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Communication in the conditions of diversity

Introduction

Communication is one of the main dimensions in functioning of each organization. Being the key area of human relationships development, communication significantly influences effectiveness of any team or enterprise. On the one hand, internal communication establishes female and male employees' commitment. On the other hand, with the aid of external communication we shape the organization image and develop relations with our partners and environment. When considering communication in the company context, it is worth to remember the relatively rarely discussed, although increasingly more important, issue of diversity.

It is customary to define the concept of diversity in a rather wide context as all these features that make people both different and similar. In the practice of managing diversity, organizations focus mainly on factors important for construction of social identity of individuals. Therefore, the attention is paid mainly to diversity related to gender, age, race, ethnic and national origins, level of disability and sexual orientation¹. The main assumption in managing diversity is the thesis, that the above-mentioned differences are significant and it is worth to take advantage of them in order to increase the company profits in a strategic way attempting reduction of costs and risk related to diversity, simultaneously strengthening advantages generated from it².

The analysis presented below concerns the issue of communication in respect to the organization activities and gender difference, the level of internal and external communication and related chances and threats. Undoubtedly, the presented questions do not fulfil all issues within the scope of communication in organizations and diversity. The publication objective is presenting the most important issues in respect to the subject and outlining the areas requiring further deepened analysis.

Communication and gender

Different upbringing, socialization and education of boys and girls lead to a development of different communication styles between women and men. Gender may comprise one of the factors differentiating communication styles. However, this differentiation does not exactly originate in biological determinants. It is rather a result of social and cultural pressure regarding being perceived as a person of a given sex. Therefore, the difference does not necessarily have to reflect personal experience of all men and all women. When characterising the communication style of women, described as "female", it is usually described as the one that relates to people, relationships and feelings; the style that expresses emotions, support and understanding and is more personal, polite, context related and detailed³. In discussion women wait their turn, often speak through asking questions, smile. They understand communication mainly as the way to sustain relationships. Communication style of men called "male" characterises different attitude towards objects, figures and facts, high level of concreteness, briefing, stress put on indicating concrete answers, unambiguous solutions, passing on information. "Male" communication contains many authoritative statements, in discussion men take a lot of space and time, they often cut in each other's statements, whereas discussion itself serves for maintain their individual status. Leaving aside the question whether and to which extent the above descriptions reflect gender stereotypes or whether they are unjustified simplification, let us consider the consequences of this diversification for the communication process in a team of women and men working together.

Firstly, it is worth to notice that varied communication styles can match various needs respective to the context of organization functioning or specifics of the problem that we are to deal with. Realization of differences and their appreciation instead of thoughtless



and automatic assumption of either style may prove to be an effective strategy facilitating organizational flexibility, adaptability and ability to take on evolving challenges.

Secondly, if we consider both communication styles and associated values in practice, we will increase chances of all people representing either style to join the communication process, regardless of their gender. Therefore, it is worth to effectively use the existing diversity and minimise the risk that a difference between personal communication style and the one dominant for a given group will lead to exclusion from the teamwork. Increasing awareness concerning the differences in communication is an effective solution favourable for the situation when a particular communication style is rather a matter of choice and conscious decision of an individual than the effect of subconscious pursuit of an acquired gender role. Moreover, adequate structuring of communication makes possible to guarantee all male and female members of the organization equal opportunities to participate in the communication process of the organization.

Taking into account the historically determined “male personality” of the contemporary organizations, the awareness of possibility to overstep the ascribed gender roles, also within the scope of verbal and non-verbal communication, is obviously more significant for strengthening of women in organizations and promoting gender. As gender does not exist independently from culture of a given organization within the organizational framework the personal attributes of individuals, their individual predispositions and perceptions of desired behaviours clash with socialising influence of the place of work and expectations expressed by other male/female participants of interaction.

Internal communication

Managing diversity is based on assumption that differences among staff may facilitate improvement of the problem solving and decision-making process, as well as development of creativity and innovativeness. It also assumes the principle of equal treatment as the main condition in order to convert diversity from the individual level into benefits of the whole organization. The differences between individuals in decidedly most cases result in communication difficulties, conflicts and tensions, they weaken team involvement and its internal integration, resulting in subjective perception of a group as less attractive from the individual's point of view⁴. In order to prevent these processes, or even reverse their negative from the organizational point of view influence “reforging” differences into concrete profits diversity should be accepted as a value and equal treatment of all male and female members of a group should be ensured.

Developing culture of the company that guarantees each individual a similar feeling of appreciation, inclusion and acknowledgement of their talents constitutes a necessary element of managing diversity and strategic condition and it is the condition of successful company's diversity policy. It is worth to observe here, that it firstly means elimination of the cases of discrimination from the place of work and taking responsibilities deriving from the Labour Code provisions concerning information related obligation of the employer⁵. Internal communication plays here a role of double importance. On the one hand, using communication employers may prevent any possible cases of discrimination, while on the other hand, they may actively promote work environment, taking into account both: formal as well as informal communication in the place of work.

According to the current law, sexual harassment is a form of gender discrimination, defined as “any unwanted behaviour of a sexual character or related to the employee's gender, which goal or effect is violating an employee's dignity, in particular, creating the threatening, hostile, depreciatory, humiliating or derogatory atmosphere; this behaviour may consist of physical, verbal or nonverbal elements”⁶. The definition embracing the issues of the atmosphere in the workplace, refers not only to unwanted physical contacts, but also to various messages such as emails, posters, snapshots, films sent via electronic way, presentations, graphic and verbal jokes, taunts, remarks, comments, insults, allusions, insinuations, gestures.

Thus, creating the space within which discrimination may occur, communication becomes also the area where cases of discrimination may be prevented. Inclusive organizational culture not only means lack of discrimination and harassment, but it is also means elimination of other messages that may lead to exclusion and lowered sense of self-worth. This refers to microinequalities, i.e. small, often unaware, depreciating verbal and non-verbal behaviours, particularly threatening to people who are in any way different, belong to minority or to a traditionally excluded group⁷. Such group are women in the workplace, who on the one hand may more often suffer microinequalities, while on the other may stronger react to them. Microinequalities may be manifested through meaningful sighing accompanying verbal expressions of a given female employee, disrespectful facial expressions or gesture, regular use of diminutives, e.g. usage of diminutive form of a first name, avoidance of eye contact, silent treatment, etc. The nature of microinequalities is the fact that each one in itself (a single one) is not particularly detrimental; however, they had a snowball effect, i.e. a person who is suffering them regularly and who cannot directly react or protest because of a micro scale of the phenomenon, becomes to feel disrespected and excluded.



Finally, it is worth to point out the language that we use in the place of work as regard its metaphorical and symbolic context. The Polish language comprises many examples of expressions (sayings, proverbs, phrasal expressions) bearing univocally sexist messages (e.g. “you cannot finish a woman off even with a stick”, “when the woman gets off the wagon, horses have an easier time”, “old wives’ tales”, “a man to man talk”, “to behave like a man”, “man’s decision”), which relatively often appear in the colloquial language, also in official relationships. Verbal and visual messages including stereotypical image of women and men and hidden, depreciating meanings spoil the atmosphere at work, where diversity may be appreciated and accepted as a value for the company.

It should be remembered that involvement of the male and female employees is not only a matter of their awareness of goals, own competences, impact on company development and opportunities for personal development, it is also the matter of personal emotions corresponding to a positive opinion about the company, willingness to stay in the organization, pride in the performed work. Therefore, internal communication plays a key role in the diversified workplace. It is not only the area of intervention aimed at preventing discrimination and law breaking, but also a strategic place of activities targeted at development of activities establishing inclusive working environment, facilitation of the commitment of male and female employees, throughout respecting them and benefiting from their diversity.

Communication external

From the perspective of managing diversity and relations of an organization with external environment, one of the most significant elements is employment of the best possible male or female labour force. Taking into account gender differences in external communication becomes a key issue in recruitment process. Through the use of gender sensitive language, the use of female form of occupations or gender neutral forms (e.g. “we are seeking a person for a job”), using visual aids presenting both men and women (on the website, as an illustration of recruitment advertisement, etc.) organizations may effectively show that they want to include all, and that gender does not hinder employment.

Increasingly more often, also in Poland, recruitment is accompanied by the provisions such as: “We are an equal chance employer. We unconditionally comply with the principle of equal treatment within all areas of employee’s relationships” or “Gender equality is an important value for our company. In the process of recruitment and professional career development we make decisions on the basis of competences, ensur-

ing that no one is treated unequally because of their gender and other factors”. Such univocally formulated declarations build the company public image and are propitious for reaching the widest possible group of male and female job candidates, simultaneously strengthening the organization’s position as “the choice employer”. In case of these branches of economy that are engaged in the fight for talents, paying attention to the external message and diversity dimension may prove to play the key role in gaining the upper hand over competitors.

Communication on behalf of equality and diversity

Alongside increasing diversification of the labour markets, the increasingly more significant will become organizational competences in respect to inclusion and taking advantage of existing diversity of the potential human resources. For certain, one of the most important areas of actions will be widely comprehend communication, embracing both: relationships inside an organization, as well as contacts with environment. In this context, it is worth to remember the following determinants of the success⁸:

- assurance that diversity and equal treatment are real organizational values, and that people holding decision-making and managerial positions in the company do believe in purposefulness of the activities within this area, and they support it actively also through their personal attitude
- the vision of equality and diversity and its connections with the organization’s business goals is communicated clearly and consequently, people holding managerial positions are encouraged to discuss it with their teams and they are supported in performing this task
- the principle of equal treatment and prohibition on discrimination in employment, including the ban on sexual harassment, are communicated regularly and strengthened by the organization’s male/female leaders; moreover, there are adopted known for all male and female staff rules of proceeding in case of suspected or proved occurrences of sexual harassment
- there will be initiated attempts targeted at elimination of excluding expressions from the language used at the workplace and its sensitising to existing diversity, through diversification of grammar forms, symbolic messages, applying the inclusive language, etc.
- communication and differences in communication styles create the space for professional development of male and female employees, therefore they allow the conscious use of diverse ways of expressing one’s own opinions and interests, carrying out discussions and making decisions



- organization provides a space for expressing worries and doubts regarding differences, diversity and equal treatment, male and female managers can recognize both: chances and challenges arising from differences, at the same time understanding that diversity does not mean depreciation of the similarities.

¹ D. Merrill-Sands, E. Holvino, *Working with Diversity: a Focus on Global Organizations*, in: J. Ely, E. G. Foldy, M. A. Scully, *Reader in Gender, Work, and Organization*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 2003.

² J. Ely, E.G. Foldy, *Diversity: Overview*, w: J. Ely, E.G. Foldy, M.A. Scully, *Reader in Gender, Work, and Organization*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 2003; P. Prasad, A.J. Mills, *From Showcase to Shadow: Understanding the Dilemmas of Managing Workplace Diversity*, w: P. Prasad, A.J. Mills, M. Elmes, A. Prasad, *Managing the Organizational Melting Pot. Dilemmas of Managing Workplace Diversity*, SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, 1997.

³ Por.: D. Tannen, *Ty nic nie rozumiesz! Kobieta i mężczyzna w rozmowie*, Wydawnictwo W.A.B, Warszawa 1995.

⁴ A.C. Homan, D. van Knippenberg, G.A. Van Kleef, C.K.W. De Dreu, *Bridging Faultlines by Valuing Diversity: Diversity Beliefs, Information Elaboration in Diverse Work Groups*, "Journal of Applied Psychology", Vol. 92, No. 5, 2007.

⁵ Based on Art. 94 and 94¹, Law of 26 June 1974, Labour Code, Journal of Laws 1974 No. 24 item 141 with later amendments – Journal of Laws of 2008 No. 223, item 1460.

⁶ Law of 26 June 1974, Labour Code, Journal of Laws 1974 No. 24 item 141 with later amendments – Journal of Laws z 2008 No. 223, item 1460, Art. 18^{3a}, par. 6.

⁷ E.L. Hinton, *Microinequities: When Small Sights Lead to Huge Problems in the Workplace*, "DiversityInc." May 22, 2003.

⁸ Based on: D.A. Thomas, J. Ely, *Różnice mają znaczenie. Nowy paradygmat zarządzania różnorodnością [Differences matter. New paradigm for managing diversity]*, in: Women and Business, Wydawnictwo Helion, Gliwice 2006; *Valuing and Managing Diversity. Workplace Issues*, "American Society for Training and Development", Iss. 9305, 1999; D. van Knippenberg, S.A. Haslam, M.J. Platow, *Unity Through Diversity: Value-in-Diversity Beliefs, Work Group Diversity, and Group Identification*, "Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice", Vol. 11, No. 3, 2007.