Chapter 5

Novel tools as new challenges to HRM communicational practices (and the increasingly important social role of the manager)

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Abstract

Each communicational process consists inseparably of three aspects: the linguistic (which means the whole language content of the message), technical (which states the form of the message) and the social (meaning social relations, emotions, behaviours). The recent COVID-19 pandemic deeply influenced several layers of our lives. But the main aim of the chapter is to focus on the communicational processes that normally take place in organisations. We conducted a qualitative study based mostly on in-depth interviews and observations among managers and management students. The analysis revealed the enormous expansion of technical dimensions of communication, where personal direct communication was often replaced by indirect ones, supported by the usage of modern tools like internet communicators and interactive software. This resulted in abnormal reduction of the social - highly needed and obviously important - dimension. Such 'new normal' organisational reality forced the HR managers to re-think the flow and quality of existing communicational processes within which they are always situated, also considering its deep, multidimensional influence on the existing social relations.

The chapter presents the results of qualitative studies from in-depth interviews, structured interviews, and focus group interviews from 2012-2020. We aim to answer the question of the

changes which were brought into organisatons by the pandemic as our long-term research allows to follow the changes. As a result, we received characteristics of the organisational changes and the shift in expectation from the role of a manager in the altered social reality. Practical implications are included in the chapter and provide guidelines for communication in crisis situations while maintaining a high quality of interpersonal relations.

Key words: communication, managerial role, organisational culture, HRM

Introduction

At the time of the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, multiple governments were forced to introduce activities to prevent the spreading of the coronavirus, through social and economic restrictions (Kraus et al., 2020; Skuza et al., 2021). This influenced the life of the citizens as well as impacted the economy (Baker et al., 2020). The Eurostat (2020) report proves no aspect of economic or social life is immune to the pandemic-induced crisis. Every human being reacts to the isolation and threat-specific situations in a different way, which should be taken into account in human resource management (HRM) processes. All this is definitely linked to the individual intellectual predispositions, character traits, age, education, life expectations, and experience (Griffin, 2003). The pandemic is accompanied by fear for oneself and the closest people, as well as uncertainty as to the future. There has also been a rise in fake news count, both on the national and international level, leading to the emergence of the notion of "infodemics" (Popiołek, Hapek, and Barańska, 2021; Du Vall and Majorek, 2020), understood as enormous abundance of information flow, where it becomes very difficult (sometimes impossible) to select confirmed information from misinformation, or disinformation. The situation translated directly to the raised level of stress of employees from across the industry branches (Zhang et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2020), the emergence of fears, insomnia, and symptoms of depression (Torales et al., 2020), as well as susceptibility of abuse of stimulants and increased pathological behaviours (Continetti, 2020).

Organisation managers needed to take responsibility through decisions related to HRM and work organising taking into account the sanitary restrictions and creating a safe workspace, most usually selecting one of the three strategies below (Tagliaro and Migliore, 2021):

(1) work from the office all the time – traditional way of working;

(2) work-from-home all the time – teleworking;

(3) multi-location work across time and space.

Even though before the pandemic a number of HRM processes applied modern technologies, such as social media to boost various HRM functions, including recruitment, onboarding, training, and development (Kluemper et al. 2016), the pandemic introduced the need to boost the use of new technologies and communication platforms, thus limiting personal and direct interpersonal relations.

Problem statement and objectives of the chapter

The aim of the chapter is to follow the changes and challenges that the pandemic situation brought to the organisational communication. The question which was formulated for this study was: what changes in organisational communication were brought by the pandemic?

The specific questions were: how did the transition of the majority of areas of social and professional life (including HRM) into the online realm influenced organisations? How did communication processes within organisational cultures alter under the influence of the omnipresent intense use of remote tools? What new challenges were set before the managers?

The answers to the research questions come from qualitative studies of 2012-2020 on the influence of communication on the practices of management and HRM process changes.

Background

The process of communication is, for all humans, quite a similar activity to breathing – everyone is engaged in it with not much reflection and not much preparation or training. Its quality can be obviously different, as well as the results, when one is more aware of its rules and general meaning. As Novinger (2001, p. 4) claims "We cannot not communicate". We ought to realise that communication is built not just by words we say but constitutes a whole complex system of behaviours (see: e.g. Watzlawick, 1967). It is also worth emphasising that communication is always rooted deeply "in the matrix of culture" (Novinger, 2001, p. 3) which is - as also Mary Jo Hatch (2002) claims – dynamic.

Managerial roles usually require permanent and much more intensive communicational activity, both in symbolic and strictly practical meaning, than any other role in an organisation (Barnard, 1997). Due to the multiple tasks to fulfil, the managers appear to be at the intersection of several internal (among the employees) and external (among the employees and the external environment) communicational flows. All the managerial roles are deeply emerged within the mutual influence of surrounding demands and elaborate organisational communication, both strongly settled within the cultural context in all kinds of organisations.

None of the human resources management practices, seen as e.g. motivating, assessment, development, work organisation, strengthening the organisational culture, and building relations between staff and the managers (Konstanty and Modzelewska, 2014) would be possible without communication. It always forms the first step before any other action, especially one demanding cooperation. Communication within an organisation is often seen as a key HRM process (García-Carbonell et al., 2018). Aligning HRM and communication is a key to achieving true involvement and an improvement in the finances, or employee motivation of an organisation (Bayerlein and Gailey, 2005).

Managers need to become the best communicators and provide reliable information on the organisation's goals, policies, systems, and practices, based on the six rules from Bayerlein and Gailey (2005, p.33):

- "Build communication as an integrated system connected to the business strategy.
- Provide clarity, information and inspiration to connect heads, hands, hearts and minds. Use communication as a leadership alignment tool. Establish strategic communication competencies for leaders, managers and supervisors.
- Analyze information flow to provide neutral, objective perspectives on critical issues.
- Move faster than the speed of change".

Communication in HRM processes is of high importance for the support of organisational strategy, strengthening of the organisational culture, building involvement and supporting interpersonal relations among staff, and staff involvement in the HRM processes (Griffin, 2003). Communication processes are also vital for the HRM processes during the pandemic – On the one hand, they are usually the first step towards realization of any HRM practices like

motivation, evaluation, onboarding etc., supporting the management decisions and actions. But on the other hand, they gained even more importance as the pandemic generated new problems (e.g. psychological, but also organizational) and communication had to be fluently adjusted to new demands so as to support usual managerial decisions and actions to make the organization operate as 'normally' as possible.

Organisation, its culture, and communication

Mary Jo Hatch (2002) claims that modern organisations can be introduced as inter-imposing spheres of culture (a unique mixture of participants' norms, values, expectations, willingness to work, health, dedication, etc.), physical structures (the organisational core divisions of the material places for work), technology (all the tools that need to be used to make the organisation operate), and social structures (the organisational core divisions of the roles and duties) that exist in a very specific background, also creating it at the same time. All those four elements have common spheres. It means that they are inter-connected but, looking at it from a wider perspective, that no of the issues, ideas, theories come from the intellectual vacuum and have no connection to some previously known and shared issues, ideas or theories. Such a perspective allows to understand multidimensional world of organisations.

For the last years the increasing number of areas of our lives are becoming more and more organised – starting with work and ending with leisure time, e.g. holidays (see: Kostera, 2003; Ritzer, 2003). When we are born, we immediately become members of several organisations at once, playing there later very different and sometimes excluding roles (e.g. the role of a dedicated employee and an engaged parent – staying overtime can be even impossible in that situation). The American sociologist Amitai Etzioni (1964) thinks that we leave a great part of our life in organisations (not just those connected to our jobs).. Other sociologists (e.g. Smith and Preston, 1977) think that people cooperate in groups to achieve goals - financial profits and non-financial, like environment protection. What differentiates the organisations is not just their aim, but also the size or ownership (Kostera, 2003). That means we can split the organisations into obligation-driven and voluntary ones, and the latter can then be divided into *formal* (which are based on norms and regulations; the relations that appear within them are rather official,instrumental and formal); and *informal* organisations, based on social relations and emotions, where the structure has less meaning but the information spreads within informal relations of liking and disliking. In each type of organisation we can identify several

forms of communication (e.g. verbal and non-verbal, horizontal and vertical, oral and written), although the dominant character of the organisation imposes the dominant communicational practices.

Organisational culture

As Monika Kostera (2003) writes, culture enables communicational processes because it is based on the symbols. Moreover, culture seems to be a kind of a medium that assists people in understanding the world. There have been deep changes appearing in perception of culture over the years. According to Susan Wright (1998) the modern perspective perceives culture as an active process of sensemaking (Krzyworzeka, 2008, p.185), which is hegemonic, the places are not frozen, the people use their several relations on different levels with different groups.

If we agree with Smircich (1983), we would treat each organisation as a distinct culture which is usually non-monolithic and ambiguous, and possesses its specific features that make it different from others – they are visible artifacts (Hatch, 2002), like the patterns of communication, assumptions, values, symbols, rituals, tales, or taboos. And the people always build their own groups (and their cultures) through symbols. They can move, and change places within, and also emphasising its unique character (cf. Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992; Geertz, 1973).

Communication

Several social concepts can be perceived either statically or dynamically. Karl Weick (1979) claims that 'the image of organizations that we prefer is one which argues that organizations keep falling apart and that they require chronic rebuilding. Processes continually need to be reaccomplished. Consistent with the process image, organizing can be thought of as a set of recipes for connecting episodes of social interaction in an orderly manner. These episodes, later to be called *interlocked cycles*, constitute the ingredients that are made orderly by organizing recipes.' (Ibidem, pp. 44-45). Such perspective is based on the three examples of those recipes: *enactment, selection,* and *retention.* Enactment means separating a part of organisational experiences for the future, the selection level implies a defined range of

interpretations into the bracketed material, and retention establishes the interpreted parts for further usage.

This processual perspective is widely exploited in this chapter and refers to most of the appearing social phenomena. It includes also organisational communication.

From Latin, the word 'communication' meant literally 'participation', 'creating a community' (Novinger, 2001). Some of the later definitions emphasised its rather utilitarian character and summarised it as the transmission of information from the sender to the receiver (Griffin, 2003). Bruno Ollivier (2010) perceives and explains communication as the co-existence of three interrelated facets:

- **technical** (meaning the form of the communication, how we communicate),
- **linguistic** (the content, what we communicate),
- **social** (basically, social relations among the people who communicate).

Organisations and communication

Joann Keyton (2005) wrote that an organisation emerges within and in favour of communicational processes that permanently happen there. She defines the organisation as a "dynamic system of organizational members, influenced by external stakeholders, who communicate within and across organizational structures in a purposeful and ordered way to achieve a superordinate goal" (Keyton, 2005, pp. 10-11). The researcher does not define the organisation by its size, aim or structures but by its „linguistic properties that reside in its internal and external communication interdependencies (Ibidem p. 10).

She wrote that an organisation is a dynamic, flexible, and interactional system created by its participants. Also, the external world influences the organisation and the organisation's members communicate within its structures in an ordered and purposeful way to achieve the common goal. Keyton claims that even if the organisation changes its place of residence or replaces the old participants by new ones – it will not disappear or become destroyed, because an organisation is "essentially a patterned set of discourses that at some point in time were created by the members and codified into norms and practices that are later inherited, accepted, and adapted to by newcomers" (Keyton, 2005). An organisation's participants also

change it on daily basis with their own specific ways of communication – verbal and non-verbal, electronic, written, communicating both with internal and external stakeholders. And each communicational flow can have real consequences, no matter if it is intentional or spontaneous (Keyton, 2005). Her concept echoes the one described by Karl Weick (above). It also found its confirmation in recent pandemic. The old communicational system, tools, or solutions became outdated in a short period of time. They were efficient before, but the sudden situation demanded rapid changes to make to communication well-working again. It means that immediately the forms of communication (just as Ollivier, 2005, perceived them – described above) had to be adjusted to the new work reality with its all consequences. Changed technical aspect led to share the linguistic aspect, but the question arose – how it influenced the social relations? We would like to propose some suggestions further.

Managerial roles

Each manager, irrespective of their place in the organisational structure, daily routines, self-perception, or being perceived by co-workers, must communicate with both: internal organisational stakeholders as well as with the external world. On the one hand, it is obvious – all people communicate permanently (although the results can be different), on the other hand, it is well recognised that to communicate efficiently there are some prerequisite skills and/or abilities. Thus communication becomes an obstacle to playing organisational managerial roles and presents a challenge. Some initial observations and conclusions related to efficiency in communication appeared already in classical management sources (see: Barnard, 1997). Practitioners as well as academics were aware that in the communicational processes of an organisation, the manager plays the most responsible functions in each dimension of their social role (Szeluga-Romańska, 2014). The manager, obviously, as well as the other internal stakeholders of the organisation, is settled strongly in its culture and reacts to changes within it. That means permanent reproduction of the same processes with addition of inevitable changes which are sometimes stronger, sometimes less visible. But in contrast to the other organisation members, the manager has symbolic power and if they also have awareness of the organisation and know how to put this awareness into practice, they are more efficient than the managers without such qualities (Hatch, 2002). The manager undergoes the same, permanent processes as the culture they are a part of. In a sense, they are the reproducers of the processes. Mats Alvesson (2002) observed that the managers are better understood in organisations when they are transmitters of the culture (and not those who

make changes in it). But as communication is obviously a solid part of the culture, also in this sphere the manager becomes the most influential person in an organisation. Using the informative function of all communicational tools, they have to introduce and implement established strategy, organisational politics, or HRM practices, present the established norms and rules. They also have to inform the subordinates about the most important aims to follow and the means of strategy delivery. In those situations , excellent communicational skills are desirable , like fluency in interpreting and explaining difficult information clearly and directly. . Bruno Ollivier (2010) calls them technical skills and such a vision of dominant communication usage – instrumental (Ollivier, 2010, p. 345). Those technical communicational skills play an important explanatory role. The more fluent the manager is in them, the better and faster to organisation absorbs the new information, e.g. in such dynamic times as we have in pandemic.

On the other hand, the manager is also a creator of organisational culture elements and some communicational patterns as well. Together with the patterns of communication, they also perform the patterns of behaviour – e.g. they set the border between formal and informal spheres in organisational culture, to limited degree they dictate their ways of building relationships and create different kinds of relationships (Figure 1). Managerial role as a creator is mostly to overcome the crises and also to enable the updating the enterprise activity regularly (Ollivier, 2010), which appeared extremely important in pandemic times.

Figure 1: The role of a manager in organisations
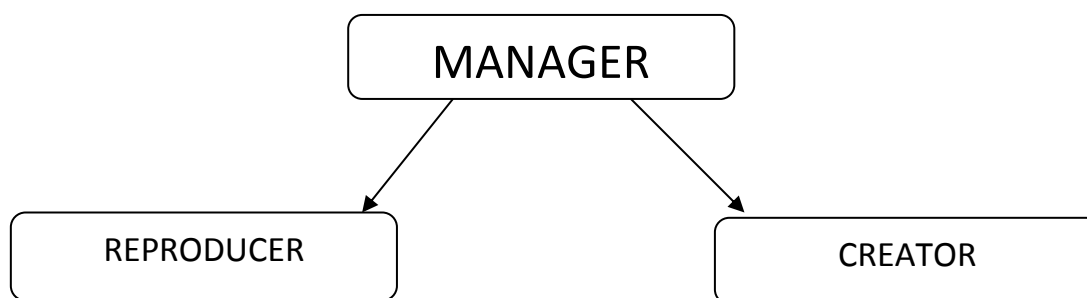
Source: Szeluga-Romańska, 2014, p. 211.

Key managerial functions are invariable since Henry Fayol's times – this means planning, organising, controlling, coordinating, and ordering (Fayol, 1916; Mintzberg, 2009).

But, as Monika Kostera (2008) proposes, management should be perceived holistically – as a mixture of both technical and social aspects, moreover, as a **social practice that appeared in specified social and cultural conditions**. Similarly, to management (understood as a socio-cultural practice), the communicational processes cannot be perceived differently than in the context of organisational culture: as social, linguistic, and technical integrity (Ollivier, 2010). In such a perspective it becomes possible to understand both phenomena in their multidimensional characters.

Our post-modern reality is filled with different organisations and thus management is becoming an everyday necessity for an increasing number of people who function in absolutely different work environments and have miscellaneous duties (Mintzberg, 2009; Kostera, 2010). Even if a job position is called similarly in different organisations, the duties can have nothing in common. The greatest difficulty of our times is not finding out what managers do is not the problem; interpreting it is" (Mintzberg, 2009, p.1). That means that the ways we use the means and tools to deliver known aims can be different and demand having wide, deep experience in functioning in particular organisations. That is the reason why many practitioners and also academics claim that it is impossible to learn how to be a manager theoretically, using standard procedures, schematic algorithms, or any other 'perfect tools'. There are no always-and-ever-working recipes for management. In other words – there is no one and only way of behaving, problem-solving, cooperating with other people – as Frederick Taylor saw it at the beginning of the 20th century. Modern definitions of managerial roles in organisations can be called processual (as Karl Weick claims), that try to follow permanent changes in surrounding environment, or even to predict or overtake them (see: Kostera, 2008; Mintzberg, 2009) – if possible.

Also in the other spheres of social life where people play several roles, these are mostly played simultaneously (e.g. public, professional, as well as private roles). They are deeply rooted in cultural context which is read and understood by the actor and by the audience (Kostera, 2003). Each role entails different expectations. As Erving Goffman (1959) claims, the information how to define the situation, what is expected by particular audience is gathered by the actor before the role is played. It is also crucial to know how to behave to provoke the desired reaction.

When one decides to start playing a particular role, they also agree to undertake several duties, tasks, patterns of behaviour, and acknowledge the whole motivational system of rewards and punishments that is attached to the role (Kostera, 1996). Playing the role is not just subjective but also has an intersubjective character (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992), which means that even if one takes up an already shaped role, they can change/improve/develop it because social roles are 'a part of sense-making process and social culture process' (Kostera, 1996, p. 126)[1].

According to Monika Kostera (1996) a manager fluctuates among three dimensions of their social managerial role: *societal*, *professional,* and *organisational*. Societal dimension means dominant scripts of the role, professional dimension is building the role by the managers and organisational dimension are the places for role playing – theatres-organisations (Kostera, 1996).

This concept clearly shows that each managerial role is inevitably connected to all the other organisational roles, played by other co-participants. There must be followers to give sense to the leadership (as Mintzberg – 2009 - claims). In HRM practices the mutual influence is observable at each and every level – starting with the organisational strategy preparation, its implementation and updating; within on-boarding processes when both sides' aims have been agreed upon, etc. Just to mention again, communication in HRM practices is an important first step towards connecting several, sometimes mutually excluding expectations to make the employees go together towards the same organisational aim(s).

Research design

The research was a qualitative one, multileveled, inspired to great extent by organisational ethnography. We used several research methods: in-depth, anthropological interviews, non-participant and participant observations, focus group meetings. According to the rules of conducting interesting but still proper qualitative research, we have been exploring the themes openly, attempting to follow the emerging plots and different perspectives (Ochinowski and Szeluga-Romańska, 2020, Kostera, 2010). We had no hypotheses adopted, so as not to be influenced by any expected result, trying to remain on the research grounds as long as

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[1] See also: Berger and Luckman (1966/1983).

possible and absorb its specificity with all our senses. In ethnographic studies, an interview is one of the key tools for collecting empirical material (Kostera and Modzelewska, 2021). An interview is a driven conversation, where both sides acknowledge and accept its form (Czarniawska, 2002). In our study, we have used varied interview types – in-depth (open, unstructured, non-standardised), structured (following a10-question cafeteria), and focused (with focus groups) interviews. According to the rules of qualitative research, the material was anonymized.

So far, we have been investigating the links between organisational processes of communication and the managerial activities permanently since 2012 in several research contexts. However, the research steps we chose for the purpose of the chapter are as follows:

Step 1 – We made 15 in-depth face-to-face interviews with managers from business, public, and non-governmental organisations between 2012 and 2013. They were supplemented by organisational observations[2]. That step led to the understanding of the depth of influence of the managerial roles on communication in organisations. It also enabled the construction of a universal model of said managerial influence.

Step 2 – in-depth interviews and a structured interview (10-question questionnaire) conducted in 2012-2021 on a total of 110 management students from two Polish universities (cf. Szeluga-Romańska and Modzelewska, 2020). The study was related to the perception of a managerial role, changes to the management processes, and the respondents' own experience in managerial roles. The study conducted in 2020-2021 was also related to the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the change to the HRM processes in organisations.

Step 3 – Between 2020 and 2021 we conducted 10 in-depth, individual interviews with managers (during in-person and online meetings) working for a variety of institutions, including public administration and private corporations. The second step helped in understanding how the pandemic influenced and changed the communicational processes within organisations. It also pointed at the new tools that became widely used e.g. for recruitment, selection, and adaptation processes.

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[2] That research was partly used for the Ph. D, thesis of one of the authors.

Step 4 – We interviewed 4 focus groups consisting of business students in 2021. All together there were about 25 participants in the online meetings from bachelor's and master's study programmes. Some of the participants had been working in several kinds of organisations, sometimes being also the managers themselves. We asked all the focus groups to discuss the pandemic times and it referred mainly to the advantages and disadvantages of remaining in a dominantly online reality. The third step was an initial, pilot part of a wider research[3], conducted to diagnose and explore some new areas/issues that appeared within the context of the pandemic. It shed new light on the social context of organisations.

All the interviews and focus group meetings were recorded and transcribed. Also, all the observations had a written form. The survey results enabled the creation and description of the multidimensional managerial role as the reaction to several sets of internal and external expectations. The empirical material was coded, and organised according to categories. The coding was performed in a traditional way, i.e. through dividing the material, analysing it, comparing, conceptualising, and categorising (Strauss and Corbin 1990, p. 61). Afterwards, it was analysed and divided into three main findings for the purpose of the chapter.
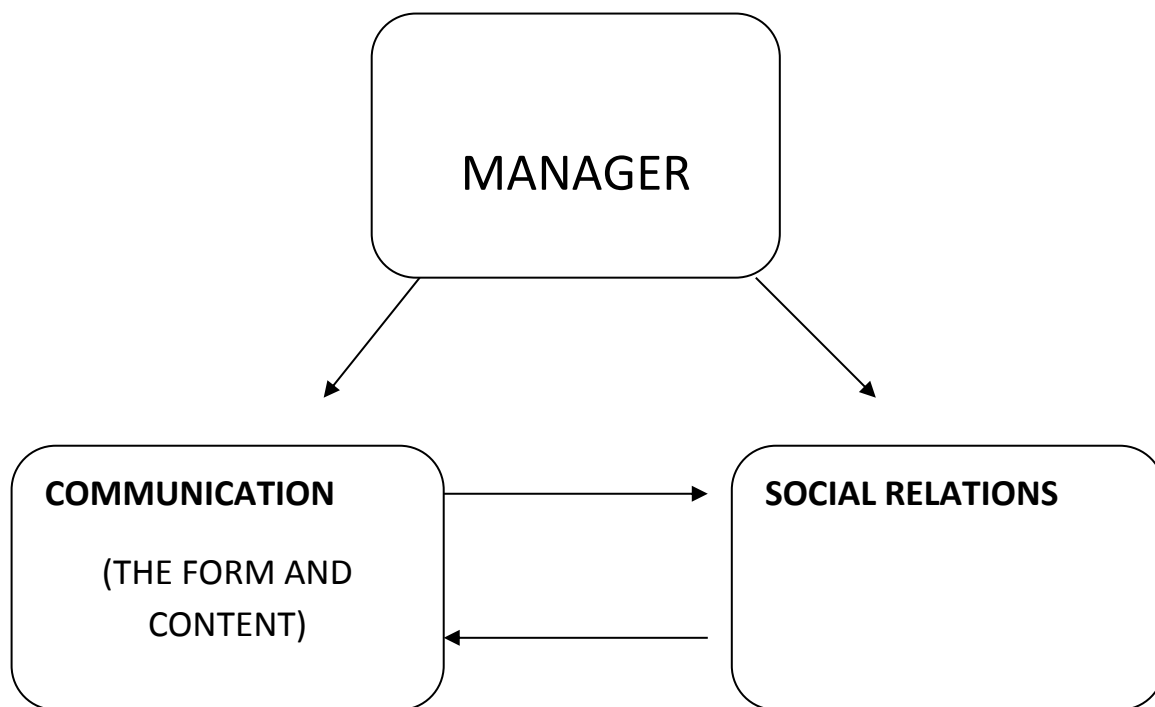
Results/findings

Managerial role's influence on communication
The analysis of the data from the interviews with managers revealed that a manager can intentionally and unintentionally build several social relations in the managed organisation. It seems that the relations influence the quality of organisational communication (Figure 2). Positive social relations influence the communication positively, improving its efficiency. Efficient communication reinforces building good relations. It is the process of mutual influence that changes within time. If the social relations in the organisation are not positive, supportive, then the communication works inefficiently.

Figure 2: The manager and the communication process

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[3] The working team is Marta Szeluga-Romanska, Ph. D., Anna Modzelewska, Ph. D., Paweł Ziemianski, Ph. D., Professor Krzysztof Leja, Professor Jan Kreft, and Professor Paweł Horodecki.

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Source: Szeluga-Romańska, 2014, p. 210.

The manager is committed to care about both: the quality of internal and external relations, and of the communication quality, because both processes are strictly connected and influence each other.

Firstly, the manager chooses the content and the form of communication adequate to both the interlocutor and the communicational context. This way, they build some social relations. They can be more superficial, limited to professional contacts, but also can be deeper and more stable. As mentioned before, communication means mostly human behaviours. This indicates that the manager builds social relations on the basis of several organisational activities, like common celebrations of some important dates (birthdays, Christmas, etc.), during trainings or integration, and even in the midst of conflicts. But building social relations is a very delicate issue. Many of them appear spontaneously, accidentally.

Secondly, the manager who is just starting to work for an organisation, also enters the whole rich organisational culture – all the relations, emotions, problems that already exist there. Their communicational means (the form and the content adjusted to the context) can do both –

either support positive behaviours or strengthen negative relations, either build or destroy the existing social order.

The relations in organisations are not constructed according to any rigid schemes and appear naturally following most of the social events. Their quality and strength depend on all of the participants/people/employees, not just the manager, but the role of the manager seems to be particularly important and influential. In the context of organisational communication managerial role seems to be so much complicated because it is not just the role that is multidimensional but also because the process of communication happens at a few levels simultaneously. Similarly, to any other organisation participant, the manager also communicates with the others at the level of meaning (semantic aspect), at the level of social relations (social aspect), using a set of available technical tools (technical aspect). In other words, each dimension of managerial social role is followed by somewhat different social relations - simply because they communicate with different people, and the content because in each role's dimension while communicating with different people, the speaker would obviously consider several different problems and matters. Each communicational situation requires choosing its form (usually linked to the social relations between the sender and the receiver) and also inscribed content. But the communicational form seems to be just a means or a tool in reaching the aim which can be efficient company functioning, possessing new clients, good reputation, efficient adaptation, or recruitment.

Formal and informal communication are the most crucial in understanding communicational processes, in which the manager participates in several dimensions of their social role. In each dimension they appear with different density. Formal communication is thus mostly visible in the professional dimension in occupational contacts that sometimes lead to deeper relations. Informal communication is connected with all the non-professional issues (such as personal matters). It is omnipresent, which means that it appears not only in non-professional situations (like chats during lunch breaks) but it is also visible in situations that seem to be strictly formal. That is the informal communication that enables to build long-term relations among the participants of internal and external organisational life. One of the interviewees was very disappointed with the fast pace the world works on which – in his eyes – leads to lack of human contacts or relations:

That is the sickness of the whole world. Everyone is on a hurry. That is a curse. Unfortunately. The human cannot be always on the run. Should have time to sit and talk normally. It can be chit-chatting about the weather. Drinking tea together with the others. Why to run so fast? What for? Sit and talk and listen to the other human [Priest Manager].

What happened to the organisations at the time of the pandemic?

As the pandemic clearly showed, the management of organisations is burdened with the duty of implementing the safety and organisational policies at the time of the pandemic, based on government guidelines and the specific needs of the subject organisation. Transmitting the information on the risk and threat to the members of the society ought to convey the nature of the risk and preventive actions (Basolo et al., 2009). At the time of the pandemic, organisations are faced with serious financial losses, the need to lay off personnel, and interruptions that need to be communicated to the interested stakeholders (Ibidem). Sudden situations pose new, difficult challenges to managers. In order to protect the health of staff, some direct contact with organisation members need to be limited and sometimes closed off totally. The interviewees in focus groups said often the pandemic deeply changed the mode of contact both between staff and the stakeholders of the organisation, causing larger social distance as well as an excess of forms of meeting – so-called "Zoom fatigue". In company offices, distance between people is visible: people avoid direct contact, and meeting someone to talk in a hall takes a shorter form, also obeying sanitary norms.

Before the pandemic, relations were mostly built through personal meetings. At our company, there was this tradition of frequent working group meetings, with discussions that lasted for hours. The building was full of life. You could always happen upon someone you knew in the hall, at the mess. […] Personal meetings and conversations constructed relations in a group, as well as relations with partners. [...]. Now, when people walk by in the hall, they treat one another as a potential source of infection. Meeting time is set to minimum. Instead of going to see someone in the office for clarification, people prefer to send an email. [interviewee 1]

HRM processes are largely remote. The interviewees stated that at their companies, most recruitment and training activities is of remote character. They indicated the possibility of setting up more meetings as an advantage of the remote model, as well as better flexibility in selecting time and place for a conversation. There was also a definite disadvantage of not being able to check how a staff member reacts in direct relations.

For over a year now, all recruitment interviews at our company are remote. We publish a job posting online, on a special website, we accept email submissions, and later set up video interviews with the selected candidates through one of the online platforms. […] A remote job interview has its pros and cons. It may be organised from any place, we can set up multiple interviews one after another without the candidates knowing about this. We are not able, however, to see how a person will react in direct contacts. […]. It happens that we see the staff member for the very first time only when we sign a job contract. [Interviewee 2]

Research participants also talked about trainings and specialist courses. They indicated that during the pandemic, these were also done mostly online. This often allowed to invite experts from other locations in the country, or even from abroad, who provided real-time instruction. However, they said the disadvantage of such trainings is lack of integration, which was often the case with real-life trainings.

At our company, there is a special programme for the development of managers' competences, for people who manage individual departments. Soft HR development is especially important for us, we care about the development of staff and the improvement of their work quality. […]. There is also a dedicated programme for staff, they can choose from a list of courses or suggest their own. […] In the time of the pandemic, there was an increase in demand for efficient communication courses as well as language means to construct communication. [Interviewee 3]

I am especially pleased that we managed to organise a training in the operation of social media with a well-known expert who, because of numerous duties and the fact he lives in another location, would not be able to meet us personally. […] The course plan was changed, some workshops that would be hard to organise remotely were omitted. [Interviewee 4]

The interviewees often voiced the motive of the dominance of one-way communication and the fact that trainings turned into lectures or videoconferencing monologues. Study participants said that many people take a passive part in meetings, without their cameras or microphones switched on. During the focus interview, participants also shared their experience from returning to regular work from the remote model, after the sanitary situation in Poland improved temporarily. They observed that group relations changed and people who

were apt at coordinating their remote work were not so apt to manage a team within a company building.

We had a manager who was excellent at coordinating an HRM project remotely. He split tasks between online groups, he was in constant touch with his group via a messenger app. […] When we returned to the office, it turned out that live relations looked totally different, that you need to talk with people live, interact with a group. Sending an email and a task through a messenger app are not sufficient. […]

The study participants also pointed to the difficulties in onboarding processes, which were largely disbanded during the pandemic. New staff were slow to acculturate and learn the organisational culture without physical contact.

The pandemic proved remote work is possible. It showed us that digitisation is possible. I have a feeling that it pushed relations to the background. […] People had these relations at their disposal before COVID and they worked with them most of the time. The issue appears with new staff. […] New people do not even know who is who within the organisation, they do not know one another. It is more difficult to manage such a team. [Interviewee 10]

A new staff member is instructed on-site, they have their job description. When working remotely, it is difficult for them to get to know the organisation, the rules, and their peers. They receive tasks they perform on their own. [Interviewee 9]

It was interesting to see interviewee 10 to remark that at the time of the pandemic and remote work, organisations utilised the already established networks of relations, which was valuable organisational capital. Yet another issue the interviewees raised was efficiency of remote work.

In remote work, it is important to precisely define tasks and the trust of a manger towards their people doing what they are supposed to do. [Interviewee 8]

During the University Areopagus debate, Wojciech Czakon (2022) mentioned work efficiency at the time of the pandemic in the strategic dimension. He said that in 2020, i.e. in a short-horizon time, efficiency increased. However, there is an observable issue of dropping efficiency and quality of work in a long-term view.

We need to also mention, however, that focus group participants also remarked on some positive characteristics of reality: more freedom in choosing place and methods of work, required trust of the employer towards their staff, possibility, and sometimes need, to combine professional and private life. One of the summarized discussions of the focus group claimed:

We think that there is less chaos and also our time organisation is different. We can see that the teachers are better prepared, they know more tools. But at the beginning, they did not know what to do. […] On the other hand, it was problematic to speak to the camera and some of us still do not feel comfortable speaking to the camera, especially when the others have it off [Focus group 2].

Managing at the times of a crisis

Interviewees who worked a managerial position pointed to the responsibility on their shoulders, for organising the work at the time of the pandemic, especially when needing to decide on the model of work and introducing rules of safety. They also stressed that in their organisations, an HR manager was also the leader of a task force that defined guidelines for remote work at the time of the pandemic, or the establishing of a vaccination point at their companies.

There were visible fear and uncertainty of staff from the very beginning of the pandemic. I feel the responsibility for the life and health of my staff. Staff health and comfort are important, we try to adjust the form of work to their individual preference. […] During the pandemic, there was definitely an increase in individual approach to tasks, it is difficult to deliver group projects remotely. [Interviewee 7]

Some study participants also pointed to the emergence of informational chaos, e.g. rapidly changing safety rules when staff was not informed quickly enough. Also, not all information was, in their opinion, clear and comprehensible. Some organisations launched special tabs on their websites, where they published COVID-19-related guidelines and rules. There were also HR staff members delegated to provide information about the company activity during the pandemic. Participants repeated that there was an expectation in their organisations for the managers to introduce the rules for safety and model of work.

Everyone looked to their boss and waited for them to take the decision for everybody, to define the work model. Many were disappointed that the boss delegated these responsibilities

to line managers. The idea behind this was that each line was different, so the work model needed to be adjusted to the line's specifics. [Interviewee 6]

At the times of the crisis, people who gain importance are leaders, charismatic people who are expected to show the way out of the crisis (Boin et al., 2017). In the interviews and the questionnaire study, it is evident that a manager is perceived as the person to point the way forward. Management students often saw a manager metaphorically as a captain of a ship or a captain of a team who will lead the team towards its goal (cf. Szeluga-Romańska and Modzelewska, 2020). In their perception, a manager ought to have the traits of a magician whose illusions will build the conviction in a team, that of a better course of events in the future (Ibidem).

Discussion - implications for theory and practice

The conclusions from our study and practical implication thereof are related to two areas: changes of ways of communication and the changing expectations and challenges towards managers' activity. It is worth to mention that communication happens always in the three dimensions simultaneously: the technical, the language and the social one. The changes that take place in one of them also entail changes in the other dimensions. Managerial roles in organisations have particular influence on the organizational culture and the social relations: they do not just share the ways of working, or valid standards of communication, but also shape to great extend the organizational social reality and the ways of understanding of actions.

We propose a set of recommendations for the managers considering both: the quality of communication and the quality of social relations:

Social relations first – it means constant and absolute care for interpersonal relations – while also taking into account the safety rules. This can be achieved through e.g. celebration of common events (e.g. birthdays, or namedays) that were important before the pandemic and thus also always celebrated. These can be organised in a virtual space if conditions do not allow for a live meeting, but they should be maintained as before. The expected social distancing ought to allow for social bonds so the researchers suggest the use of the term "physical distancing" instead (where we attempt to stay in safe physical distance but still meet

face-to-face) (Van Kerkhove, 2020). Dhawan (2021) proposes to 'Value Visibly' which means being attentive, caring and respectful to other people by our widely used digital body language.

Find time - finding time for individual contact with staff, especially when staff seek such contact and voice the need for it. Regular meetings, even virtual, help cope with uncertainty. As Kim and Kreps (2020) claim control the flow of information to eliminate interruptions, and set up a direct communication channel to get to know the requests, questions, and feedback from staff and stakeholders.

Face-to-face contacts (ASAP) - making even the most automated processes within the organisation, such as are algorithm driven, done with the use of electronic tools and remote functionalities, require a person-to-person activity at some time, even just to get to know one another, double-check traits and competences, make some small talk online. The immense importance of such events for organisations, and especially for interpersonal relations, is also voiced by Henry Mintzberg at his blog post "Zooming Ahead".

Trust and delegate - making the work mode more flexible, introducing modes that will take into account the needs of those who try to combine private and professional life. This can be done by e.g. increasing trust that employees work in defined timespans and deliver the designated tasks/projects, instead of exerting excess control and account for every minute spent online or offline. Develop relations based on trust and cooperation, make information available to key stakeholders (Kim & Krep, 2020).

Communicate honestly - Direct your activities in a way which meets the actual needs and makes use of the most recent data related to the limitation of pandemic spread. Convey information in a clear way (transparently) so as to lead to rational and coordinated behaviour of the members of the organisation, which will help limit confusion, fear, and incomprehension at the time of the pandemic. Filter out inaccurate and fake information, provide the members of your organisation with the best available academic information. Actively seek for information on the approaching crises and react to these, so as to identify the threats and best possible strategies to react in crisis situations (Kim and Krep, 2020). Transparency of given information gains the trust which is undoubtedly strongly needed.

Limitations of research design/theoretical framework

The subjective character of each qualitative research makes it limited to a narrow group of interviewees, providing deep knowledge and understanding of their specificity, but no wider generalisations of the conclusions. On the other hand, there are no obstacles for the proposed models, based on qualitative research, not to be universally true.

Suggestions for future research

Future research could focus on long-terms consequences of the pandemic, its influence on organisations and models of communication in a longer perspective. It seems important to study the influence of returning to on-site work on the shift in relations within an organisation.

Conclusion

Researchers put a lot of emphasis on the issues related to crisis communication at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, this is on the level of governments and public administration communicating with the citizens (Hyland-Wood et al., 2021; Bucatariu, 2020; Johnston, 2020; Yudarwati et al., 2021, Sanders, 202l). Regardless of the nature of the organisation and the level from which a message originates, positive influence on the spread of the disease can be obtained from information campaigns on the risk of infection (Bucatariu, 2020). Actors – governments, organisations, groups – use communication to reach their rhetoric goals and bolster the feeling of being safe, e.g. by announcing their readiness to act in crisis situations (Johnston et al., 2020). The HRM processes ought to be based on open communication, which takes into account the needs of the members of the organisation and the conditions in which they function. The ongoing pandemic caused an omnipresent fear for the health and life of people around the world. One of the possibilities of countering tensions and stress in an organisation comes from a leader based on a culture of compassion, which is of key importance in management at uncertain times (Oruh et al., 2021). Compassion culture-based management is based on involvement and supporting the staff, showing them understanding and empathy (O'Dea and Flin, 2003). In this area, it is important to undertake activities leading to the development of a new model of economy, one which is based on preventive measures, underlining the protection of the staff members' lives against the threats

of the COVID-19 virus, while assuring the organisation's productivity (Tan et al., 2020; Rozman and Tominc, 2021). It is essential that new frameworks for organisational policy are established, ones that are based on financial support, defining of new sanitary conditions, development of new business models, introduction of new digital investments, and supporting education. Human solidarity is of vital importance in overcoming the existential threat posed by the pandemic (Maboloc, 2020). Barbara Czarniawska (2009) quotes similar sentiments, following ideas and definitions by Mary Parker Follett from the first half of the 20th century, where the role of a leader **emerges** depending on the situation at hand, so that the leader reacts to the changes surrounding them, has the skill to notice new trends and phenomena. Such a leader ought to combine the knowledge and experience of all staff so the whole organisation can put it to good use in reaching **common** goals. In her 1991 article, Barbara Czarniawska (2010) remarked that specific times generate the need for specific organisation leadership, as management is strongly shaped by all the social, cultural, economic, and political events of the surrounding world. The role of a leader at the times of a crisis is to limit the effects of a crisis, limit the timespan of chaos, helplessness, and dissatisfaction of the organisation's participants, as well as awaken the mobilisation and efficiency in coping with the situation (Boin et al., 2017).

We are still surrounded by the pandemic. It is worth reflecting upon what a manager can do right now so that communication and HRM processes in an organisation run smoothly, paying particular attention to the social relations that always are influenced by communication.

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