Organisational Culture in Representative Institutions of an European Capital

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Abstract: - The paper aims to detect the cultural dimensions of some representative institutions from the city of Sibiu, Romania, in the context in which in 2007 this city was declared European Capital of Culture. For this, it was started from the analysis of the organisational culture of the Engineering Faculty of the „Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu and then there were analyses dimensions resulted from the research of the organisational culture of the National College "Samuel von Brukenthal" of Sibiu, of the Court of Law and of the Sibiu City Hall. By determining them, it is easy to understand which are the favourising factors for the local community, which need to be taken into account when initiating large-scale projects.

Key-Words: - Education, organisational culture, cultural dimensions, public institutions, engineering faculty

1 Introduction

Sibiu, a city located in the "heart" of Romania, was declared in 2007 European Capital of Culture, together with Luxemburg. It was probably not by chance, not anyhow, not at a random point in time, but in the year when Romania joined the family of the European Union.

The greatness of cities is built through the industriousness of its citizen. The resistance to time and to foes comes to give them nobility and fame. Many of them, after a glorious past, fall into ruin and often they are forgotten. Others still are struggling to live on and to create new destinies for themselves. Among the latter is also Sibiu.

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A historical citadel, more than 800 years "young", Sibiu is both a city of the past, a city of the present, but especially a city of the future, through the more than 30,000 students that return in each autumn in the universities. This made it possible that, through the preoccupations connected to these students, an interest for this paper was born. In the wish to know wherefrom we start, towards which horizons we are headed and how we live in today's world, organisational culture studies were initiated and applied to four institutions from Sibiu: the Engineering Faculty of the „Lucian Blaga” University, a university whose roots can be traced to the 18th century, the National College „Samuel Von Brukenthal”, a reference highschool that recently celebrated 625 years since its founding, the Sibiu Court of Law, and the City Hall of Sibiu, the soul of this ever young city.

There are three forces influencing the quality of labor and determining its results in an institution: the organisational culture, the leadership and power. Our study is focused on the first element, on the culture.

Organisational culture represents an important concept that significantly influences the thinking and action manner of researches, professors and students, of managers, of specialists from various
organisations, from all areas of the world. This interest grew exponentially, as a consequence of pressures coming from within and from outside the organisations, pressures that required a better knowledge and an increase in competitiveness of the organisations and their components in order to be able to survive and develop under the new conditions.

The development of the organisational culture concept was favourised also by the major reconsidering of the human resource's role in the organisation's evolution.

The senses of the notion are still vividly debated. The term “culture” comes from anthropology. It was used to represent in a very wide sense the physical and spiritual elements that a certain human collectivity passed on from one generation to the other. Thus, for Hofstede [4], culture is a collective phenomenon, as it is accepted at least partially by the people who live or lived in the same social environment where the collective programming of thinking was learned, that differentiates the members of one group from another. By culture, Hofstede understands the organisation's mental software. According to Edgar Schein [5], the culture focuses some elements: behavioural rules, norms developed within groups, dominant values of the organisation, the organisational policy's philosophy, the spirit and climate that characterised the organisation in the inner environment and in relationship with the outside world. Edward Sapir considers that there exist three senses of the culture concept:

- the technical sense, targeting the unifying of all human elements (the culture co-extensive to humans, a term identical to that of civilisation);
- culture as a personality ideal, with regard to training and education;
- culture in the sense of spirit or genius of a people.

The importance of studying organisational culture is given by the practical valences presented by this instrument, which is more and more employed in the enhancement of the organisation's performances. Through diagnosing the culture's components and dimensions, a radiograph of human behaviour within the organisation can be realised and the organisation's qualities that are relevant for its proper functioning can be emphasised.

In order to be able to determine the impact of organisational culture, it is very suggestive to use the representation of the organisation's key elements realised by Dr. Johnson Edosomwan [6], figure 1.

The Edosomwan model consists of four circles that present the organisation's key systems: managerial, social, technical and behavioural systems, gravitating around the fifth circle, that of the desired organisational changes. The model's conclusion is that all four systems are in close connection and react one function of the others. Together, they hold the key to the organisation's evolution. Regardless of the transformation, adjustment or any other improvement to the organisation, the success and effectiveness of this effort will depend on the way in which the systems interact, on the culture's impact.

Of the four systems, the managerial one has the largest power and influence on the other three systems. The organisational culture and the change which the management desires to realise are influenced by a cause-effect relationship. This means that the management's vigilence in monitoring and interpreting the organisation's behaviour are essential for creating and maintaining a positive and productive organisational culture.

Fig. 1. The Edosomwan model of organisational and process transformations
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It can be affirmed that management leads the culture, and culture leads the behaviour. A successful organisational culture is more than a management technique. It is not simply an instrument or an immediate solution, but rather a way of life.

As managers and subordinates of an organisation, we need to struggle to get to "the same wavelength", for the organisation's well-being. The adoption of the common goal is the factor leading to a successful organisational culture. But in order to achieve this, it is essential to decipher culture, to know it in-depth and to understand the mechanisms directing it.

Therefore, the present study aims to discover which are the cultural elements and dimensions in a few institutions from Sibiu, in order to determine whether there exist elements pertaining to the local specifics and whether common action lines can be foreseen for all four institutions and, why not, for the local community.

The actual research on the organisational culture of the analyses institutions employed the case studying as qualitative investigation method. Within it, following methods were used:
- The direct observation of the organisational environment and of the partners' behaviour;
- Questionnaires applied to the four institutions;
- Analysis of documents and reports related to the institution's current activity.

2. Dimensions of organisational culture

The coordinates of the research on the organisational culture were defined by means of the concepts introduced by the Dutch specialist Geert Hofstede. Based on this, four cultural dimensions were analysed:

a. Distance towards power: this dimension indicates the manner in which power inequalities are perceived within society and within the organisation. It shows the extent to which the personnel expects and accepts the power to be inequally distributed. A large distance towards power shows the predominance and the preference for authoritarian management styles, the managers’ opinions being listened to in a noncritical manner, just based on the formal authority with which these are invested. By determining this dimension, information can be obtained on the dependence relationships within an institution.

In public institutions, distance is proportional to the authority centralisation degree and to the autocratic level of the management.

Thus, for example within the Faculty of Engineering, we can talk about a large distance towards power [1]. Specific for this situation are the delegation of tasks, but not also of competences and responsibilities to the faculty members. The communication process is dominated by formal aspects, there being only relatively rare informal discussions between managers and subordinates. Often, the managers show their status and their authority either through their office’s layout and endowment.

This result would have to be put in direct relationship with the one achieved by Romania, in a ranking of countries according to their distance towards power. It can be noticed that the current study’s results coincide with the one realised by Hofstede for the countries [4]. This index’ value can be explained also by the relatively short distance in time to the communist, totalitarian type of society that Romania had abandoned in 1989.

For the other studied institutions, from the questionnaire’s analysis there resulted a small distance towards power, emphasising a limited dependence of subordinates towards the managers, which might indicate the preference for consultations. The explanation could be in the professional training of the interviewees, which requires a high educational level. The subordinates and the managers consider each other as existentially equal, while the hierarchical system is determined conventionally, indicated the possibility that roles might change: the one who today is my subordinate, could be my superior tomorrow. Another cause might be the relatively small number of hierarchical levels, as well as the limited number of supervision personnel. In an organisation, hierarchy represents a conventionally determined inequality of roles. There is a relatively small variation of salaries for activities unfolded by managers from the organisation’s top and base levels.

The advantages for those in higher positions are not offensive to the others: everyone has to use the same parking lots, toilets etc. It is expected that subordinates be asked before an important decision, that might affect their work, is made, but they accept
that their boss decides in the end. Managers have to be accessible to their subordinates and the ideal superior is the resourceful democrat, which as a consequence is well-respected.

b. Individualism-collectivism: refers to the predominance of individual interests over the group interests, or of the group interests over the individual ones. Again, the questionnaires applied to the Faculty of Engineering showed a differentiation, in the sense of a strong individualism. This dimension’s interpretation can start from the fact that the links between faculty members are relatively weak in intensity and are manifested in small group, in the informal sphere. The research emphasise the fact that the activity’s participative dimension is rather reduced, that administrative decisions are of the exclusive competence of managers, while the subordinates have to execute them and are involved in analyses and debates only if their direct superiors consider such an intervention as necessary. Usually, the superiors request information and make the decisions on their own.

The personnel employed within an individualistic culture, such as the one of the Faculty of Engineering, is expected to act according to its own interest, while the work has to be organised so that the personal interest and the organisation’s interest coincide. It is assumed that faculty members act as “economic people” or as people with a combination of economic and psychological needs, but in any case as people with their own needs.

Individualism is specific to the conflictual cultures, characterised by a strong dynamism at the level of mentalities, dominated by the valorisation of differences, contradictions and controversies, to the benefit of development. From this point of view, the engineering organisation satisfies the needs of change and development, due to the fact that it views the conflict as a process that stimulates individual performances.

For the other three organisations studied, the research has emphasised a strong tendency towards collectivism, characterised by the fact that the employment process in a collectivistic society always takes into account the common interests subgroup. A person from the same subgroup employed in the organisation will be interested in its reputation and will help in the correction of a misbehaviour of another “family” member. The workplace itself can become a common interests subgroup, in the emotional sense of this word. The manager-subordinate relationship is seen in moral terms and resembles a family relationship with mutual protection obligations in exchange for loyalty. In such a society, the weak performance of an employee are no reason for his firing and the open discussion of a person’s performance with this person itself is in striking difference to the society’s harmony norm and can be felt by the subordinate as an unacceptable loss of his/her prestige. In the people’s minds there is deeply embedded the difference between “our group” and the “other groups” and it is considered normal and ethical to treat friends better than the others. Sociologists call this manner of thinking particularism.

This dimension is in contradiction with the one existing at national level. Romanians are characterised by individualism (which may go up to anarchy), but also by the lack of appetite for private initiative. Their sense of solidarity, specific for collectivism, is a mechanical one, which does not start from conscientised moral convictions, but rather from a forced intervention from outside. The difference between national dimension and the one existing in most of the studied dimensions starts from the education and training level of the analysed groups, differing from most of those who compose the common population segment.

c. Masculinity-femininity: this dimension refers to the higher value of arrogance within masculine cultures or, to the contrary, to sensitivity and modesty in feminine cultures.

The traits identified as being specific for masculine cultures are: a strong wish to have opportunities for big gains; need for acknowledgement, when outstanding results are achieved; the wish to have opportunities to advance towards a better position; competitive spirit and need for a stimulative activity; need for order and rigour. This is found to be the case in the Faculty of Engineering.

If this dimension is analysed for poorer countries, it confirms the rule according to which in poorer societies the boys are given priority in education and training. Also, in masculine type societies, women teach especially small children, while men teach in universities. Men are invested with more important, more dominant roles, while women are oriented towards services or care. In a masculine society, social, traditionally masculine values impregnate the whole society, even the women’s mentalities. The public hero is and has to be a “superman”.

Of course, the first conclusion that can be drawn is that in Romanian culture, and not only, the engineering profession is one belonging predominantly to men. Similarly, the researches carried out at the city hall and at the court of law display a strong masculinity. This can be interpreted by the fact that dominant values in society are material success and prosperity.
With regard to the high school, researches emphasised a strong feminine culture. The traits identified as being specific for feminine cultures are: the need for good relationships at the workplace, especially with the direct superior; the wish to work with people with which you get along well; the valuing of workplace safety, preference for the mainenance, for an indefinite duration, of the current workplace; solving of conflicts in school is done through compromise and negotiation; feminine cultures have a relative advantage in the area of services, while masculine cultures excel in industrial branches; managers use intuition and search for consensus; there exists the opinion that the weak and needy must be helped; a relatively high number of women are accepted as managers.

When analysing this dimension, it is noticed that the result is superposed over the one achieved at national level in Romania. In the first researches carried out at national level, the culture was a feminine one. The socialist period had encouraged this dimension, through the fact that it favoured workplace safety over economic efficiency of organisations, thus encouraging “paternalism”. In the last few years, however, it was noticed an increase of masculinity levels also at national level, because more and more individuals are categorically opposed to the artificial preservation of workplaces.

d. Avoidance of uncertainty: the degree of avoiding uncertainty indicates the manner in which the members of a culture feel threatened by unclear or unknown situations. This feeling is expressed through a negative stress and a need for the predictable, materialised in a need for clear, written rules.

Usually, the avoidance of uncertainty (i.e. safety) can be achieved in three ways:
- through technology, which protects us from the risks induced by the forces of nature. At the level of a technical school or university, it would be expectable that profession comprises also a certain degree of safety;
- through laws and a multitude of regulations, which protect against the unforeseen of human behaviour. However, it should be noted that the proliferation of laws and regulations marks an increased intolerance towards behaviours and life opinions.
- through religion and science Religion helps us to accept the daily uncertainty in offering the possibility to interpret the daily life in the context of an all-encompassing and almighty dimension which transcended the personal reality.

In societies with a high degree of uncertainty avoidance (such as is the Romanian society in general and the Faculty of Engineering in particular), religion claims its absolute truth and generally doesn’t tolerate other cult types. Also, in these societies we encounter scientific traditions that target supreme, absolute truths, in contrast to the traditions of more relativistic, more empirical societies in which the uncertainty avoidance index is lower.

In cultures where uncertainty avoidance is high, the need for rules is extremely high, it is even emotional. Internal rules and regulations are needed for the control of all processes, although distance towards power might also play a role here. If this distance is large, as is the case in the Faculty of Engineering, the exercising of the managers’ authority might replace, to a certain degree, the need for internal rules.

The other studies organisations showed a low need for uncertainty avoidance. This can be due to the fact that two of the analysed institutions (the court of law and the city hall) have a strong bureaucratic component, manifested through a legislation undergoing significant changes, which determines in the collectives a continuous mobility in view of the modernisation and efficientisation of activity within the institutions. Thus, the segment of magistrates displayed a low tendency towards uncertainty avoidance, which could be interpreted in that uncertainty is a normal aspect of life and we expect it to appear every day. Thus, there have to be no more rules than the strictly needed amount, while time is a means of orientation, precision and punctuality having to be learned. If the rules cannot be respected, they have to be changed. Human rights are respected and nobody should be criticised for his/her faith.

The personnel from the magistrates' area leaves the impression of being calm, quiet, controlled. There is a weaker endowment with the sense of emergency and therefore there exists a broader acceptance of the lower speed limit. Not only common risks are accepted, but also uncommon ones, such as the engagement in activities for which there are no rules. The scientific adversaries may be friends in private.

With regard to the highschool, there exist an emotional rejection of protocolar rules. Rules are set only in cases of absolute necessity, but once set, the rules are observed. People from cultures with a low degree of uncertainty like to relax, time being a framework within which one can orientate himself/herself. In such a culture there exists also a tolerance towards the ideas and behaviour that deviate or are innovative, as well as a weak stress state, because uncertainty is a normal aspect of life and is expected to appear every day.
It is interesting to note that at the national level too, the avoidance of uncertainty is small, which is due to the fact that the Romanian people is a fatalistic people. Also, even the Christian Orthodox faith practices more the outer signs of faith, the observance of norms, rites, which leads to a low uncertainty avoidance.

3. Conclusions

It can be thus remarked that there are differences at the level of the analysed institutions, which are mainly due to the education of the studied persons. Thus, the technics-oriented personnel (from the Faculty of Engineering) as well as the magistrates and the public servants are characterised by a higher educational rigour, their ego and the personal and professional success being a barometer of the organisation's health.

However, the collectivistic dimension of magistrates and public servants is surprising. It points to a very large grouping of common interests and goals, which, if they are directed on a line of value and morality, benefit the institution and society as a whole. For the professors from the pre-university education system, the collectivistic dimension is no surprise, as it complements very well the organisation's femininity, emphasised also through the fact that most teachers/professors at the pre-university level are women.

With regard to the distance towards power, it can be seen that only the engineers maintain subordination accents, a fact which comes from their speciality training, which implies the existence of authority in order for the things to go on normally. They are also the ones who, using algorithmised structures, grant a special importance to algorithmisation also in real life, requiring that the activity unfold in a strictly determined framework, thus preventing errors caused by non-directing.

Analysing globally the studied organisations, it can be seen that there are a few traits that define the society of Sibiu. Thus, the distance towards power suggests the idea of a participative management, in which employees are involved in managerial initiatives, but also in achieving the proposed goals. The collectivistic dimension indicates the common target of employees, namely the public welfare, welfare for all those involved in the community of Sibiu. The alternance of masculine and feminine must be understood in the sense of the desire for affirmation and progress, of the competitive spirit and of the need for acknowledgement of the results achieved even by team work. Also, within the analysed organisations, we can talk about the value assigned to job security, about the need to have good relationships at the workplace, as well as about the rigour and promptitude of the employees.

With regard to the small need of avoiding uncertainty, it can be related to the legislation that is in a permanent change, to the mobility requested of the organisations for accepting institutional changes and modernisations, as well as wil those demanded by the efficientising of the activity.

All these arguments allow us to assert that they were also the base which allowed the acceptance of the challenge to organise, in 2007 in the city of Sibiu the events related to a European Capital of Culture.

The radiographing of the culture existing in some of the most representative institutions of the city of Sibiu, there can be later determined strategic targets for development at the level of the local community, starting from the idea that the most important desiderate is the maintaining of the medieval identity and, at the same time, the provision of an economic and social development in agreement with the demands of today's society.

Or, in other words, by looking into the past we need to open new bridges towards the future.

References: