

HUMAN RELATIONS – DOWN BY RESTRICTIVE LANGUAGE INSIDE ORGANIZATION

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Abstract: The specific vocabulary related to the profession and to the work environment tends to restrict the informal, normal relationship, the human touch. Related to fewer opportunities to interconnect, more time necessary for the completion of the ever bigger tasks, more pressure of deadlines coming closer and sooner, this language limitation leads to less contact between people, dehumanisation of the work place and crises on the social and emotional level. Are there any methods of gaining back the lost winning formula of friendship and proper team work?

THE LANGUAGE OF THE OFFICE

“Organizations position internal communications under the human resource department is the thinking that HR department has the best understanding of what the community inside an organization needs and wants” [7], but the department specified deals more with improving the way information spreads and is disseminated on the horizontal and, maybe more carefully, on the vertical channel. There is one particular aspect they rather neglect: the deterioration of human relationships inside companies as a result of a too formalized language rendering in time a sense of distance.

A specific language may be noticed in all fields of activity, meeting the needs of the particular domain and the process performed in the particular company. Reference to the given job, the work to do, is obvious, still extensive and prolonged use of the same formula ends up in equalling limitation. The vocabulary related to the profession, to the field of a certain expertise is, after all, if vital and implicit in the particular domain and related work place, a limited one, involving only impersonal matters and work related discussions. “A critical feature of a firm is its internal language that facilitates communication among its managers. Firms will vary in the richness of their languages. A language summarizes informal work routines, convenient technical jargons and a vocabulary of patterns remembered from past experiences. The language is private to the firm and its terms cannot be easily codified or conveyed without a significant investment of time on the part of a manager. Firms with richer languages will enjoy better communication amongst their managers, which will lead to increased production”. [1]

Of course, different jobs face a more or less extensive need of using lexical elements, notions and terms in connection with the field of activity. In business, in law firms, in IT companies, in healthcare service the language tends to be more and more professionalized and restrictive, the volume of work bigger and bigger, so the use of this conventional discourse overwhelms any attempt of informal conversation. When it occurs, it is rather commonplace small-talk or trivial dialogue on weather that day or, in the best case, about family. Yet, sometimes, this is hold just for the sake of exchanging a few words on ‘personal matters’, perhaps not even knowing anything about the members of that family, and maybe not really expecting or hearing the answer given –

supposing the latter is more than an evasively formal one. What connection can anyone claim to have established by a dialogue near the coffee machine, going somehow of the type “Hello, nice day today, isn’t it?” / “Yes, indeed.”; “How are your family?” / “Fine, thank you”. “Executives in ... high-performing companies believe that rationality and analytical rigour are crucial. But they also understand that the soft bonds that bridge boundaries with empathy, mutual understanding, and trust need something else. Intimate exchanges are the foundation for building such deep, trusting relationships. This is particularly crucial when the relationship is being built across the company boundaries.”[2, p.213]

One of the primary enemies is the volume of work, taking too much time to do the job and being left with too little for socializing, let alone that the atmosphere at the work place is felt most commonly as the last location one would consider for ‘socializing’ and the reasons for that are by and large rather obvious. Less spare time means less opportunity of using self disclosing and connecting language, of getting beyond the shallowness and leading a proper conversation, communicating at all levels, listening not only for fact but caring for meaning, feeling and intention, as well.

What can result from this surface interaction is only a perverted human interrelation, a poor excuse of human touch, superficiality and fake concern and this can do nothing but harm the entire organisation, as it is communication that stays at the basis of any effective company. “The importance of *how* an organization communicates internally is even more vital than the question *what* is being communicated. This implies that communication aspects that are usually considered to be rather ‘soft’, such as openness, trust and having a say in the organization, are indeed both relevant and ‘hard’ factors when it comes to organizational identification ... Improving the communication climate ... demands a continuous and long-term management commitment.”[8]

SPEAKING TO THE POINT ... OF THE JOB

Analysing dialogues taking place at office, we can depict a series of peculiar aspects, denoting an atmosphere that in time could undermine the human touch:

- Communication tends to reduce, refer to or go back – even when running from a casual, informal topic – to the problems linked to the work
- Attempts of connecting beyond that area often turn into endless discussion on the same matters that are involving the job.
- The language is rather dull, the tone formal and the discussion does not allow diversion
- The jargon, the abbreviations or acronyms replace plain English even when not required by the context, resulting an odd dialogue even if on personal matters
- A certain pressure can be felt in the pace and from the ‘amount’ of communication people try to put together in one query or one reply, maybe for fear something important might be left out if not said quickly
- A sense of urgency seems to be distinguished in conversations at office perhaps because of the great number of things that need to be clarified and communicated in the process of the activity
- There are restraints not only of a lexical nature but also on the emotional and affective level, triggered either by the actual soberness and distance

imposed vertically but also horizontally on the communication channels inside organisations, or simply by mentally induced formality attributed to the work place

How else can we understand the following answer than being of a man, if not obsessed with work, at least stressed enough to be unable to unwind a little and give a human reply to the question asked?:

“So you’re off on a trip to Italy next week?”

“Yes, I must get the suppliers organized before we can launch the new computer unit. That means I have to approach Brano Electronics on this trip. I’ve set up some meetings with them. As we’re putting something new on the market we need to get the planning right. We’ll use our current distributors – we don’t need any new ones...” [4]

Of course, interpretations can be provided, such as the interlocutor feeling the question as intrusive, ironical or envious and thus the answer is more of an explanatory type and rather defensive, claiming the company’s interest in that travel. But aren’t these interpretations products of the similar crooked way of thinking which turns humans into some working robots, as the study reveals, from the very beginning? Human mind is best at finding excuses for its own mistakes.

Ellipses are normal in colloquial speech and in familiar, informal talk, but abbreviations that are commonly used at work, for instance in the business field, are not generally rendering a normally sounding communication when employed, for no reason, in a discussion that should have flown ordinarily, between usual individuals:

“FYI, Susan, I’m not sure the CEO’s idea is all that great. I see a lot of problems here, e.g. costs, personnel, office space. Am also worried about production schedule, i.e. deadline of 1 April. Is that a joke? I think our CKO should be informed asap. Heard he’ll be visiting next Friday, ETA 1 pm.” [5] Hearing such a communication one can truly wonder about what language has come to be, because the abbreviation, as efficient and proper they might prove in the process of the normal activity performed in that particular firm, seem indeed out-of-place and exaggerated in something that claims to be a casual discussion.

“For a group or organization to operate effectively, there has to be ... a generally accepted set of assumptions; in effect, it represents the collective experience without which people would have to ‘reinvent their world’ for different circumstances. As with individual experience, this shared understanding allows the collective experience gathered over years to be brought to bear to make sense of a given situation, to inform a likely course of action, and to gauge the likelihood of the latter’s success. Obvious as this may seem, it has significant implications. The important point is precisely that the underlying assumptions are taken for granted; they are unlikely to be considered as problematic. But suppose the organization needs or expects to undergo significant change. Core assumptions and routines are difficult to change just because they are taken for granted; and managers may therefore find themselves unable to adjust to such pressures.” [2, p.12]

Special vocabulary intermingles with jargon, acronyms or abbreviation and they then invade the ‘everyday’, informal language of those involved sometimes becoming linguistic habits hard to get rid off, perverting natural interaction.

IN SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS

Given the fact that proper communication is vital and the “communication climate may be instrumental in creating favorable attitudes toward strategic objectives” [9], something should be done to restore normal human relating inside organisations. “Building and nourishing employee relations, establishing trust, providing timely and reliable information and thereby contributing to general motivation, particularly in times of change and stress”[3, p.171], the internal communication has to be on the priority list of the management. What options of redressing might there be, linked to this particular aspect of gaining back a touch of informality, humanity, familiarity and normality within companies?

Some recovering solutions can be identified; of course they are not applied permanently but resorted to partially and/or from time to time. Such could be the attempts of team building and the associated activities the firm imply in connection with this, on one hand, and, on the other, the endeavours to organise various common activities: parties, trips, celebrations at work, or to set up a company sports club, private dinning rooms, restaurants or bars, inside the office building a.s.o. These changes of atmosphere would be opportunities to loosen up, if all goes well, but what should be done to keep part of that ‘communion’ back in office, ‘functioning’ at the same pace with the required professionalism of the activity performed, would be another puzzle.

If get-togethers are well organised and if the atmosphere in company is not of such a nature that colleagues are already judged as somewhere between strangers and enemies, there might still be hopes for things to get better in what communication is concerned, because, instinctively, humans are designed to interact and socialise: “The informal communications network originates in two natural human tendencies. The first is our tendency to talk; when you get two or more people in a room together, they communicate. The second is our tendency to form social hierarchies. These hierarchies show up in everything from kindergarten cliques to nursing homes; that the same basic rules govern their formation in business situations should come as no great surprise. These hierarchies tend to be based on the exchange of goods (money, activities, plans, or information are common commodities)”. [6, p.1]

CONCLUSIONS

The heavy load of the work agenda, the busy schedule combine with the specialised language at the work place, connected with the various activities and with contextual abbreviations, coming from the field of preoccupation, from the situations involved in the particular job, conceived in order to save time. In time, they all lead to the creation of a new way of ‘communicating’, particularised and personalised but lacking personalisation and feeling, sophisticated but losing substance. Moreover, most often the competition between employees makes it impossible for them to be truly open and hence disclosure is unlikely to occur. All these, cumulated, impede the development of a proper connection, the formation a real link between people working together and thus the work place becomes dry communicationally, gapped emotionally.

The attempts of redressing, such as planning team building sessions and setting up company clubs, or organising festivities and getting together do not prove to be very efficient as, besides the fact there is not enough time to enjoy the latter too often, there is still the same sober atmosphere for the former in most cases. People might end up talking about work even in the club, while at the team building the atmosphere often imposes formality. Still, even though there is no ideal solution, at least there is the hope that these partial compensations may grow in number and in diversity, thus becoming more effective.

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