public management style seems to be disputed as far as its influence upon the working environment is concerned

• While in the private organization the major sources of stress are related to the job the employees have, within the public organization work relationships seem to be partially out of the control and regulation of the formal communication channels and inherently of top management. However, considering the overall attitude of satisfaction expressed by the employees in relation with their job it seems that stress factors are seen as an inherent part of the job the staff holds.

Both organizations are likely to be confronted with interpersonal conflict generated mostly by diverging goals by disagreements over work-related responsibilities. Moreover, the public organization is equally prone to a dysfunctional approach of conflict, as well as to a positive one leading to cooperative behavior within the organization. Contrasted to this the private organization is more likely to display collaboration among employees despite the conflicts that could occur at a certain moment.

3. ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH CHECK

As far as the relationship between individual behavior, group behavior and organizational behavior is concerned the findings of the current research highlight the importance of viewing the individual as multifaceted, some of the personas being built up and shaped in accordance with the secondary groups designed or triggered by organizational behavior. Thus, if we are to talk about the differences and similarities underlying such a relationship, then there are more similarities than differences.

In terms of the differences between individual behavior, group behavior and organizational behavior, the latter can be discussed only from two perspectives: informal groups and personal decisions concerning individuals' welfare. However, as their overview is to highlight, when it comes to correlating the macro dimension of organizational behavior to the micro dimensions of individual and group behavior it becomes obvious the framework reinforces the similarities and not the differences.

Thus, regarding informal groups as the dimension of group behavior that differentiates itself from organizational behavior is not appropriate, since the likelihood for informal groups to appear is the direct consequence of the formal communication variable underlying organizational behavior, as demonstrated by the answers of the respondents concerning the variables of horizontal communication.

As for the differences between individual behavior, group behavior and organizational behavior, the latter may choose to act against,

to join or to distance from the two as a direct result of the communication flow underlying them. As a consequence, if difference is chosen by the individual to point out and to enact, as pointed out by the small percentages recorded for some categories and coming in sharp contrast with the majority of the respondents taking a completely different stand, then the difference has to be viewed strictly correlated with the issue and with the behavior from which an individual distances.

As common knowledge has it, there are no two things alike. Consequently, it is impossible to claim that the two organizations are similar, their private and state field of activity considered. on overall, the basic differences between the two organizations can be accounted for mostly in terms of how successful the formal communication flow underlying organizational behavior is in conveying and convincing the employees to share common norms, principles work-related tasks.

Moreover, starting from the same variable, levels of formality and informality, as well as relationships among employees can be described as manifesting differently in the two organizations.

In terms of the similarities observed between the two organizations, the latter can be summed up from the same perspective which yielded the differences, namely the way formal communication influences in a positive manner respondents' satisfaction with management style, commitment and trust in the organization, to mention only few.

In conclusion, it is obvious that organizational communication patterns alongside with their dimensions, variables and categories are a valid instrument for an organization's health check.

However, a larger and more thorough perspective may be adopted by moving away from the attitudes held by individuals and expressed in a quite limited manner because of the nature of the instrument of the initial research towards observing the way individuals interact within the organizational framework both verbally and non-verbally.

Consequently, a paradigm that could fit such an investigation would be symbolic interactionism in terms of the way employees interact with their peers and with their managers.

Last but not least, from the perspective of organization theory, management attitudes in terms of organizational behavior could also be held under scrutiny and then compared with their employees' in order not only to gain a more complete picture of the topic of organizational patterns underlying organizational behavior, but to also accurately point out where communication breaks down and why.

Finally, taking into account the elusiveness of the topic organizational patterns underlying organizational behavior simply because communication itself is a difficult concept to grasp and account for, as well as the cross-sectional nature of the study, the findings are strictly context-related and thus valid only for a limited period of time. Consequently, the relevance of these findings for other organizations is restricted to the advice to be encountered in specialized literature on organizational communication and organizational behavior according to which it is the manager that has an important saying in the way things are in a small organization like the ones that provided data for this paper.

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