The Collaborative Dimension of Conflict Management in the Educational System

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The increasing number of conflicts in an organization is an alarm signal for the managerial conduct management in the educational system, in which the specific line, drawn on losses in the human values prevailing over the financial ones, requires careful monitoring of the conflicting tensions even from the first signs of their occurrence. The conflict management in the educational space refers to the process of specific planning of the management activity for the purposes of increasing the probability of avoiding conflicts, of organizing steps to reduce, resolve and / or solve the manifesting conflicts, in "a manner as fair and expeditious as possible" and of implementing ways of impact positivation in the learning organization.

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Introduction

A fundamental requirement of modern conflict management activities, necessary yet not sufficient for the possibility of solving conflicts, is to create a channel of communication between conflicting parties: students, parents, representatives of authority at different levels, managers of pre-school and school classes, of educational units or departments of education authority as the county inspectorates; in this context, it should also be added the motivation of the parties for communication and not for the escalation of the conflict by patterns of avoiding it through constraints and threats, considered to be erroneous reflexes. Their evolutionary heritage is reflected in the precept "fight and flight" because the most appropriate method to avoid danger was the escape, the removal from the threat, and if that protection was not possible, the resort was to meet for force with force, action with reaction, in the hope of obtaining victory.

In modern analysis, running away appears as an "expensive option"35 because the modern world is built on an intricate system of interdependence and continuing professional responsibilities preclude such drastic measures to terminate the relationship within the organization. The alternative reflex of coercive force, although it may appear useful in the short term, is a generating source of negative feelings and attitudes including humiliation, anger, revenge. Withdrawal and intimidation, even disguised in modern, sophisticated forms, are conflict approaches aimed at increasing stress in the organization and at sharpening the state of tension, especially in the periods of economic recession.

The collaborative dimension of conflict management

Conflicts arise in educational organizations regardless of their type: kindergartens, schools, colleges and school groups, children's clubs and sports clubs, etc., of their size and level: standard schools, European schools, national colleges, special schools, etc., or of their functional period, but the conflict state is influenced by organizational culture and tradition in reverse proportion.

The conflict management in the educational space refers to the process of specific planning of the management activity for the purposes of increasing the probability of avoiding conflicts, of organizing steps to reduce, resolve and / or solve the manifesting conflicts, in "a manner as fair and expeditious as possible"36 and of implementing ways of impact positivation in the learning organization.

If the phrase conflict management is generally accepted, conflict resolution is under discussion, ranging between the concepts of insolvable problems and there is no conflict without a solution. Is the persistence in the idea that there is a solution for a particular type of conflict a sort of prejudgment or not? From an essential core of philosophical perspective in Romanian oral folklore Time solves everything, one can deduce that the process of managing conflict always includes or induces, sooner or

Later a conflict solution, in one form or another. The solutions can be located at different points on the scale from positive to negative, including variants of withdrawal and coercion, as well as the solution of "avoiding the boulder in the way"\textsuperscript{37}, although it is desirable that both parties should be winners after a confrontational relationship.

Even if this situation does not happen, the result should not be considered in terms of gain and loss of each party, but at the level of organizational life as an improvement for all, a step in the beneficial acquisition for the learning organization\textsuperscript{38} focused on things on which there should be agreement, on the common values, on the development of specific skills, on the accumulation of experience.

Therefore, the correct management of educational conflict is addressed to the identification and approach of the issues upon which the set of actions is conducted after the selection of priorities, to the (re-) connection of the members to the reality of the organizational life on the ground of their involvement motivation, as well as to the awareness of differences and the modalities of their positive revaluation.

The literature in the field states that "conflict is not the problem, but poor quality of conflict management is."\textsuperscript{39} if it impedes the educational process in any of its components (teaching, knowledge consolidation, evaluation, etc.), if it demoralizes the organization and if it causes increasingly numerous escalations leading to types of conduct inadequate to the high standards of an educational environment appropriate to its mission.

The value of the management activity in the educational system is given by the quality of teamwork, by the training quality, by experience and organizational standards. The differences in attitudes, values, priorities, perceptions and interests are visible in any important professional, family or community relationship and often generate conflicts which affect not only the other members of the organization, but also those positioned in the core conflict.

The rational conflict approach in order to cover a relevant percentage of conflict solutions provides a degree of satisfaction and sense of value in the workplace, and in personal relationships, being a correct alternative to the classical approaches of intimidation by power use or cold distance, isolation, applied and not once, in the management of interpersonal disputes in the educational organization.

Cooperation is vital between all the components of the management aggregate: the holders of the responsibilities of general inspectors and their deputies, the human resources departments, the management and institutional development departments, the project team, the managers of education providers and the school boards; their cooperative actions are the recognition of the importance of educational work performed in order to develop and maintain the inter-relational system at a level suited to the prevention and minimization of a dimensional transformation of a dispute into a destructive conflict.

A particular constituent of the existence of conflict in the Romanian educational organizations, and of other types as well, is our "Latin specificity"\textsuperscript{40} which seems to imprint the tendency to obstinately continue the conflict, to consistently argue to demonstrate a point of view; from this perspective, satisfying personal vanity, which repeatedly requires high consumption of time and energy reserves compared with the behavior of the organizations of different origins, represents a hidden cost.

Another factor, very difficult to control in most cases, is to "avoid responsibility in the organization’s assets."\textsuperscript{41} Lack of motivation leads in some cases to major frustrations, evidenced by negligence, carelessness, delays, misuse of didactic equipment, non-acquisition or distortion of information, which determine the sharper conflict cost rates.

From this angle cooperation requires a double inter-relational pattern accepted by both parties: manager - manager, manager - member of the organization, aimed at professional behaviour based on the communion of values, priorities and interests. Both within the management team and outside it, in the educational organization, in the partner and associate institutions, there may occur complaints, quarrels, mutual accusations, attempts to avoid responsibility, confrontation, that have to be prevented, monitored or resolved using methods and techniques designed to alleviate the impact on

\textsuperscript{37} http://www.capital.ro.Interviu cu Daniel Dana, 2003
\textsuperscript{38} Petrescu, M., Stegăreou,I.\textit{Managementul schimbării şi riscului},2010, p.127
\textsuperscript{39} http://managementhelp. Org/interpersonal/conflict – Carter McNamara – \textit{Clarifying Confusion About Conflict.}
\textsuperscript{40} http://www.capital.ro.Interviu cu Daniel Dana, 2003
\textsuperscript{41} ibidem
the foundations ensuring proper functioning of the institution that provides education services; in this
respect, the references are made, on the one hand to the identification of adverse effects on the
mechanisms of the institution functioning with the supervision of the generating factors, and on the
other hand to mediation, conciliation, arbitration of the affected human resource in order to return to a
professional environment suitable for achieving the envisaged objectives. In the teams providing
educational activities of high quality, it is visible a process of obtaining the added based on the phases
of "form, storm, norm and performance" which emphasizes the idea of beneficial conflict; the
maximal capitalization of diversity means in this case, the subordination of the contradictions between
certain values, perspectives and opinions to a common goal that raises organizational standards in the
educational system.

Types of conflict-generating managerial actions

Communication inefficiency – Information management, which acts on two levels: information
gathering, processing and interpreting but also information elaboration and transmission – is a domain
in which the manager of the educational institution needs to prove his efficiency, working with a
compressed time horizon and with the complex data of different documents: regulations,
methodologies, procedures, managerial and activity plans, tables, diagrams, reports, schedules etc.

A defective communication or the lack of communication in this domain, which is sensitive for
a large part of the population, can lead to different degrees of disfunctionalities, going up to some of
the most severe, from the obtaining of the necessary permits for the functioning of the educational
institution, to the hiring of didactic personnel and the announcement of the exam calendar – if there
appears a relaxation as in the case of a high school headmaster who forgot to announce the date of a
test of the baccalaureate exam – the informational flow is interrupted and the pupils risk not taking the
competence certificate as part of the baccalaureate exam, which can lead to a situation with a high
potential of conflict.

A good circulation of the information supposes the “rigorous and efficient organization of the
informational network vertically and horizontally”, accompanied by an attentive managerial control
of this information. The quality of the information exchange assures the level of mutual understanding,
fundamental in the inter- and intra-institutional cooperation. Real conflict sources can be, in this sense,
the unpleasant surprises for the organization members and educational partners given by a lack of
information, truncated or distorted information on certain major decisions and events for the
professional and personal life, especially when the reasons of these decisions are not clarified and
there is only “a market of rumors”.

Communication can be realized through verbal language – oral and written, paraverbally –
tone, accent, pronunciation and non-verbally – gestures, posture, mimics, being accompanied by
affective tones specific for different situations; not rarely, any of the elements enumerated above may
impede or distort the correct decoding of the meanings of the message, becoming a conflict-generating
factor.

An essential value is also trust, without which the clarity of the goals of the educational activity
disappears, leaving room for disputes and conflicts. They can be diminished and counteracted through
the good quality of the managerial process, manifested in the capacity to differentiate the scale and the
types of tensions appeared, to analyze and to reason in order to identify the sources and the solutions
for solving the situations appeared in the legal organizational framework.

Resource position and quantity – Disputes over limited resources are relatively frequent in the
educational system, as it actually happens in any organization, as they consist in opportunities, goods
and money: possibility to be reimbursed for commuting to school, for participating to conferences,
symposiums, school camps, projects and programs, professional and training courses and stages;
publishation of scientific papers in school reviews and other specific publications, differentiated
awarding of the points in the evaluation sheets; obtaining managerial indemnity as form master or
manager, merit bonuses, the quality of expert or mentor in education, the title of professor emeritus,
etc.; here, one can add time and space resources and socio-professional positions. Sources that can
generate numerous conflicts may be: the decision-making procedures, temporal constraints,
communication procedures, physical conditions, opponents’ proximity, the way of distributing certain
resources, the access to information, functioning parameters, organizational structure and political pressures.

Revealing examples for the educational system, many of them accurately provided by Ş. Iosipescu (Analiza culturilor organizaţiilor / Analysis of the organizations’ cultures, Leonardo Fortius, p.22) can be: dividing the available area, its volume, its location, the decorations and the furniture among the different groups present in school; privileges awarded to certain persons or groups such as: parking lots, mobile phones, Internet access, computer and laptop accessing passwords; available work equipments: Xeroxes, scanners, office supplies, tape recorders, video screens, musical instruments, easels, etc.; written materials, images to be posted as announcements, catalogue covers and tags, diplomas for prizes; information circulation in terms of receivers, quantity, accuracy; allowed or forbidden behaviors such as being late, being absent from meetings, presence to certain events, phone calls; the monitoring and evaluation procedures of different services based on judgement or development; existence and content of internal regulations, responsibility allotted for training and integrating new teaching staff and pupils, the features of the climate in which the didactic activities take place.

**Personal chemistry – values and actions in conflict**

The functionality of the process assured by the manager is characterized by a set of three basic elements referring to: personal features, conduct and situations of involvement. Studies have shown that a significant weight goes to the manager’s personal features: physical characteristics, studies and education, personality features – authority, trust, influence, enthusiasm, maturity, emotional stability, social features – prestige, popularity, diplomacy, capacity to cooperate and characteristics specific for the professional area, such as responsibility, initiative, perseverance. Decision, as a basic management tool, reflects best the manager’s capacity to correlate native qualities, such as intelligence, memory, imposing app, discerning heart, socializing spirit, to the complexity of the educational sector. Without communication skills, thinking qualities, creative spirit, capacity to assume responsibilities, self-motivation, which are necessary to an efficient manager, the organizational environment becomes exposed to a series of conflicts, largely non-constructive.

The managers’ behavior, oriented towards the quantitative and qualitative realization of the tasks distributed to the organization members and towards obtaining the necessary results is, especially in the educational domain, based on a human inter-relation system that should include good interpersonal communication, reciprocal help, respect.

Another remarkable aspect is the conflict between the managerial and the specialized tasks, as, very often, school inspectors and head managers also have a teaching norm, which, although reduced, is obligatory. Here intervene considerations generated by the way how managers used to be selected, which relied on previous professional accomplishments in didactics and not necessarily in management, the domain which should have revealed skills for the future activity; that is why, in 2012, in Romania, the creation of the Management Experts Body has been started, made up of teachers who graduated from training courses and stages in this domain and who obtained a certain number of credits proving their training, skills and interest in assuming a position of authority in the system. The manager’s non-accomplishment of the tasks according to the standards consecrated by the law and the tradition of the educational institution, the inadequate allotment of his work time, ambiguity in the identification of the activity goals, as well as an authoritarian style, are elements with a negative influence on the organizational life, which may lead to the accumulation of frustrations, discontent and tensions.

The manager’s efficiency, decisive in conflict prevention and minimization, is determined by a set of factors which include: the manager’s personality, his intellectual skills, his behavior, his managerial style, his professionalism, his decisional skills, his motivation and his collaborators’ motivation in the actions undertaken, his receptivity to the organization’s problems. Leadership issues – Conflict may appear recurrently in the organizations in which leadership is characterized by inconsistency, absenteeism, lack of information, accentuated power, and when the management tries to avoid conflict by passing its responsibility onto someone else or by declarative decisions, accompanied by no action; the managers’ lack of understanding for the tasks of other

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45 www.leonardo.fortius.ue.fiscsu
46 Man,M. Eficienţa activităţii manageriale în Învăţământul preuniversitar (Efficiency of the managerial activity in pre-university education), 2006, p.40
47 Man,M. Eficienţa activităţii manageriale în Învăţământul preuniversitar (Efficiency of the managerial activity in pre-university education), 2006, p.42

240
organization members or of their responsibilities may lead to discontinuity in the organization life through the repeated occurrence of the same conflict situations generated by the same sources.

A way of preventing conflicts in organizations is to apply the principle Voice and Choice⁴⁹; through voice, the manager needs to provide all the organization members with possibilities of expressing their views: pupils, teachers, directors, inspectors, but also partner institutions, parents, local authority representatives, administrative representatives, etc. On the other hand, through choice, all these people need to be helped to have opportunities to influence a certain type of decision, as for example the selection of alternative textbooks and optional courses, the creation of programs, projects and interior regulations, the creation of partnerships, the appointment of members, heads and secretaries of administrative councils, methodical and school commissions, etc.

The responsibilization of the organization members in the implementation of any decision of the educational institution becomes a conflict prevention factor; or, in case a conflict has appeared, a conflict minimization factor. It is also true that this action becomes more efficient by attracting or choosing natural leaders, who can influence the organization members through their opinions, allowing the educational organization to obtain positive results.

Conflict diagnosis

Conflict is preceded but also accompanied by unpleasant feelings, anger, hurt selves, dysfunctional communication, which all of us have certainly experienced at a certain point in our lives. There are distinctive signs (red flags)⁵⁰ announcing the triggering of a conflict and they can be deciphered through body language, disagreements on a topic, reluctance to announce unpleasant news, unpleasant surprises, embarrassing public allegations, expressing disagreement by means of media channels, contradicting value systems; to these, one can add the lust for power, public clashes, the lack of transparency concerning the budget or any other sensitive topics, inconsistent objectives, the absence of discussions and debates on the evidence of progress, the non-attainment of different targets, the incapacity to provide a correct evaluation for contesters.

Conflict management becomes a situational one, constantly requiring emotional intelligence to relate with the parties involved and to manage the conflict environment. Organizational managers and leaders need to pay attention or be on the watch for conflict signs, both among organization colleagues and members and among groups. Typical signs most often include, in the first case, the ceasing of the discussions between colleagues, reserve, distance and even isolation, contradictory discussions and disapproving mimics, intentional undermining of the opponent’s professional and personal status, lack of collaboration even to the point of triggering the failure of the group or team that he is part of.

Latent conflicts on the level of the organization groups also need to be identified, monitored, evaluated and approached via an action plan, to avoid going over the optimal level of the conflict, a point beyond which the consequences become destructive; in this situation, one can note small groups or factions which meet separately to discuss matters that actually concern the organizational life as a whole, which do not take part in an event or in its organization, although everybody should participate, and the proliferation of menaces, the repetition of slogans, the publication of symbols supporting the correctness of one group’s opinion at the expense of another group or of the organization.

Conclusion

It is obvious that on a macro-level, the top managers hold the global leadership of the educational system, directing the approach of the institutional policies in the domain, and representing the political authority that selected them. Yet, (with the exception of the totalitarian periods) middle and lower managers, and the members and partners of the system should be consulted concerning the legislative directions (The Law of National Education, The Status of the Teaching Staff), the objectives and strategies in the average and short run concerning the beneficiaries of the educational services, the didactic staff and other organizations connected to it. A harmonized social set of institutional laws de and norms, not at all perfect, but always perfectible, is nevertheless relevant for keeping a balance between acquisitions and evaluation, between behavioral patterns instituted by means of a social and human agreement based on the benefits obtained and verified through experience, on which monitoring and control tools need to be installed, without deteriorating the non-leveling degree of the activity. The curricular diversity, the application of didactic strategies and methods meant to stimulate creativity, the variety of the human reactions inside and outside the class, of the education providing institutions, determine us to consider the idea of unaware agreement, of unique mirror of reality, an

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⁴⁹ http://www.capital.ro.Interviu cu Daniel Dana [An Interview with Daniel Dana], 2003
undesirable end and very remote from the educational functionality, as if all the young generations of the present should fall prey to the unhappy copy-paste syntagm.

What we consider to be a specific element in the presentation of the educational system is the double relevance of the concept of learning organization, on the one hand in the sense of the actual goal of the activity directed towards the cognitive, affective and moral progress acquisitions and, on the other hand, in its positioning among the basic principles of the total quality control (James Edwin Swiss, Public Management Systems, 1991, apud Gherguţ, 2007, p.183); in the second sense, the educational system is considered an organizational system able to become more intelligent in time, continually trying to improve itself, anticipating and creating the abilities needed for future success. An organization prospers as it changes; it excludes what is static and blind adhesion through group dynamics, considered by Moscovici himself as “the most efficient tool able to change behaviors or opinions and to integrate the individual”.

Based on the idea of this organizational evolution, one can conclude that conflict management in the educational system, far from having the features of an insignificant and mechanical activity, constitutes a necessary continual process that should focus on the prevention, reduction, minimization of the divergences, on the identification and application of specific methods and techniques that can help solve the conflicts, and on solutions meant to diminish the negative effects generated by them, if possible turning their impact into a positive one for the organization. Such an ample role derives from the status of this process, situated at the confluence between science, art and practice⁵¹, a nodal point submitted to social influence, attained by conflict management following a constant development of the intuitive and creative skills, following the accumulation of practical experience and progress in the theories related to the systemic non-identification models.

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