RELATIONS WITH THE PUBLIC VERSUS PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE LOCAL PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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Concomitant with the evolution of society, public relations are socially expressed only together with the explicit articulation of public categories and public organizations, once the individual becomes a citizen whose satisfaction is at the core of the public system's preoccupations, ignoring times long gone when the ordinary citizen and the majority of the public administration representatives couldn't tell apart the concept of public relations from that of relations with the public.

Organizations are blindly linked to very heterogeneous human groups and categories, to other organizations, cultural values, currents of ideas and, of course to politics. They need information on these social partners' expectations, their sympathy and adherence. They also need their messages to reach quickly to the public and be assessed by it. They are responsible for organizing the institutional communication and for building up the strategy and communication policies. Public relations are a filter of communication; they allow through and amplify the circulation of favourable messages, at the same time stopping or buffering the impact of unfavourable ones.[749]

Public relations are one of the methods by which the society adapts to changes and solves conflicts of attitudes, ideas, institutions and opposed persons[750].

In the organization chart and factual relations with citizens, the local public administration institutions focused not too long ago only on the system "relations with the public". Although "relations with the public" concern only the direct communication with the immediate public (citizens, suppliers, visitors, members of subordinate institutions, etc.), getting in contact with at the desk, by phone or on the Internet. Again through "relations with the public" papers are filed for the recipient that is the public institution in discussion. Considering the complexity of local public administration functioning, the relations with the public represent only a component part of public relations.

The public institutions feel the need to communicate when good things happen to them. If they had a spectacular increase of budget incomes as compared to past years, or when they accomplished an elaborate project. Communication is associated with good news. But in times of crisis their tendency is to stay away, this proving to be a big mistake on their part. Public Relations may be regarded as "doctor of crises", the binder that keeps the public close to the organization even in moments not so good. Ignoring this aspect, institutions may fall into a dangerous trap considering the period of the present financial crisis, that of alienating citizens, up to the point of refusal to communicate. Such an attitude has a negative impact by perceiving the institution as not being transparent. Even during crises opportunities must be seized by adapting the communication strategy to the new context. Obviously, the resource of adaptation length lies in the people and their capacity to design and sustain a new mission of the organization, in consonance with the new extra-organizational tendencies. The support of the organizations'

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[749] Prutianu Ş.,"Tratat de Comunicare şi Negociere în afaceri", Polirom Publishing House, Iaşi, 2008, p. 282.
[750] Grunig J. E., Hunt T, Managing Public Relations, Detriot, Rinehart and Winston, Philadelphia, 1984, p. 3.

adaptation is of communicational order. The adaptation strategy is, in essence, of communicational category. In this context, the organization's public categories establish and express themselves – the internal and external public, the latter comprising the local public (local community members the respective institution serves). Thus, internal communication becomes more visible than before, the reputation auditing being called for because the crisis is a moment of balance followed by long term decision making.

Even in the public institutions the organizational identity must be created hand in hand with the organizational culture. Swchwebig[751] distinguishes the two concepts by placing culture at a behavioural level and identity at the level of the unconscious. In this perspective, one of the responsibilities of an organization's board is to create and maintain through a proper policy the process of identification with the organization. Partially, the identity is also built up from the relations with the environment and due to internal management. Another very similar concept and often mistaken with the above ones is the concept of organizational climate referring to the visible characteristics of the organizational "atmosphere", visible features for the outsiders even from the first contact with the public institution, for the employees being a rather hard to define ensemble but which may be part of the motivational factors. In the specialty literature the climate was defined as "a relatively lasting quality of the internal environment which is:

a) lived by its members;

b) influencing their behaviour;

c) described by a set of "organizational environment attributes". Thus, climate is a variable prone to creation or alteration in a shorter time as compared to the other two, whose design and management take much longer.[752]

The identity of an organization when it is well managed may be a very powerful mean of integrating more regulations and activities essential for the success of the organization. It may also furnish the visual cohesion necessary to secure the fact that all communication actions are coherent to one another and the result is an image compatible with the public institution's specificity. Through an efficient identity management an institution may build the understanding and trust for its diverse categories of public.

The effort of public relations communication create an important bond between the organization's strategy and personality, identity, culture, image and reputation, that is why various instruments are used for conveying identity and subsequently, assessment instruments to make sure that identity was properly communicated. The key to the differences between the types of organizational communication is the fact that it focuses on all public groups and has an internal dimension that contains communication with and among employees. A mission, vision and organizational philosophy related strategy develops, and the mission statement includes these values that couldn't have been extracted from the strategy. The mission statement may be used both for the internal and the external communication.

Public institutions also face communication problems due to the fact that the public system is a rigid one, with beaurocracy affecting all members and the performance of communication is also affected by the size of the institution – the bigger the institution (as number of employees) the harder is to obtain an efficient communication between all levels.

A large dimension public institution, rigid, with a rational organizational culture, tends to look to internal routine and less to non-routine, to improving both internal and external communication, with impact on the relations between the parties involved in the process of communication. Also, in an institution whose aim and organizational identity are misunderstood by all members, communication will suffer. In addition, beaurocracy itself affects the communication performance[753]. Organizational identity should be published in the largest sense possible because

[751] Sfez, Lucien, Dictionnaire critique de la communication, PUF, Paris, 1993, p. 580.

[752] Cismaru, D. M., Comunicarea internă în organizații, Tritonic Publishing House, Bucharest, 2008, p. 79.

[753] Pandey Sanjay K, James L Garnett- *Exploring Public Sector Communication Performance: Testing a Model and Drawing Implications*, Rutgers University, Campus at Camden, 2006, p. 41.

the public categories are influenced in several different ways. Practically, the building of identity is the first major step in image building.

The organizational culture, meaning the common integrating culture that stimulates and revaluates the members' potential, is the place where internal communication represents an important variable for the infusion of values and of the other elements of an organizational culture. It may be, at the same time, an instrument for the design and construction of a system of values which to stimulate performance and capacity to face the influences from outside. The culture of the organization may be seen as an expression of norms and values, representing that pattern of values and norms that distinguish an organization from the other, appointing to what is important for the respective organization[754]. Organizations must build themselves an organizational culture which emphasizes open and bi-directional communication with the aim of forming positive relations between employees which would lead to improving and/or building positive relations with the public categories outside the organization[755].

Bluedorn explains that in order to understand and mostly to act in the sense of altering the organizational culture, the time factor must be taken into consideration. The author insists on the fact that the attempt to modify an institution's organizational culture, even of a department to a new creed or a new ideology, is one of the greatest challenges a manager may face; amid all the dimensions of the culture, the temporal one is the most difficult to alter because it stands for the foundation of any culture's values and creeds[756].

Moreover, the public institutions where positive relations develop have as advantages, dedicated employees (public clerks that feel commitment towards the respective public institution) and employees developing positive relations both inside the organization and with the public categories outside the institution.[757]

At the same time, the organizational perspective makes possible a relevant way to operationally define public information and organizational communication as a priority form of managerial communication. If in the public space public information is legitimated through the norm of social democratism, in the organizational space public information comes as a functional imperative. In other words, "organizational communication is the ensemble of structures and communication processes through which organizations adapt to the external environment changes". In conclusion, in the organizational space, the actors are the organizations themselves. Interests are of an adaptative order and the processes are of communicational nature. In this new context, a new sense and a new possible definition of the public relations become visible, according to the acception of SNSPA: "Public relations constitute an organizational communication strategy, through which organizations become communicant and the fluxes of communication between organizations and the internal and external public categories determining the adaptation of the organizations".

Public institutions must not overlook communication of public relations both due to lower costs and to the role public relations have in building the reputation and in times of crisis reputation is the most valuable asset of an organization. The spreading of its image among the large public depends on the way the public relations activity within the institution is organized, starting from the position of the department in the flow chart and continuing with human, material and financial resources allocated to that field and with the establishment of some strategies and public

[754] Vlăsceanu Mihaela, Organizaţiile şi cultura organizării, Trei Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999.

[755] Schneider, B., Bowen, D., Ehrhart, M., & Holocombe, K. (2000). The climate for service: Evolution of a Construct. In N. Ashkanasy, C. Wilderom, & M. Peterson (Eds.), Handbook of organizational culture and climate, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 21-36.

[756] Bluedorn AC. 2000. Time and Organizational Culture. In Handbook of Organizational Culture and Climate, Ashkanasy NM, Wilderom CPM, Peterson MF (eds). Sage: Thousand Oaks; 245–260, p. 127

[757] Yunna Rhee, *The employee-public-organization chain in relationship management: a case study of a government organization*, University of Maryland, 2004, p. 8.

relations campaigns in agreement with the specific and need of the institution. On the way these institutional level relations are managed, on the importance given by the board of the institution and by the entire personnel to this activity depends the draw-up and implementation of some efficient public relations and communication campaigns, and finally, the creation of a proper image of the institution in the eyes of its public categories. In addition, public relations are indispensable in changes. Any decision must have a related communication plan and crises, by definition, imply changes. As a matter of fact, in all public institutions, the focus of public relations communication will move on from informing to explaining, from "what" they do to "why" they do certain things (for example, organizing public meeting to discuss with the citizens about the streets that are going to be rehabilitated, why those and not others, etc.), perhaps not to the liking of their public and "how" do they prepare to meliorate the situation or maintain a positive direction. As general directions of strategy, public institutions must be more internal communication oriented, both with their own employees and with the unions, but also with the communication with the suppliers which due to the peculiar financial situation are not seldom paid with delay, with the ONG but also with the other public institutions they have relations with. Social normality expresses and results from a society's capacity to assume and practice social norms, of democratic "norms" of social behaviour. The states of social abnormality are possible when in the social life either the tendencies of social "over-aggregation" manifests itself (through totalitarian type practices, of compressing the space of the individual life free existence), or the tendencies of social "under-aggregation" (by the dissolution of "social tissue" and of public authority, through social anarchy manifestations). It is a fact that, in both cases, the root of social abnormality is of a communicational structure and consists in a communication deficit or in a communication crisis. The communication crisis can only be surpassed (or foreseen) through an optimal public communication strategy. Or, this is exactly the essential role of public relations in the democratic societies, a role concentrated on generating communication fluxes between public institutions and citizens, so as the public institution to recognize and act for the real interests of the citizens and the citizens to gain confidence in the public institutions and clerks. In the above context, the following definition of public relations may be formulated: Public relations are a public communication strategy, through which the acknowledgment of the citizens' interest and their faith in the public institutions are generated.

In this sense the "stake" of public relations is huge being directly linked to a society's social health state and a society is healthy when citizens communicate freely with each other and with the public institutions.

The practician in public relations serves as intermediary between the organization he represents and all the public categories of that organization. As a consequence, the public relations practician has responsibilities towards the institution and the different public categories of the organization. He distributes information which gives the public categories the possibility to understand the policies of the institution. This implicit role includes the communicational aspect linked to the ascertaining and influencing the opinions of a group of persons.

As important function of the communication strategy public relations describe the followings[758]:

1. Anticipation, analyzing and interpretation of public opinion, of attitudes and elements that may have a positive or negative impact on the organization's plans and operations.

2. Counselling the board, on every level, about the decisional politics, the course of events and communication, considering their public effect and the institution's civil and social responsibilities.

3. Research, coordination and continuous evaluation through action and communication programs in order to obtain the information and support of the public, necessary elements for successfully achieving the objectives of the institution. These programs may include financial

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[758] Newsom et al, 2000, apud R. Pricopie, *Relatii publice: evolutie si perspective*, Bucharest: Tritonic, 2005, p. 15.

and marketing techniques, funds raising and governmental relations, with the community and/or with the employees, as well as other types of programs.

4. Plan and implementation of the organizational efforts to influence or modify public policies.

5. Objectives establishing, scheduling, budgeting, recruitment and staff training, developing some activity spaces – in short, administrating the resources necessary for accomplishing the above.

6. Among the necessary knowledge in the public relations professional practice are listed: art of communication, psychology, social psychology, sociology, political sciences, economy, as well as the principles of management and ethics. Specific knowledge and technical abilities are necessary for: study of public opinion, analysis of public related issues, relations with the press, publications, video productions, special events, speeches and presentations. To aid the policies definition and implementation, the public relations practician uses a variety of professional communication abilities and has an integrating role, both inside the respective institution and between the organization and the outside space.

In order to realize an efficient communicational process both intra and inter-institutional, the following criteria must be fulfilled:

 - The credibility criterion – trust and mutual support between administration and population are some desiderates that cannot be accomplished in a week or a month. These take time, are hard to build and are maintained by permanent efforts sustained by positive elements, performed by both parties involved in the communicational process.

 - The sensitivity criterion – in the public relations work it is very important that orientation be both dependant on the wishes and expectations characteristic of the organization and on those of the partners. It is wrong to focus only on the own goals and development of own programs without considering their impact on the others. The reverse of the medal is not beneficial either, meaning to listen and act only dependant on the others. The public relations work must have as a result the fulfilment of own goals by not harming the discussion partner or any competitor whatsoever.

 - The realism criterion – any system, through the work of public relations must very well acknowledge its potential, its strong points, as well as the weak ones. The system must lean on strong elements and it must avoid the alleged problems that weak elements should create. The weak elements once identified must constantly and permanently be enforced to become, in turn, strong points able to help the system. There are also cases when these weak elements take too much effort from the whole system to get strong, case in which they should be removed.[759]

For the good development of all the activities within an organization, the internal communication process must function impeccably. Inside any system where the intra-systemic communication flows in good and very good conditions, there is also a positive environment, aspect that has beneficial consequences on the involvement of its component elements in different actions, as well as on the accomplishment of the proposed targets. Each element of the system has a role of image multiplier. When an employee is satisfied with their working conditions (being met both their material and spiritual needs, of self-accomplishment), they will convey/disclose to other persons their experiences, passing on positive things in general, which brought them satisfaction within the system they work in. Czaplewski, B. Schneider and White & Paul present the relations inside the organization as directly responsible for the satisfaction experienced by the clients after coming into contact with the organization.[760] The relation public – organization is given by the bond created between an organization and its public, which result from the behavioural

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[759] Rus, Flaviu Călin, Relaţii Publice şi Publicitate: metode şi instrumente, Institutul European Publishing House, Iaşi, 2004, pp. 7-8.

[760] Czaplewski, J. Southwest Airlines: How Internal Marketing Pilots Success. Marketing Management, 10(3), 2001, pp. 14-17.

Schneider, B., White, S., & Paul, M. (1998), Linking service climate and customer perceptions of service quality: Test of a causal model. Journal of Applied Psychology, 83, pp. 150-163.

consequences (conduct) an organization has on its public, a repeated communication[761] being also needed. We must not overlook the fact that in the case of relations from within the organization the situation is more delicate in the way that employees (as part of the organization) undergo an avalanche of contacts with the organization and when evaluating the quality of the relations, the criteria are different from person to person. Also, as towards the external public, the employees have the tendency to accentuate differently the dimensions and ways of establishing and maintaining the relations between employees. The relation employee – public mainly refers to the individual relational level developing between the employee and the external public. Analyzing this issue, Grunig and Huang[762] identified trust, control reciprocity, satisfaction and commitment as dimensions of this relation.

The most important tactics public institutions under crisis may adopt are transparency and steadiness in communication in order to maintain the public's trust in the decisions taken and also in the fact that each decision follows primarily the interest of the citizen.

Due to the insecure situation generated by the existent crisis in Romania citizens find it more and more difficult to have trust: in the safety of the job, in the evolution of the economy and of the country's currency and in the public institutions, both central and local. Confidence is one of the poorest of resources from the highest political level down to the smallest economic transaction. At the same time, on a market governed by uncertainty confidence is the most precious resource an organization may own, that is why public institutions must rely more on strengthening the relations with the citizens through the system of public relations.

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[761] Yunna Rhee, *The employee-public-organization chain in relationship management: a case study of a government organization*, University of Maryland, 2004, p. 9.

[762] Grunig, J., Huang, Y. (2000). From organizational effectiveness to relationship indicators: Antecedents of relationships, public relations strategies, and relationship outcomes. In J. Ledingham, & S. Bruning (Eds.), Public relations as relationship management: a relational approach to the study and practice of public relations, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, pp. 23-53.

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