

COMMUNICATIONS AND SUBCULTURES AS ELEMENTS OF INTERDEPARTMENTAL RELATIONS IN AN INTRA-ORGANISATIONAL SETTING

Nikša DUBRETA¹, Maja TRSTENJAK¹, Tomislav TURK²

¹University of Zagreb, Faculty of Mechanical Engineering and Naval Architecture
Ivana Lucića 5, Zagreb, Croatia

²M. Viriusa 1, Koprivnica, Croatia

Abstract

The article deals with possibilities for introduction of concepts of organisational subcultures and communication in consideration of relations between departments of maintenance and operation. The focus groups based qualitative research has been conducted with the members of these two departments in one Croatian pharmaceutical company. Findings indicate possibility to introduce subcultural perspective only in terms of soft determinism. On the other hand, the findings suggest communications are comprehended by departments' members as potential remedy for their relatively poor relations. Finally, findings allow for further research and for more empirically grounded theoretical developments regarding organisational studies.

Keywords: maintenance, operations, organisation, focus groups, subcultures, communications

1. INTRODUCTION

Relations between departments in organisation represent an area of interest for different actors within organisation as well as for social scientists. In industrial settings these relations are part of everyday living deeply engrained into individual and collective images of organisation created by inhabitants of that space - employees at different levels of organisational structure. Social scientists who have researched these relations usually used them as a lens at the appropriate analytical level for consideration of more general, and maybe, generic social processes.

There is a plenty of theoretical constructs used in such analysis which differ from approaches based on organisational culture (and subcultures) to studies related to the issues of communications and intergroup relations. For example, subcultural approach in terms of working groups as a unit of organisational analysis emerge relatively early, with empirically based insights into differences in task clusters of occupationally distinguished members of different working groups [1]. However, as theoretically elaborated concept, subcultural approach has gained recognition more recently, through the pluralist perspective in organisational culture theory, or more precisely as the conceptual reaction to the functionalist approach which dominated the subject area in 1980s and which tended to conceptualize organizational culture as unified, homogenous and all-inclusive phenomenon [2] suitable for shaping according to the needs of management [3]. Since the organisations in 21st century tend to raise exceptionally complex structures which get out of functionalist predominantly unifying analytical insight [4], subcultural perspective has emphasized that in such organisations "the ongoing recruitment of the new personnel from the outside, the introduction of new technology, and the existence of departmental and other group perspectives all mitigate against a unitary culture" [5]. Similarly, as regards complexity of contemporary production systems, Bailey and Barley point out that differentiation and distribution of relevant knowledge followed by increasing worker autonomy "may cause unanticipated problems while not necessarily achieving productivity gains" [6]. The authors refer to the earlier Bailey's finding in semiconductor manufacturing where the autonomy of production operators before preventive maintenance threatened the job security of equipment technicians [6].

Often, depending on their inclinations to understand and possibly improve these relations, "in-house" actors, employees themselves, strive toward explanations, raise eventually known concepts or put relevant questions acting in terms of Lemert's practical sociologists referring "to those aspects of personal repertoire that form the basis for a person's confidence in her place, rights, and possibilities in the world" [7]. Such was the case

with this research. The third author, an employee of the large Croatian pharmaceutical company and at the same time the PhD student of industrial engineering at University of Zagreb put the idea of research on the relationship between company's maintenance and operations departments.

One of the more important reasons for contests and misunderstandings between departments of maintenance and operations stems from their different focuses of action [8-11]. Operation is focused on production maximisation, it wants equipment to be in use all the time and without deadlocks. On the other side, maintenance evaluates preservation of equipment as the most important issue. In essence, their conflict is mediated by sense of responsibility for what they do, i.e., by the need to do the job the best way. However, maintenance has to switch off the equipment to perform inspections or repairs, but this makes production to face stopping the production. In essence, they need each other - if there is no production, then there would be no need for maintenance, and, vice versa, without maintenance it is hard to assume that there will be production at all [11].

One problem is enshrined also in inclinations of the both departments to comprehend their relations in terms of customer and service provider [11]. On that basis, emotionally dyed relations arise, suggesting that operations as a client asks for a service from maintenance. Maintenance, then, responds and concentrate on demand, and, by consequence, ignores the fact that, at the same time, there are other, maybe more important problems to be solved. In other words, it responds to what the client is looking for. Indirectly, this pattern generates communication problems with possibilities for subsequent mutual incriminations [11].

Idhammar suggests that development of better relationships has to start "from above", from management [11]. However, Idhammar does not specify at which levels of hierarchical organisational structure such an activity should be conducted. Generally it is believed that open and clear indications on the importance and value of both departments could discourage their mutual undermining, for continuous mutual objections coupled with bad stance on each other do not contribute to work conditions, but to the contrary, generate bad feelings [11].

Suggestions for improvement and better coordination of two departments include several measures. First, it is assumed that it would be helpful for people from operation to be at least partly included in some basic checks and maintenance for it would improve communication and relations between departments. It is expected a basic agreement could be achieved with regard to work priorities. At the same time, a basis for reasonable expectations from both sides could be established. Also, it is suggested that organisation of meetings on regular basis for discussion of working plans and possible complicities would represent the first step to realisation of production goals. For example, at these meetings it is possible to plan schedules of equipment to be switched off with additional benefit in highlighting the value of good communication. Finally, the entire process of mutual alignment involves significant responsibility and the role of departments' managers who have to actively work on improvement of these relations [11].

Many of the previously mentioned interdepartmental relations were indicated as initial idea for the present study. Therefore, our starting research question has focused on possibillity to consider whether the members of maintenance and operations sector in one Croatian pharmaceutical company develop relatively coherent images on each other and thus participate in the process of determining their mutual relations which reflect a number of problematic patterns considered in organisation studies as well as in social psychological literature related to inter groups relations. In other words, our primary research intention was inspired by Martin's observation [12] that existence of coherent and relatively firmly framed group (self)conceptions as a driving element in social categorisations of other groups and as a general framework in shaping relations with them represent empirical, but not theoretical question.

Secondly, we tried to discern what options to overcome existing problems in their relationships the members of maintenance and operations sector consider as relevant and promising. As it is evident in aforementioned literature review which is stemming more from professional engineering practice than from extended research, much of corresponding considerations has moved toward classical social psychological explanations which emphasize possibilities to apply some intra-organisational actions in terms of developing contextual elements for eventual unifying superordinate goals [13]; reframing categorical boundaries [13]; and reducing intergroup prejudices through implementation of contact-hypothesis model [13].

2. METHODOLOGY

Present study is based on analysis of qualitative data gathered from focus groups discussions in order to discern constructed meanings which could mediate intergroup relations between members of maintenance and operations departments in one Croatian pharmaceutical company. Methodologically, focus groups discussions were chosen for the reason of its interpersonally stimulating character and the possibility for more spontaneous responses and different points of view to be discussed with regard to identified problems and corresponding solutions offered by participants [14]. Furthermore, presented expressions (or, situated social constructions) are part of already established everyday interactions in the company - they are relational and socially contextualized [15]. Additionally, as well as other qualitative research techniques, focus groups allow for themes unanticipated by the researcher and the script to arise.

Research was carried out during autumn 2017. Focus groups were followed by field observations which included several visits of the company, i.e., its new production lines where members of maintenance and operations sector spend most of their activities. The first two one-day observations represented the first author's elementary acquaintance with life and work in the facility. Also, along with discussions with the second and the third author and through the review of corresponding literature, these observations were the basis for developing a focus group script. A total of 3 focus groups were held, one with the members of maintenance sector, and two with members of operations. The two focus groups involved 7 participants each, whereas remaining group consisted of 8 participants. All participants from maintenance were male, with women came as employees/participants only with operations. Discussions lasted from 45 minutes to 1 hour. The subsequent observations included occasional and spontaneous conversations with persons who already participated in focus groups discussions. All participants joined the discussions voluntarily. At the inception they were informed of the research character with elaboration on anonymity of their participation.

A total number of four field activities represent also the key limitation of the present study. That way, possibilities for deeper ethnographic insight and for more comprehensive research with better empirically grounded material were excluded. However, obtained findings contain elements for the more elaborate sociological considerations on organisational aspects of production engineering and represent the epistemological basis for the future research.

Discussions were transcribed and analysed through two steps of coding [16], where initial codes were made through open coding which was followed by their grouping into several categories which allowed a couple of general themes to emerge.

3. THE SETTING

Manufacturing facility is extended on three floors of the building at the periphery of the town. Manufacturing process is organized linearly starting with the rooms for the mixture preparation, through the rooms for granulating, to rooms for packaging of finished medicines and other products. The feature those rooms have in common is possible to discern in the isolation of one from another. These rooms are relatively small with one or a couple quite impressive devices where a few operators work at the control panels. In some rooms there were not any operators for the moment, although devices were working. It was said to the researcher that the isolation is result of the safety, and the overview of the situation in the rooms from the hallway is enabled by glass. All rooms are connected by the hallway. Despite its evident function, it seems the hallway even more brings to the fore the isolation between the rooms including operators working there, and maybe the difficulties in their direct communication.

Everything is literally sterile. Moving from the dressing room to the hallway of the manufacturing facility and to the rooms with the machines and the operators takes place through small quasi chambers in which the pressure from different rooms is equalized. In the manufacturing facility, the doors for entering the rooms from the hallway must be permanently closed, i.e., it can be opened only for the passage.

On one door, previously e-mailed but later printed manager's message is pinned warning of the bad practice of leaving the door open behind personnel who used it. Obviously, the safety of production is the main reason for this kind of space organization. It is possible to assume that this prevents spontaneous circulation of people and their spontaneous interactions. In fact, the feeling of separation between the rooms prevails - people move through the hallway according to their needs, unfrequently, with unpredictable prospects to meet someone else. It's very quiet, no machines or people are heard.

4. FINDINGS

Initial coding allowed for development of several categories which stressed vertical integration, workload, intergenerational knowledge transfer, specialized knowledge, responsibility etc. In this section we present findings related, first, to the issue of social identity and categorisation as a possible obstacle in relations between maintenance and operation departments, and second, to expressed possibilities to overcome existing interdepartmental problems.

4.1. The images of each other

Generally, in all focus groups discussions it was possible to see mixed expressions on members of other department. Verbally and nonverbally, any possibility to generalise on other group was not only relativized, but also explicitly neglected, with understanding of the other group's real difficulties. At the same time, generalisations as a kind of categorisations were implied through expressions from more negative than positive work experiences, and through conceptions on the maintenance's and operations' separated areas of action. During the focus groups discussions mixed constructions were dominant, simultaneously imbued with dissatisfaction and understanding; were shared among most of the participants in all focus groups; and from time to time were verbalized by one and the same participant.

"We do not perceive them in general, everyone is individual in himself ... Every maintenance operator approach his task, job, name it as you like, in his own way ... There are extremely conscientious operators, more capable, and there are operators less interested in job, and without knowledge ... So, everything has to be analysed from person to person ... If you know what I mean, who is in your shift ... This one ... Then I find it a little easier ..."

"Yet, perhaps we do perceive them as service providers, but, I think, they don't really perceive us as a clients, but more as nuisance ..."

The last comment was followed by laugh as a sign of approval from other members of operations.

"In their and in our interest it would be the best that we do not need them at all ... If they, by an prevention and ordinarily maintenance, would succeed to sort our machines and equipment to function all the time we need ... This would be ideal, for us and for them ..."

However, customer-and-service-provider type of relationship seems to be more internalised among the members of maintenance department, partly experienced as a label expressed by operations department, partly as internally elaborated conception of company' entire organisation.

"For several times we got indications that we are service sector ... From production manager ... I think, it is not universal notion, it depends from person to person ... A lot of people here in the company think that everything is our common interest ... But, when the problems arise, then the border between someone's jurisdiction and tasks crystalizes very, very quickly .. And then, you very quickly get in position that you are service provider, and have to work it off ..."

"As regards maintenance, the most important is to make production to continue ... Availability of equipment ... And production, it has to produce ... It seems silly, but, that's the way it is ... They have to produce for other sector to sale, and we have to maintain machines for production to be able to produce ..."

On the other side, customer-and-service-provider type of relationship was manifestly disputed as appropriate lens for viewing the character of interdepartmental relations in discussions with members of operations, but implicitly it was implied as a recurring expression in understanding of boundaries of a group area of work and corresponding actions and duties.

"We are to ... Maybe not to bestir ... But to show more engagement, so the malfunction to be repaired as soon as possible ... But, again, we should not do it ... O.K., we are the users of equipment, it is correct, and we have maintenance at disposal to solve problem promptly for us ... For we can continue with production ..."

It seems that in-and-out group categorisations are not pre-established and do not necessarily emerge as a feature solely inherent to a group membership. In a way, this observation has been supported by one member of maintenance department significantly less active in focus groups discussion. When carefully asked to take

more part in conversations he said he had no firmly established conceptions on departments' relations or any specific groups' features since he was employed in company relatively recently. This supports the assumption that categorisations and social identity progressively emerge through the problems which stem from groups' practice and are determined by daily job demands. While some authors mentioned in introduction [11] interpret relatively conflict oriented relations in terms of the departments' different focuses, social psychologists refer to the concept of different and relatively exclusive groups' interests [13]. In other words, when intergroup attitudes and behaviour are conflicting, then interests of someone own group would be promoted through competitive orientation towards the members of other group extending to generating prejudices and hostile behaviour. In essence, both Idhammar and Brown refer to the same phenomenon's situational and contingent character.

Also, "different voices heard" in focus groups discussions, particularly as regards understanding other group work difficulties, overload, too small number of employees or insistence on the need to differentiate other group's members individually, are consistent with the concept of categorical differentiation where it is suggested that real differences between groups often seem to be exaggerated [13].

However, focus groups discussions generally pointed to a kind of dissatisfaction with existing relations as a base for generalisations which tended to be established "in process". An illustration of this "process" had imposed by itself when one of operation technologist (which joined focus groups discussion earlier, together with his colleagues from operation department) entered the room and interrupted focus group discussion with the members of maintenance department. The way he approached to the room maintenance technologists have considered intrusive, as a sign of disrespect and superiority. He didn't show any sign if he may be bothering because he knew that the talk had been fully confidential and themed by the sector he is coming from. He rushed in, sat down and started the conversation with one of the maintenance managers who was sitting by the computer and was part of the group conversation. He started his talk which seemed to take some time and wasn't just a short information passing. Maintenance technologists have looked confused and resigned, signalling nonverbally that they have seen this kind of behaviour before, that this was something they are well aware of. They recommended to break the conversation shortly and to move to another room. The first theme they wanted to continue with reflected a need to comment this situation with the researcher. One of them said:

"That's the story from the beginning ... Service sector ... I mean, O.K., he didn't know, he came in, but he had to apologize and to go out".

Other technologist added:

"This situation we just saw, this is the normal behaviour of operation technologists ... We always ... Like we retreat ... In a way, operation must take place, in any way, and we have to adapt ... If we were firmer, if we, for example, send away this person who just ran into, then we would be the ones who are criticized for inappropriate behaviour".

4.2. Suggested improvements

As regards possibilities for improvement of relations between maintenance and operation departments, the literature mentioned in the introduction section [8-11] suggests measures that can be summarized mostly in terms of better interdepartmental communications. Since communications are otherwise well researched topic often considered as an element that maintains and sustains intra-organisational relationships [3], it is understandable that this subject theme have emerged as important in focus groups discussions on possible improvements in relations between maintenance and operation, along with other relatively sporadically mentioned issues such as education, equipment duration, work ethics etc. However, another topic, namely overload of maintenance department's members, also emerged as an important corresponding factor.

Basically, everyday interaction between these departments is intensive, highly frequent and determined by the need to immediately solve an unpredictable or unanticipated problem. Therefore, both departments should act in coordination, weight problems in similar way and raise relatively common images on problems' nature or on deadlock's duration. Communications are one of the crucial elements in that process. For example,

"The one who works at the machine can call maintenance directly ... It takes time for them to come, they have to follow these dress procedures ... They have to pass one or two dressing rooms ... It doesn't

take a lot of time, some fifteen minutes ... But, it happens when technician come he has no appropriate tools, so then go back ... It depends on person, who calls, who answers, is he already introduced to that particular machine and malfunction ... And, he can not know 100% what tools he exactly need, you have firstly to see what is the malfunction, he can not bring spare parts in advance, and only then look what is the matter ..."

"Let's say, one hole on thermoformer doesn't work correctly ... We have to see why ... It means, for it is complicated process, we loose there maybe six to seven shifts, so two days three shifts each, to determine our forming station doesn't work well ... If we have no such stations on stock, in cooperation with operation we should coordinate if we proceed that way with some other parameters, in a sense to raise temperature above standard value, but, at the same time, to be sure that the process of welding blister cards will be O.K. ... So, we need to coordinate this with others, with operation, with quality assurance sector, etc. And it has to be until the station is repaired ..."

Since malfunctions and deadlocks happen on daily basis, communications are often mediated by discontent and impatience as the fertile grounds for emotionally based reactions and blaming each other. Participants recognized this very well, and for that reason they turned to the communication as the important functional matter with its meaning expanded to be important for their mutual relations in general.

No statement was established with indifference to or against a number of possible organisational steps toward better communication suggested in discussions. On the contrary, it looked like as an urgent need expressed mostly through suggestions for regular meetings, and through reminding of a couple previous short lasting attempts in this direction. And again, the contradictory constructions with regard to differentiation of individual and group communicating features as well as to recognition of communications as an area of stereotyping and at the same time the means for overcoming intergroup troubled relations have been shown.

Finally, a concrete subject matter with regard to improvements of relations between two departments, usually uncovered in professional articles on this subject matter, have arisen in discussions - insufficient number of employees within the maintenance department. The members of both groups explicitly referred to the need for more maintenance technicians and technologists. It was recognized in both groups not only through emphasis of maintenance sector members' hard working conditions and overload, but was also indicated in terms of barrier to better coordination, problem solving, and in terms of reason for time consuming nature of repairs, and even for poor communication and mutual misunderstanding.

"Considering that too few of them are at the department, they are forced to repair every machine ... There could be more of them, and, I think, they would work it off much better ... Because, for example, while he repair the machine, other operator calls him for an failure has happened at another machine ... Look, he can not be at the same time at two places ... And, definitively there is too few of them ..."

"Yes, our communication could be better, but, for beginning, employ more people ... Who has the licence to do that, we don't know ... But, employ more people and evenly unburden existing people ..."

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Since sociological approaches to subcultures usually refer to groups of people who share a common problem, interest or practice and differentiate themselves from other social groups [17] it could be said that the same goes for the members of maintenance and operation department. Their "central preoccupations" are mostly the product of the principles of a given organisational design which functionally clustered them into independent but mutually strongly related departments [18]. The present research has shown that the members of these two departments raise more intensive in-group interaction and communication, different work focuses and differentiated definitions of problems to be solved. However, their interaction on daily basis is frequent, intensive and cross-cutting; it is simultaneously introducing perspectives of mutual separation and interdependence. It was continuously confirming in focus groups discussions where explicit dismissing of generalising or stereotyping notions on other group was followed by predominant expression of work problems through differentiations between "us" and "them". Therefore, subcultural influences could be introduced mostly in terms of "soft determinism".

Additionally, the members of both departments expressed understanding for other group's work difficulties and problems along with strongly indicated need for a more intensive regular and informal interdepartmental communications which were meaningfully constructed as the means for improved coordination of work and corresponding relationships. As regards the issue of interdepartmental communications, it is evident that it is basically "considered to be simply one of the many factors involved in organizing" [19] coinciding that way with recommendations from related professional literature [8-11]. On the other hand, constructed meaning with regard to the issue of communications expressed in focus groups discussions allow for transcending communications as a something that represent the pre-established reality, toward realisation of communications as "ongoing and precarious accomplishments realized, experienced, and identified primarily - if not exclusively - in communication processes" [19].

Finally, as usually overlooked in professional literature [8-11] the issue of organisational structure and politics emerge as important for contingent character of interdepartmental relations. Without exception, all participants pointed to the need for change in company's employment politics, i.e., for more employees in maintenance department. It was seen as one of important ways for overcoming various predominantly functional difficulties in relations between these two departments.

6. REFERENCES

- [1] Trice, H. M.: *Occupational Subcultures in the Workplace*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1993.
- [2] Schein, E. H.: *Culture: The Missing Concept in Organization Studies*, Administrative Science Quarterly, 41(1996)2, 229-240.
- [3] Kitchin, D.: *An Introduction to Organisational Behaviour for Managers and Engineers: A Group and Multicultural Approach*, Elsevier, 2010.
- [4] Alvesson, M.: *Understanding Organisational Culture*, London, Sage, 2005.
- [5] Bloor, G., Dawson, P.: *Understanding Professional Culture in Organisational Context*, Organisation Studies, 15(1994)2, 275-295.
- [6] Bailey, D. E., Barley, S. R.: *Return to work: Toward post-industrial engineering*, IIE Transactions, 37(2005), 737-752.
- [7] Lemert, C.: *Social Things: An Introduction to the Sociological Life*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012.
- [8] Alsyouf, I.: *The role of maintenance in improving companies' productivity and profitability*, Int. J. Production Economics, 105(2007), 70-78.
- [9] *Service with the Smile*, Works Management 68(2015)10, 35-36.
- [10] Levery, M.: *Motivating Maintenance Craftsmen. Do We Know What We're Doing?* Engineering Management, 15(2005)3, 16-19.
- [11] Idhammar, C.: *Operations + Maintenance = Production*, Pulp and Paper, 75(2001)2, 29.
- [12] Martin, J.: *Organizational Culture: Mapping the Terrain*, Sage, London, 2002.
- [13] Brown, R.: *Group Processes - Dynamics Within and Between Groups*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2000.
- [14] Onwuegbuzie, J. A., Dickinson, W. B., Leech, N. L., Zoran, A. G.: *A Qualitative Framework for Collecting and Analyzing Data in Focus Group Research*. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 8(2009)3, 1-21.
- [15] Ross, A., Puzić, S., Doolan, K.: *Balkan and European? Place Identifications of Young People in Croatia*, Revija za sociologiju 47(2017)2, 125-150.
- [16] Strauss, A., Corbin, J.: *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 1998.
- [17] Gelder, K., Thornton, S.: *The Subcultures Reader*, Routledge, London, 1997.
- [18] Smith, V. (ed.): *Sociology of Work. An Encyclopedia*, Sage, London, 2013.
- [19] Cooren, F., Kuhn, T., Cornelissen, J. P., Clark, T.: *Communication, Organizing and Organization: An Overview and Introduction to the Special Issue*, Organization Studies 32(2011)9, 1149-1170.