COMMUNICATION CHANNELS OF MIDDLE MANAGERS AND NON-MANAGERS IN PUBLIC SECTOR ORGANISATIONS IN POLAND

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Abstract

Background. Discussion about instruments appropriate for administrative activities in Poland started in 1990, after the transition. The reform of public administration in 1998 initiated substantial debate in this domain, and since then, the sector has been undergoing numerous transformations, but some of them are chaotic and not well thought-out. It impacts the position of public managers.

Research aim. The purpose of this article is to show differences in the communication channel of managers and employees in public sector organisations.

Method. 1466 employees of 102 public sector organisations participated in the research. Research was conducted from November 2012 to May 2013. The survey questionnaire constituted the basis of collecting information in the framework of the conducted research. The research was complemented by interviews with managers of the entities examined.

Key findings. The research presented differences in the communication channel among managers and employees who are not managers in public sector organisations; in addition, the dominating communication channel was diagnosed in these organisations.

Keywords: Communication, Quantitative research, Management roles, Public sector, Poland

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Due to the political and economic situation of Poland before 1989, discussion about methods and tools of administrative activities started in 1990; however, only the reform of public administration of 1998 initiated substantial debate in this domain. Since then, the sector has been undergoing numerous transformations, but some of them are chaotic and not well thought-out. First of all, a consistent vision of those changes is missing. Lack of consistency translates into the manner of functioning of public sector organisations, resulting in the consequent manner of rendering services by them. Despite the fact that many organisations undergo noticeable changes, especially in the attitudes of managers, the depth of those changes triggers doubts. Therefore, the subject of the discussion in this article is the communication channel in organisations as a carrier of information

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about the depth of transformations in this sector. A communication lines map may be compared to the bloodstream being a carrier of the most important values and consequently, it is vital to the functioning of the body (organisation). The goal of this article is to determine the preferred communication channel in public sector organisations in general and in the case of managers at the middle level in particular. The communication channel inside the organisation influences the communication of the organisation with its surrounding environment. Special attention is paid to managers of middle level due to their particular place in the organisation between the highest level managers and the employees and their crucial role in the communication process. Conclusions drawn from the literature is that managers have a key role in organisations and at the same time they may prove to be particularly problematic (Kottler, 2005) in the process of implementing changes, among other reasons, due to the loss of certain powers resulting from it (Nadler & Tushman, 1990; Klagge, 1998). Inclination to maintain the status quo may translate into the preferred communication channel in the organisation and consequently to the manner of shaping the relationship with the environment.

In literature concerning this topic, communication is defined as an exchange of meanings in a complex, multi-layered and dynamic process (Morgan,1989; Adler, 1986; Guo & Sanchez, 2005; Sheng, Chang, Teo, & Lin, 2013). More figurative definitions identify communication as the adhesive (glue) joining given distribution channels together (Mohr & Nevin, 1990, Mohr & Sohi, 1995, Worley & Doolen, 2006). Communication is efficient when the message received by the recipient has the meaning assigned to it by the sender. However, the sender transferring the message cannot transfer its meaning because it is created indirectly, influenced by symbols used by the sender (Varey, 1996). Efficiency of communication results from features of particular elements of the communication process and their mutual compliance. Therefore it depends among other things on the similarity of communication skills, attitudes, the degree and type of education, social experience and the sender's and recipient's cultures, but also on the skill of selecting the carrier and information channel. Internal communication takes place among an organisation's members (Clutterbuck & James, 1997; Butler, 2010). External communication takes place between the organisation and the environment. This work focuses on internal communication; that is communication taking place in the interpersonal group and organisational context. We distinguish two groups of factors conditioning the efficiency of internal communication: organisational and socio-cultural (Guo & Sanchez, 2005). Organisational factors create an objective framework for the communication processes flow. Communication efficiency is particularly influenced by configuration of the organisational structure, the distribution of decisive powers and the distribution of work (Olkkonen,

Tikkanen, & Alajoutsijärvi, 2000). The shorter the organisational distance between the sender and the recipient of the message, the greater is the communication efficiency. The greater the organisational distance between the sender and the recipient of the message, and the higher the degree of decisive powers centralisation, the greater the number of intermediate levels the message has to travel and consequently the higher the risk of message deformation and delay (Pandey & Garnett, 2006; Quirke, 1996). In case of vertical communication, communication relations overlap with the relation of power and the superior and subordinate relations themselves contribute to communication difficulties, especially in the case of organisations having slim structures. Principals are very reserved in transferring information to subordinates and subordinates apply careful censorship to messages sent to principals. On the other hand, communication processes in an organisation may have relationships of a horizontal nature. Their efficiency is conditioned by the similarity of tasks and manners of acting. As a result, horizontal communication is more difficult in functionally structured organisations, where specialists in various domains are placed in various divisions and departments and information is aggregated in the form of immense siloes. In such cases, communication may be made more efficient by creating task forces composed of specialists in various domains. Socio-cultural factors refer to its cultural background and the message sender and recipient's characteristic features (Quirke, 1996). Consequently, communication efficiency will depend on the perception capacities of particular recipients and also on the degree of awareness accompanying consolidation of particular patterns of perception and judgment in particular environment. When this awareness is low, people follow stereotypes simplifying the reality. Strong attachment to stereotypes translates into a big obstacle to learning. People became closed to information incongruent with their convictions. Apart from an inclination to stereotypes, the compliance of ego states of the participants in the process influences communication efficiency. It signifies that people in a communication process analyse the exchange of information in the context of its relationship with their own intellectual and emotional needs. Apart from the awareness level and ego states compliance, the last group of socio-cultural conditions is made up of the communication skills of the sender and the recipient. Efficient message transfer requires concentration on the recipient, efficient reception depends on listening skills (Guo & Sanchez, 2005; Varey, 1996). Communication efficiency in an interpersonal context is determined by a personal feedback loop, communication with the principal and the communication with the subordinate (Goodman, Holihan, & Willis, 1996). Communication with colleagues and the organisational integration are related to the satisfaction drawn from the communication measured in a group context, and the satisfaction from communication on organizational level is deter-

mined by collective communication, communication climate and the media quality. The personal feedback loop is connected to employees' understanding of procedures and standards. Communication with the principal concerns vertical communication (top-down and bottom-up) and includes the principal's openness to new ideas and the skill of listening to problems. Communication with the subordinate concerns also vertical communication (top-down and bottom-up) and includes interaction with him. Communication with colleagues includes informal horizontal communication flow and the level of accuracy of the transmitted messages. Organisational integration covers information received by the employees within borderlines of their current work environments or organisational units. Collective information is connected to an organisation's general functioning (its goals, implementing changes, transferring financial information, etc.) (Manns & Waugh, 1989; Worley & Doolen, 2006). The communication climate is understood as motivating and stimulating employees' enthusiasm to realise organisational goals, influencing employees' identification with those goals, receiving through them the information necessary to realise the task accurately and on time. The quality of media reflects employees' opinions concerning the efficiency of information flow, their attitude to communication, the manner of organizing meetings, clarity of reports and directives and trust in the organisation (Downs & Hazen, 1977; Mueller & Lee, 2002). Research results show that the most important factors influencing communication efficiency are the personal feedback loop, communication with the superior and the communication climate (Downs & Hazen; 1977). In literature, communication is divided into formal and informal. Formal communication is a consequence of superiority and subordinate relationships in an organisation and it is identified with communication having routine nature characterised below. Formal communication, as research outcomes show, may contribute to deformation and censorship of the information by the exchange participants (Mohr & Sohi, 1995). In informal communication, the sender's or recipient's place in the structure is not important, but current relationships between individuals in the communication network are crucial. Informal networks are usually temporary, but they may be transformed into a relatively permanent system forming: a communication network, professional knowledge network or trust network. According to estimations, 75 percent of employees receive messages through the medium of an informal network, prior to receiving them through a formal channel (McCone & Von Glinow, 2003; Quirke, 1996). Communication may have a routine or spontaneous nature, resulting among other reasons from the degree of flexibility of organisational structures (Goris, Vaught, & Pettit, 2000). In organisations with rigid communication structures may be described as routine, having a unidirectional vertical form, and communication networks have the shape of the letter Y

or a star. The manner of realisation of a cooperative bond requires apply-ing collective, written or verbal and monocultural communication. Sponta-neous communication is based on rejecting stereotypes or using them only and exclusively as cognitive assumptions subject to absolute verification. It assumes a horizontal, bi-directional form and communication networks have the shape of a chain or a circle. This communication is characterised by moving away from the written form for the development of verbal and non-verbal communication forms. Frequency of communication and feed-back loop have strong impact on satisfaction with communication (Mohr & Sohi, 1995). Open and honest communication mechanisms give rise to trust and that trust is the basis for developing the team's capacity to achieve shared goals (Jacobson & Choi, 2008). Much space in literature has been dedicated to the impact of communication quality on the organisation's func-tioning efficiency. Moreover, the relationship between the perception of communication by employees and their satisfaction with work, commitment and empowerment has been confirmed (Jakki & Sohi, 1995; Mueller & Lee, 2002; Brunetto & Farr-Wharton, 2004). In addition, communication is implied by more subtle means consisting among others of managing relationships and identity projection. Often the content of the message is equally im-portant to the manner of its transfer (Dickson et al., 2003). Mutual trust of information exchange plays a crucial role in the communication process: the higher is the trust, the better is the communication efficiency (Anderson & Weitz, 1989; Anderson & Narus, 1984; Bialaszewski & Giallourakis, 1985; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In literature, communication has been analysed both as a dependent variable (Tjosvold, 1985), and an independent variable (Kapp & Barnett, 1983, Snyder & Morris, 1984).

In most organisations the highest level managers' role is to identify trends in the environment and indicate the direction towards which the organisation should develop and the middle level managers are responsible for achieving partial goals through the particular organisation's departments, enabling to follow the designated direction (Chang & Bright, 2012, Ivanova, 2007, Ekaterini, 2011, Kotter, 2005, McGurk, 2009, Oshagbemi & Ocholi, 2006). On one hand, they require the skill of controlling people and having the means for efficient implementation of changes, on the other hand, it requires reflective capacity beyond their own experience and relationships with others and efficient cooperation with employees in creating and realis-ing the changes initiated by the employees of the lowest levels and those coming from the principals. Consequently, middle level managers are locat-ed between the influence of their superiors and subordinates and in a rapid-ly changing environment; their position seems to be crucial from the point of view of both: continuity and change (McGurk, 2009, Ekaterini, 2011). Mid-dle level managers are called the adhesive, the glue of the organisation, similarly with communication. Due to their unique position in the organisa-

tion, middle level managers are faced with a completely different challenges to those faced by the highest level managers. Middle level managers are located in the middle of the organisation among the network composed of other people (Qiao & Wang, 2009). According to research, a supportive attitude of the direct superior is the most important support for employees (Borins, 2002, Scholes & James, 1997, Rainey, 1989). The literature dedicates much space to the role of managers in shaping the communication process in the organisation. However, not much is written about managers as communicative individuals (Johnson *et al.,* 1998). Herzig & Jimmieson (2006) underline the meaning of support managers gained from the opportunity of talking with other managers. Balogun and Johnson (2004) concluded that middle level managers prefer contacts with other managers holding similar positions than with their superiors: however, the support from their superiors is also significant to them (Berman & West, 2008). Spillane (1994) says that middle level managers have an egalitarian attitude to work and focus on joint problem solving, they avoid rivalry and competition. Moreover, Spreitzer and Quinn reached similar conclusions. Middle level managers who received support from other managers on the same level were more committed to stimulating changes in the organisation and mobilising resources (Spreitzer & Quinn, 1996). Due to crucial role of middle level managers and their location between employees and the higher managers, their channel of communication is particularly interesting against the background of the remaining employees.

METHOD

The survey questionnaire constituted basis of collecting information in the framework of the conducted research. 102 public sector organisations participated in the research. The table 1 presents their detailed list.

Table 1. List of Entities Participating in the Research

The type of the organization	The number of entities	Percentage
Ministry/central office	2	2%
Voivodship office	5	5%
Province marshal's office	4	4%
"District office"	13	13%
Town hall and community office	42	41%
Tax chamber and tax office	28	27%
Higher Office of the Public Administration	4	4%
Customs chamber	4	4%
Total	102	100%

Source: own elaboration.

Target organisations were selected for the research. Target organisations were public sector organisations especially active in the quality

management tools implementation due to the assumption that those organisations belong to a leading group in the area of implementing changes in general. Organisations for the research were selected based on information available on the European Institute of Public Administration website. Invitation to participate in the research was addressed by the intermediary of traditional post to 269 organisations registered in the EIPA database. Research was conducted from November 2012 to May 2013. Inside organizations willing to participate in the research, a group of employees representing 10% of the whole staff was invited. In total, they produced 1466 valid questionnaires, including 286 filled in by middle level managers and 1180 by the remaining employees. The table 2 presents detailed characteristics of people participating in the research.

Table 2. Characteristics of People Participating in the Research

Demographics	Managerial	Non-managerial
Sex:		
male	60%	70%
female	40%	30%
Age:		
to 30	5%	24%
31–40	35%	39%
41–50	30%	23%
51–60	25%	13%
Pow. 60	5%	1%
Education:		
secondary	3%	13%
higher education	26%	16%
higher economic	27%	22%
higher education management	3%	9%
higher humanities	8%	14%
higher legal	15%	8%
higher administrative	18%	18%
Seniority in general (in years):		
0–3	0%	7%
4–6	4%	17%
7–10	15%	18%
11–20	31%	28%
above 20	50%	30%
Seniority in the office (in years):		
0–3	5%	20%
4–6	14%	25%
7–10	15%	15%
11–20	44%	27%
above 20	22%	13%
Number of previous jobs:		
first job	21%	26%
2–3	61%	55%
4–7	17%	17%
more than 7	1%	2%
Total	20%	80%

Source: own elaboration.

The most numerous group willing to participate in the research are men up to 40 years of age, with higher education (usually in economics), employed in the office from 11 to 20 years for which the present workplace is the second or third workplace in their professional career.

Statistica 10.0 software has been used for statistical analysis. The analysis of relationships among variables has been conducted with the use of the independence chi-square test together with the measurements of the relationship strength (contingency coefficient C, V Cramer). The assumed materiality threshold was $\alpha=0.05$. When the calculated test probability p satisfied the inequality $p<0.05$, statistical results were recognized as significant.

RESULTS

The first goal of the research was specifying the preferred communication channel in public sector organisations. Therefore the table 3 presents answers of all employees who participated in the research. Employees were asked about how often they receive information about what is going on in the organisation by informal channels. 49% of respondents receive information in this manner. 62% of respondents receive information about what is going on in the organisation via formal channels. 52% of respondents talk with their superiors about changes taking place in organisations. The vast majority of employees have access to information necessary reaching them during work time. 84% of employees declare openness to share information with others.

Table 3. Communication among employees in organisations

	never	sometimes	often	always	difficult to say
My colleagues are the first to inform me about what happens in the company	5%	43%	42%	7%	3%
I am informed in a formal way (by my direct supervisor) about what happens in the company	3%	33%	47%	15%	2%
I talk with my supervisor about changes occurring in my workplace	9%	36%	36%	16%	3%
I have an access to the information needed at work	0%	12%	41%	45%	2%
I share my knowledge and work results with others	1%	12%	49%	35%	3%
The flow of information is hindered, information doesn't arrive on time	22%	59%	15%	2%	3%
There are no problems with the information flow, it flows quickly and smoothly	6%	33%	44%	14%	3%

Source: own elaboration.

Research results show predominance of formal communication channels in public sector organisations. Information flow seems to be a routine.

Another goal of the research was specifying the preferred channels of communication of middle level managers and employees in public sector organisations. The result of the chi-square test shows statistically significant difference between the channel of communication of managers and employees ($\chi \leqslant$= 46.36; df=4; p=0.0000). Detailed comparison of percentage distribution in reference to the preferred channel of communication of managers allows for the conclusion that managers learn from colleagues about what is going on in the organisation less frequently than employees. However, the strength of the observed relationship is not high (C=0.17, V=0.18).

The result of the analysis with chi-square test shows a statistically significant difference between the channel of communicating of managers and employees ($\chi \leqslant$= 24.31; df=4; p=0.0000). Detailed comparisons of percentage distribution in reference to the preferred channel of communication of managers allows for the conclusion that managers learn about what is going on in the organisation by formal channel more frequently than employees. However, the strength of the observed relationship is not high (C=0.13, V=0.13).

The result of the analysis with chi-square test shows a statistically significant difference between the communication channel of managers and employees ($\chi \leqslant$= 64.39; df=4; p=0.0000). Detailed comparison of percentage distribution in reference to the preferred channel of communication of managers allows for the conclusion that managers talk with their superiors about changes taking place in the workplace more frequently than employees. 30% of employees' managers and 13% of employees always talk with their superiors about what is going on in their organisation. However, the strength of the observed relationship is not high (C=0.20, V=0.21).

The result of the analysis with chi-square test shows statistically significant difference in the communication channel of managers and employees ($\chi \leqslant$= 26.11; df=4; p=0.0000). Detailed comparison of percentage distribution in reference to the access to necessary information allows for the conclusion that managers have access to information they need more frequently than employees. 56% of managers and 42% of employees have always access to necessary information. However, the strength of the observed relationship is not high (C=0.13, V=0.13).

The result of the analysis with chi-square test shows statistically significant difference in inclination to share knowledge of managers and employees ($\chi \leqslant$= 57.39; df=4; p=0.0000). Detailed comparison of percentage distribution in reference to inclination to share knowledge allows for the conclusion that managers share their knowledge with others more frequently than employees. 53% of managers and 31% of employees always

share their knowledge with others. However, the strength of the observed relationship is not high (C=0.19, V=0.20).

The result of the analysis with chi-square test shows statistically significant difference in the evaluation of information flow in the organisation by managers and employees (χ^2= 19.43; df=4; p=0.0006). Detailed comparison of percentage distribution in reference to information flow allows for the conclusion that managers evaluate the information flow in the organisation as better compared to employees. 20% of managers and 13% of employees do not have any reservations to information flow. However, the strength of the observed relationship is not high (C=0.11, V=0.11). The table 4 presents detailed results.

Table 4. Detailed Differences in Managers and Non-managers' Responses

	never		sometimes		often		always		hard to say	
	M	NM	M	NM	M	NM	M	NM	M	NM
My colleagues are the first to inform me about what happens in the company	9%	4%	54%	40%	31%	45%	2%	8%	4%	2%
I am informed in a formal way (by my direct supervisor) about what happens in the company	1%	3%	26%	35%	48%	47%	22%	13%	3%	2%
I talk with my supervisor about changes occurring in my workplace	3%	10%	26%	38%	37%	36%	30%	13%	4%	2%
I have access to the information needed at work	0%	0%	6%	13%	35%	43%	56%	42%	3%	2%
I share my knowledge and work results with others	1%	1%	6%	14%	36%	52%	52%	31%	5%	3%
Flow of information is hindered, information doesn't arrive on time	26%	21%	57%	60%	11%	16%	2%	1%	4%	2%
There are no problems with the information flow, it flows quickly and smoothly	6%	6%	24%	35%	47%	43%	20%	13%	3%	3%

Note: the M- abbreviation signifies managers, NM signifies employees who are not managers.

Source: own elaboration.

The results achieved in the research show statistically significant differences in the communication channel, inclination to share knowledge and the evaluation of information flow between managers and employees in public sector organisations in Poland. Managers are more inclined to use formal channels of information flow. They have the chance to talk with their superiors about changes taking place in the organisation more frequently, moreover, they provide higher satisfaction in the evaluation of the information flow in the organisation, they are more inclined to share their knowledge with others, at least according to what they declare. Despite the fact that 52% of managers declare that they always share their knowledge and results of work with others, only 13% of managers state that they always talk with their superiors about what is going on in the organisation.

The achieved results of the research have not confirmed information resulting from the analysis of literature concerning the need of support for managers from people having similar positions. In public sector organisations participating in the research, middle level managers seek support from the highest level managers by the intermediary of formal channels. Despite the fact that employees receive information from colleagues more often than managers, in the public sector organisations formal channels of information flow dominates.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In the analysed organizations, despite a series of changes which have already taken place, the formal channel of transferring information is still dominating. More than half of the information is transferred by official channel. Formal communication results from the superiority and subordinate relationships in the organisation and it has a routine nature. Formal communication, according to research results may contribute to distortion and censorship of information by the exchange participants. Despite the fact that employees are more inclined to communicate with colleagues, they share an attachment to hierarchical channel. At the same time, during interviews complementing the research survey, a very disquieting phenomenon has been noticed on the line: middle level managers to lowest level managers: there is lack of cooperation, a series of misunderstandings, obstructing information flow and obstructing initiative. It seems that between those groups the border line: we – they exists. Moreover, it has been noticed, that managers having a longer work experience in the given organisation attempt to maintain the status quo, and managers employed in a given organisation later – are more willing to initiate or commit themselves to the realisation of initiatives. Due to the fact that trust in information exchange participants plays crucial role in the communication

process – the higher the trust, the higher is the communication efficiency, and it seems that in public sector organisations the level of trust is low.

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SPOSOBY KOMUNIKOWANIA SIĘ MENEDŻERÓW ŚREDNIEGO SZCZEBLA I NIE MENEDŻERÓW W ORGANIZACJACH SEKTORA PUBLICZNEGO W POLSCE

Abstrakt

Tło badań. W Polsce dyskusja o właściwych instrumentach dla administracji publicznej rozpoczęła się po przemianie ustrojowej w 1990 r. Reforma administracji publicznej w 1998 r. zainicjowała konkretną debatę w tej kwestii. Od tamtej pory sektor publiczny przeszedł liczne zmiany, choć niektóre były chaotyczne i nieprzemyślane. Wpływa to na pozycję menedżerów publicznych.

Cele badań. Celem artykułu jest pokazanie różnic w sposobie komunikowania się menedżerów i pracowników w organizacjach sektora publicznego.

Metodyka. W badaniach wzięło udział 1466 pracowników 102 organizacji sektora publicznego. Badania przeprowadzono w latach w okresie od XI 2012 do V 2013. Podstawą gromadzenia informacji w ramach prowadzonych badań był kwestionariusz ankiety. Uzupełnieniem badań były wywiady przeprowadzone z kadrą kierowniczą badanych jednostek. W artykule pokazano różnice w sposobie komunikowania się menedżerów i pracowników nie będących menedżerami w organizacjach sektora publicznego, a także zdiagnozowano dominujący sposób komunikacji w tych organizacjach.

Kluczowe wnioski. W analizowanych organizacjach pomimo szeregu zmian, jakie miały miejsce nadal dominuje formalny sposób przekazywania informacji. Ponad połowa przekazywanej informacji przebiega drogą służbową. Wprawdzie pracownicy są bardziej skłonni porozumiewać się z współpracownikami, jednak i wśród nich dominuje przywiązanie do drogi hierarchicznej. Jednocześnie w trakcie wywiadów, które uzupełniały badanie ankietowe zaobserwowano bardzo niepokojące zjawisko na linii kadra menedżerska średniego i najniższego szczebla– brak współpracy, szereg nieporozumień, blokowanie przepływu informacji, blokowanie inicjatywy.

Słowa kluczowe: komunikacja, role menedżerskie, sektor publiczny, badania ilościowe