

THE EFFICIENCY OF THE WORKING GROUP IN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTOR A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Ștefan PRUNĂ^{a*}

^a *Alexandru Ioan Cuza Police Academy, Romania*

ABSTRACT

In this article, the author aims to investigate, by qualitative techniques based on the administration of structured questionnaires, the efficiency of the working groups in the public and private organizational sectors. The influence of the group over the individual is so great in time that it generates a sui generis group reality that transcends individuals (i.e. the amount of the parts is not equal to the whole). For this reason, knowing the groups based on their efficiency is important because the efficiency of the individuals of a group does not necessarily ensue the efficiency of said group as a whole. Our qualitative research is comprised of two stages. During the first stage, within a pilot research, through a self-administered structured questionnaire, starting from the traditional group processes also encountered during the working groups, we asked 25 managers from both organizational environments (public and private) and at all authority levels (low-middle-top) to identify as many aspects from the professional life of the groups (processes, phenomena, activities) which have a direct impact on the efficiency of the working group.

During the second stage of the research, we retained 12 aspects which the respondents identified as having a large impact on group efficiency and which were selected based on frequency. Based on them we drew up another 12-statement questionnaire which were administered to a number of 120 respondents for the purpose of our research. The conclusion is that the respondents in the private environment identify a higher level of efficiency in their working groups than those from the public environment, based on the scores given to those 12 assertions in the questionnaire.

KEYWORDS: *Group Processes, Organization, Organizational Environment, Working Group, Working Group Efficiency.*

1. INTRODUCTION: The paradox of working groups

Humans are gregarious beings, their existence dependent on the group, their need to communicate with the others, to form relations with the others is just as important as satisfying one's own physiological needs or security and protection needs. The group was a framework for emergence and security, it expressed the man's need to associate and socialize (Neculau, 2007; Prună, 2012). A group develops feelings of solidarity in individuals which are expressed through the mutual support the members are expecting from the group when facing a threat. (Tannenbaum, 1967) states that people have a tendency to group in the face of danger, a purely psychological reaction given that affiliation does not generate benefits other than psychological comfort. Psychological comfort materialized in wellbeing is a psychological indicator by which individuals manage to become aware that one's balance and peace are important targets in their individual actions.

The philosophy of pragmatic life is premised upon the idea that survival outside a group is impossible, which is why individuals are looking for total support for their everyday life. In these

* Corresponding author. E-mail address: stefanpruna@yahoo.com.

circumstances, we can hardly grasp the conflicts, the differences of opinions and the crises individuals create within a group. This hostility toward the group is unreasonable and is considered a paradox. Some authors like, for instance (Neculau, 2007; Zlate, 2004), state that this aggression is directed not so much towards the group as to the organization of same. What the individuals does not like, in this instance, is the way in which the resources and power are split between the group and the fact that their share is smaller than they were hoping it to be.

The life inside the organizations follows the same line of reasoning. To say that the organization is: "a social invention intended for the achievement of common goals through group effort" (Johns, 2006), is to say, indirectly, that the organization is a specific group – namely a working group. What brings the people in this type of group together is the existence of a formal task, an objective task by reference to their desires they need to fulfil.

Some authors (Baron & Byrne, 2001) consider that a group is made of at least two persons: "the group consists of two or more persons who interact and follow common goals, have steady relationships, are somewhat interdependent and realize that they are in fact part of the group". The result of an association such as this is the merger of individuality into a whole, which generates a feeling of "us", a group environment in which each individual identifies himself/herself with the group. The individual is interested in the opinion the others have about him/her even if he/she fails to admit it, about the way he/she are perceived or appreciate by the others in their everyday life or in their professional life. A lot of networking is generated to resolve these desiderata.

In brief, we could say a group is made of people who interact, have a common goal and know one another. If many people find the behaviour of an individual strange and difficult to understand, especially when it is not explained in reasonable terms, the behaviour of the people of the group is even more difficult to understand on account of the multitude of interests promoted, directly or indirectly, by the people of that group.

Group work may therefore affect people's behaviour. The need to belong to a group tends to lead to a certain compliance in terms of collective objectives and expectations, which leads, over time, to a change in the individuals' behaviour even though they do not make much effort to this end. For instance, those who are in the habit of being late for work will end up correcting this substantial flaw when they work in a group where punctuality is observed. The group is trying to put pressure, directly or indirectly, on the individual who, in turn, must comply with said values. Finally, the group may exclude those who cannot or will not adapt. We could understand the group based on the assertion: "the amount of the parties is not equal to the whole". This "independent life" of the group by reference to its individuals triggers certain dynamics in the behaviour of the individual in that group, the indications of which we will attempt to analyse and explain herein.

To summarize the individual-group link (Lewin, 1951), establishes four hypotheses that are very important for understanding this article and the research falling under its scope:

- the group is the space where an individual lives - this space may be closed, changing, rigid, elastic. When an individual does not define, accurately and clearly, their group membership or when they are not an integral part of a group, their vital space or their freedom of movement inside the group will be characterized by instability and ambiguity;
- the group is regarded as a tool by individuals. The individual, more or less aware, is using the group and the relationships cultivated within the group as a means to satisfy their own needs and social ambitions;
- the group is a reality to which an individual belongs even when individuals view one another as ignorant, isolated and rejected. The changes a group undergoes are felt by the individual, too. Individuals' complex preoccupations are either promoted or limited by the group;
- the group is to the individual one of the elements of their vital space, a part of the social universe of the individual of the group; all the while, the individual is selecting persons for his/her interpersonal network.

2. GROUP PROCESSES. WHAT IS GROUP EFFICIENCY ABOUT?

The working groups efficiency is directly proportional with the group formation process as well as the group process quality. To avoid complicating our research further, we considered the group formation process an independent variable in that we selected the respondents from both public and private sectors, from the groups the formation of which had been completed, which were operational, their rules and roles at least known within the group, and professional mobility (number of entries and exits from the group in a year) very low. In this manner, from a methodological standpoint, we chose respondents from steady groups made of people who knew one another.

As such, I was aiming to determine the efficiency of the groups merely by reference to the main processes within it. Without further details, the main processes I took into account, and did not mention to the respondents expressly, were.

a. Group rules. Rules are collective expectations that the members of the groups have about their behaviour toward one another. The most part of the regulatory influence is intangible and we are rarely aware of it. We referenced Sheriff and Sheriff's discovery: social rules influence individual rules and this influence is not direct, it is contextual. Rules also influence the behaviour of a newcomer to the group. When someone first adheres to a group, they are looking for indications as to what is considered an appropriate behaviour. By doing so, they will attempt a behaviour focused on average options, on the options of a large part of the group in order to satisfy the claims of most members thereof. Then, they may reassess their options depending on the opportunities and the threats within the group.

How do rules develop? - individuals develop attitudes depending on certain beliefs or values. In many cases, attitudes are those who affect our behaviours. When the members of a group share the same beliefs, they are expected to share the same attitudes. These shared attitudes are the basis for the rules. Rules are collective expectations and it takes two or more people for them to come into existence. The development of rules depends on these attitudes insofar as they project certain group expectations and group tolerances within the group (Moscovici, 2006).

Why do people have the tendency to comply with the rules?. Compliance largely has to do with the fact that rules simply coincide with the specific attitudes of a person. Then, it is because they save time and prevent social confusion. Some people comply to stay in the group and this will be an important issue for the purpose of this research although they find many other aspects with which they do not agree entirely.

b. Group role. Roles are positions within groups that come with a set of expected behaviours. While the rules apply to all the members in order to secure their engagement in similar behaviours, the development of roles indicates that group members may be required to act distinctly. There are two types of roles to be identified in organizations. (Neculau, 1974)

First, we are able to identify designated, assigned roles. These are roles formally prescribed by an organization, by regulations as methods for division of labour and division of responsibility in order to ensure the fulfilment of tasks. The assigned roles are indicative of "who does what" and "who tells the others what to do". (Prună, 2011)

Second, emerging roles develop in an organization. These roles develop naturally, in order to satisfy the social and emotional needs of the group members. The class clown and the office gossiper fulfil social and emotional roles. An "old pro" who helps the younger members of the group to assimilate their work tasks also plays an emerging role.

Role ambiguity - appears when someone's purposes of work or methods of execution are unclear. Ambiguity may be characterized by confusion over the assessment of activity, the achievement of good performance or the limits to someone's authority and responsibility. The practical consequences of ambiguity are: stress, dissatisfaction, low organizational commitment, intent to leave and last but not least professional inefficiency

Role conflict - appears when an individual is facing expectations that are incompatible with his/her role. Conflict is distinct from ambiguity in that the expectations for the role are well understood, but

may be incompatible in the sense that they exclude one another, they cannot be satisfied simultaneously or they are not appropriate for the occupant of that position. Even when the role requirements are clear and reasonable, they are incompatible with the personality or the skills of the occupant of that position - which triggers a person-role conflict which has a direct effect on the professional efficiency of the entire group.

c. Status within the group. Status is a rank, a social position or the prestige conferred to the group members. In other words, it represents the appreciation of the group towards one of its members. (Linton, 1965), considers status is used in reference to the position of an individual in the system of prestige of his/her society, it may be extended to each group of which an individual is a member. All the organizations have formal as well as informal status systems (Certo, 2002).

Formal systems are represent an attempt on the part of the management to identify publicly those people who enjoy higher status. The symbols of the status may include titles, special working relationships, access to logistics of some sort - telephone, car, bonuses. Status is directly proportional with the position occupied within the organization. Formal status has great influence on the efficiency of the groups in that professional effort should be directly proportional with it.

Informal status system. In addition to the formal status system, we are able to determine informal status systems within organizations. Such systems do not get a lot of advertisement and they may lack defining symbols. However, they can operate just as effectively. The "wise guy" of the group or the "negotiator" are people whose qualities are recognized by the group members and which may help greatly the group dynamics, which is why they enjoy a special status.

d. Cohesion of the group. The cohesion of the group is an essential feature of groups. The united groups are those which are extremely attractive to their members. Due to their attractiveness, the members have a particular wish to remain part of the group and tend to describe it in favourable terms. "Cohesion is the extent to which a group is particularly attractive to its members" (Prună, 2011). Cohesion is a relative, rather than absolute feature of the group. While some groups are more united than others, there is no objective line between the united and not united groups. Cohesion has a direct effect on efficiency

e. Social hooky within the group. Social hooky is a tendency, often gone unnoticed, that people have to refuse physical or intellectual effort while fulfilling a joint task. Social hooky is a motivational problem. People working in groups sometimes feel trapped in a social dilemma. Something which brings them personal gains - skipping group activities - will generate poor results to the group in its entirety is everybody does the same thing. The socially indolent resolve this problem in a way that has adverse effects on the achievement of the objective.

Social hooky can be analysed by two psychosocial mechanisms. In the case of the "idle effect", people make less effort because their co-workers work at full capacity and will compensate. With "the effect of the fooled one" which we might simply call "the sucker effect" people lessen their effort because they feel that others play hooky. We could say they are trying to restore equity within the group.

What is group efficiency about? The work efficiency problem is debated at length in the field of managerial psychology (Neculau, 1974; Bennis, 1962; Zlate, 2004). What does efficiency mean? is a question with multiple answers; among them, the goal achievement ability, the ability to adapt are the most common and profitability are the most common. In my opinion, efficiency should rely on the achievement of the goals envisaged by the management, irrespective of their origin (orderly objectives - top-down-, or proposed bottom-up goals). The pivotal element of an organization and its reason of being are related to the existence and the achievement of the framework goals, which are 3 - task resolution, creating an appropriate working environment and creating prestige in the community and in society. Insofar as these targets are met as planned, there is organizational efficiency.

Clearly, the manager plays an important part in the working group efficiency due to his/her authority and powers in managing the working processes, including groups. The relationship

between a subordinate, as a group member, and the manager is essential to group efficiency. (Belding, 2006)

3. A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON THE EFFICIENCY OF THE WORKING GROUPS IN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTOR

3.1 Considerations regarding the research methodology

The qualitative research we have designed is attempting measurement of professional efficiency in working groups by reference to the main processes performed at group level. From a methodological standpoint, we divided our research in 2 stages. During the first stage, using the self-administered structured questionnaire technique, we asked a number of managers, irrespective of their level of authority (low, middle and top management) to identify the main issues at group level that are likely to hallmark group efficiency. As a starting point, we provided the group-related processes referenced herein, but we asked them not to confine to them. We decided to retain, from a methodological standpoint, 12 such issues (processes, activities, phenomena encountered within the group). The 12 issues in the respondents' options, based on frequency, were:

Table 1. Group related issues

- | |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">- The prestige of the group members within the organization;- A preoccupation for the employees' problems and the personal disputes among them;- The quality of decision making;- The degree of attractiveness of the group to its members,- The quality of the procedures used in the work process,- Equity in task division,- The result of the meetings within the group,- Knowing the goals of the group,- The nature of communication in the group,- The use of authority by the group management,- Understanding the work-related roles,- Getting people to become involved in joint task implementation |
|---|

Source: the author

To measure the respondents' perception, during the second stage we came up with a simple questionnaire comprised of 12 assertion, one for each issue retained in our research. The sentences were built so as to follow the internal logic of each item and to allow measurable correlations to be made between the answers and the group efficiency or lack thereof. On the other hand, the items that were chosen have a direct connection with the framework goals of the organization as defined in our research. The answers to the questions relied on a response scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means complete disagreement and 10 represents absolute agreement.

The respondents who gave high scores to these assertions consider that their working group is efficient, while those who gave low scores consider their working group less efficient. The respondents considering their group is efficient will have a positive professional behaviour and will wish to maintain or increase group efficiency. This is a sensitive relational mechanism resembling Merton's self-fulfilling prophecy paradigm (1968) in that, if the respondents consider their group is efficient, then they will become efficient to rise up to the level of that group.

We opted for a broader scale to allow the interviewees to place themselves as appropriately as possible through their answers. Regarding the correlation with efficiency, we considered that those who pick high scores have a higher efficiency of work in total, while those who give low score have a satisfactory work efficiency. Mention should be made that there may be other issues within the working group that would hallmark work efficiency, but I only pointed out those which I considered were the most important.

The 12 assertions presented in the questionnaire were:

Table 2. Assertions

1. If a working group enjoys renowned prestige regarding its work, then the professionalism and skills of its members will be acknowledged easier
2. The management is concerned with understanding the personal problems of its employees as well as their informal interactions at the workplace.
3. Decisions are generally made on time and are easily accepted by employees.
4. The employees feel good at the workplace and like what they do.
5. The day-to-day procedures are short, clear and easy to follow by the employees.
6. The tasks in the working group are divided equitably.
7. During the meetings, people receive all the information they require to work better.
8. The group members are briefed periodically about the common goals they need to reach.
9. People communicate about their tasks in order to understand what they are being required to do.
10. The managers succeed to persuade people without resorting to disciplinary sanctions or disciplinary investigations.
11. People understand the roles they have within the group and act accordingly
12. People are monitored with respect to the personal effort they put in for the purpose of reaching the common goals.

Source: the author

Regarding the research sample, it is comprised of 120 individuals all of which are execution staff from the two organizational sectors. We used the step method within each group, with a 5-step, eliminating the groups which had less than 5 members. Regarding the groups of which the sample was made, they were selected at random, mention being made that I tried to select working groups directly involved in production as well as support groups (logistics, financial, human resources, etc.).

3.2 Findings of the research - the efficiency of the working group in the public and private sector

After processing and analysing the data, the main findings of the research indicate that, in total, the working groups in the private sector are more effective than those in the public sector. The average score resulting from the analysis of the answers given by the respondents was 7.3 for the public sector and 7.9 for the private sector. A first remark to be made should be that, as a general rule, working groups are viewed as efficient, at least by their employees, by reference to the advocated goals.

What is also interesting is the analysis of the impact of each assertion on the efficiency of the activity in the working group. Regarding the respondents from the public sector, the answers to Questions 2, 3 and 4 achieved the highest scores in that the issues referenced therein are highly intertwined with the efficiency of the working groups. On the other hand, the answers to assertions 12, 9 and 5 achieved the lowest scores

For instance, to assertion no. 2: "the management is concerned about the personal problems of the employees and about their informal networking at the work place" was shared by the respondents with an average score of 8.5, being considered an important item in building mechanisms likely to ensure efficiency. Furthermore, assertion no. 3: "the decisions are made in time and are easily accepted by the employees" scored an average 8.3, which means the respondents agreed with it. The

decision-making system is important to the efficiency of the group and acceptance on the part of the employees of the decisions made is a positive indicator.

Assertion no. 4: "the employees feel good at their work place and like what they do", scored a high average score, 8.2. The attractiveness of the group toward its members is important. The idea of going to work feeling at ease, of networking with other people - co-workers or managers, is also an indicator as to the efficiency of the group.

The respondents' view also comprise assertions which we did not share and which scored an average score much lower than the general average. At assertion no. 12: "people are monitored with respect to their personal efforts for the achievement of their common goals", the respondents granted a 4.9 score, which rather translates into disagreement. An explanation might be supported by the answers to the other assertions, according to which the respondents agree there is a good connection between the members with respect to the goals and that monitoring is not really necessary. On another note, a poor monitoring may lead, in time, to a slight individual disinterest for joint tasking, which might bring us closer to the organizational hooky idea.

Assertion no. 9: "people communicate whenever they can, about their work tasks, so that they may understand what they are expected to do", achieved a score of 4.8. The increase of professional communication is a positive indicator, but not an unconditional one. Eventually, over-information may be as dangerous as under-information.

Last but not least, assertion no. 5: "the everyday procedures are brief, clear and easy to follow by the employees", the average score to the answers of the interviewees was 4.6. The working procedures issue is a general occurrence in Romanian companies. We have a lot of procedures, burdensome and long, which determine the employee find shortcuts and solutions of all sorts in their everyday activity.

Regarding the answers given by the respondents from the private sector, the assertions for which the highest average score were obtained were, in order, assertions nos. 1.3 and 11.

Thus, assertion no. 1: "if a working group has a prestige that is recognized with respect to its work, then its members would be gain recognition for their professionalism and skills more easily", achieved an average 9.1 score, which means that the people become a lot more involved in their work if their merits are recognized. Furthermore, assertion no. 3: "the decisions are made in time and are easily accepted by the employees", scored an average 8.8. This is the only assertion that scored an average high with the respondents from both organizational sectors, both public and private.

Last but not least, assertion no. 11: "people understand their roles within the group and act accordingly", scored 8.7, which indicates the respondents understand how important it is in their respective working groups for each man to know what to do and to act within their competencies.

Regarding the assertions which scored below the general average, they were, in descending order, assertions 2, 6 and 8.

Regarding assertion no. 2: "the management is concerned about the personal problems of the employees and about their informal networking at the work" place scored 5.1, this aspect being present, according to the respondents, in the life of the groups. Assertion no. 6: "the tasks within the working group are divided equitably", scored 4.8, with the interviewees' being in a slight disagreement. It should be mentioned that a balanced division of tasks is an important requirement for group efficiency, the absence of which is likely to cause friction and differences. Finally, assertion no. 8: "the group members are updated periodically about the joint goals they need to achieve", scored 4.5, which also indicates a slight disagreement. The targets may have discussed, individually or with the person in charge of the technical management of a joint goal.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The issue of working group efficiency is more topical than ever. Beyond the diversity of opinions about what efficiency is and how it can be measured, I consider it should be correlated with the

framework goals of a group, namely task resolution, creating an appropriate working environment and creating professional prestige. Our research on the efficiency of the working groups in the public and private sector revealed that the respondents identify in the private sector a higher level of efficiency than in the public one. The general average score was 7.9 for the private sector and 7.3 for the public sector. The respondents' consideration of their group as efficient will prompt a positive professional behaviour on their part so that, as members of that group, they, too, be efficient. On the other hand, the company management is interested in seeing which working groups are efficient and which are not in order to establish the optimization strategy. From this perspective, our research is useful as it provides the management with such group aspects that have the highest impact on efficiency (the assertions that scored above the average) or those with a lower impact (the assertions that scored lower than the average).

For instance, the respondents from the public sector identified the aspects with the highest impact on efficiency, namely: the management concerns itself with understanding the personal problems of the employees and their informal interaction; the decisions are made in an opportune fashion and are accepted by the subordinates, while the employees feel good at their workplace and like what they do. Knowledge of these aspects allows the management to act constructively based on these realities at the workplace. Any future insertions based on this information will feed the subordinates' perception that they are on the right track and so efficiency will grow.

Just as important are the assertions that scored below average. For instance, in the private environment, the following assertions were slightly in disagreement with the respondents: the management concerns itself with understanding the personal problems of the employees and their informal interaction at the workplace, the tasks in the working group are divided equitably and the group members are notified periodically about the common goals they need to reach. Knowing these realities, the management may intervene in the work process by inserting tools or actions that would emphasize this aspect. This way, the group efficiency may be increased by focused ameliorative interventions.

We analysed the issues which scored highest and lowest averages of the two sectors in an attempt to find whether there are shared issues as well. The issues which scored low with the respondents are very important because they may be subject to various efficiency tools.

The outcomes of the research may serve as basis for future surveys. The 12 aspects identified may be detailed and developed further in researches on group dynamics, analyses on the maturity of the working groups, performance management, building the working teams. On the other hand, the identification of the assertions with a positive impact on efficiency may be capitalized on in organizational analyses, training programmes, substantiation of the management styles or the decisions to be taken. The identification of the assertions with a negative impact is important in its own right as regards the reorganization of managerial intervention, the additional powers for the managers and the staff or for the interventions regarding the change of the way in which working groups are executing their professional tasks.

REFERENCES

- Baron, R., Byrne, D. (2001). *Social Psychology*, Prentice-Hall of India, New Delhi.
- Belding, S. (2006). *Cum să faci față unui șef dificil*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași.
- Bennis, W. (1962). *Toward a truly scientific management. The concept of organizational health*, Industrial Management Review, Cambridge.
- Certo, S. (2002). *Managementul modern*, Teora Publishing House, Bucharest.
- Johns, G. (2006). The essential impact of context on organizational behavior. *Academy of management review*, 31(2), 386-408.
- Lewin, K. (1951). *Field Theory in social science*, Harper, New York.
- Linton, R. (1965). *Fundamentul cultural al personalitatii*, Științifică Publishing House, Bucharest.

- Merton, Robert K., (1968). *The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy*, in *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Edition III, The Free Press, New York .
- Moscovici, S. (2006). *Psihologia socială sau mașina de fabricat zei*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași.
- Neculau, A. (1974). *Introducere în dinamica grupurilor*, Științifică Publishing House, Bucharest.
- Neculau, A. (2007). *Dinamica grupului și a echipei*, Polirom Publishing House, Iasi.
- Prună, Ș. (2011). *Psihosociologie organizațională*, Prouniversitaria Publishing House, Bucharest.
- Prună, Ș. (2012). *Managementul organizațional al Poliției*, Universul Juridic Publishing House, Bucharest.
- Tannenbaum, A.S., (1967), *Psychologie sociale de l'organisation industrielle*, Hommes et Techniques, Paris.
- Zlate, M. (2004). *Tratat de psihologie organizațional-managerială*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași.