MANAGERIAL FEEDBACK ON OCCUPATIONAL STRESS WITHIN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

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Abstract: *The study aimed at identifying the stressors experienced by teachers. The research was conducted by applying the survey "Management standards for work-related stress", elaborated by Health and Safety Executive (HSE). The qualitative-research results reveal the main risk factors felt and expressed, useful to the managerial feedback, necessary for the improvement of both occupational environment within undergraduate education units, and human-resource management.*

Keywords: *survey, occupational stress, managerial feedback, human-resource management.*

1. Introduction

Within an organization, managers have two tasks: to comply with current issues and to prepare for the future. To this effect, they must make sure they can rely on the best strategic weapon of the informational age: an organization specialized in change, which anticipates, creates and efficiently reacts to change [5].

The managers' role in these organizations is to create the conditions capable of turning efficacious change into natural lifestyle. The staff members within the organizations specialized in change do not always qualify their own preoccupations as "change", they deem themselves performers of current projects. The effect of these projects goes beyond simple detachment from the past, in order to include greater compatibility with the future [5].

Managers have the on-going duty to mobilize and to motivate people, with a view to fulfilling collective goals, which supposes defining and communicating tasks, grouping the staff, distributing it according to the tasks, and providing adequate treatment for employees at their workplace.

Managers might start with high-quality raw material, as well-prepared human resource, whom they need avail themselves of, with a view to creating values that should remain in the organization, even after some persons' departure [5].

Occupational stress might have manifold causes; the risk factors are partly related to the system organization and functioning, determined by legislative instability; and partly related to the organizational cultures or management specific to each organization. The occupational stress

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greatly depends on the management style and on the adherents' desire to participate in the achievement of the goals. The adherence to organizational change will influence the loyalty in the organization only if the change adapts to the organizational culture and influences the basic values of the organization and not only the perceptible, noticeable aspects.

Stress management at organizational level is a core problem of all systems, inclusively of the undergraduate educational system in our country.

The study is part of the doctoral research theme within the Doctoral School of U.M.F. "I. Haţieganu", Cluj-Napoca, with the title "Cercetări privind factori de risc ai stresului în învăţământul preuniversitar [Researches about Stress Risk Factors within Undergraduate Education]".

2. Material and method

We conducted an observational, descriptive study, using the survey as working tool, which was structured in 35 items, questions with pre-formulated answers, resorting to Likert scale, applied to a number of 1600 teaching staff members within the undergraduate education system, teachers who act within the 42 school units covered by the study, afferent to the urban and rural environment in Braşov, Iaşi, Botoşani and Vaslui counties.

The study aimed at identifying the stressors within organizations.

We resorted to the survey "Management standards for work-related stress", elaborated by Health and Safety Executive (HSE) http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/

In accordance with the interpretation tool afferent to the standard of health and labour-difficulty management, the 35 questions were grouped on the six domains, as follows:

- awareness of the professional duties and responsibilities, as well as of the team roles, was assessed according to the answers given to the questions 1, 4, 11, 13, 17;
- question cluster 7, 24, 27, 31 in the survey brings information on the collegial-support level within the organization, and 5, 14, 21, 34 assesses inter-collegial relations;
- response cluster at the questions 3, 6, 9, 12, 16, 18, 20, 22 conveys information on the stress factors related to the pace of work and activity volume;
- the control level and autonomy in labour organization, assessed through the questions 2, 10, 15, 19, 25 and 30 in the survey;
- the presence of the managerial support within the organization is shown by the analysis of the answers to the questions 8, 23, 29, 33 and 35;
- the adaptation to change is evaluated by the questions 26, 28 and 32.

The survey was applied during the period 15.09.2011–27.04.2012, and was filled by self-registration. There were no cases of refusal to participate in the study.

The survey is anonymous and guarantees data confidentiality, as well as their use for research purpose only. The assent of the County School Inspectorates was obtained with a view to conducting the research; they also agreed on the content and application of the survey; the advised assent of the subjects was likewise obtained, with a view to their participating in the study.

Inclusion criteria: active didactic staff within the undergraduate public educational system in the counties of Braşov, Iaşi, Botoşani, Vaslui; regardless of their

origin, age, religion and ethnicity; holders of discipline or substitute teachers; both genres (masculine, feminine); present in the didactic activity during the study development (survey application).

Exclusion criteria: teachers with diagnosed and decompensated psychiatric pathology; residence in other counties, not included in the research; absent with or without leave from the instructive-educational process during the period of the study (application of the survey).

The data were processed by means of statistical-mathematical methods [6], with the software Microsoft Excel.

3. Results and discussions

Group characterization: Over half of the teachers included in the study are employed in the schools in Braşov county, most of them belong to the urban environment, almost three quarters are of the female gender, two thirds, regardless of their origin, are aged between 30 and 49 years old. Average age of the teaching staff members: $X \pm S = 43.05 \pm 10.10$ years old. The study highlights that almost half of the respondents – 49.13% - have the didactic degree I, over 82.75% out of the surveyed ones are teachers, almost half (49.32%) of the teaching staff members have a seniority in the current undergraduate education unit ranging between 1 and 10 years, and over two fifths (43.82%), between 11 and 30 years of constant activity in the same unit, regardless of their source environment.

Management standards cover six key areas of organizational design, which, unless adequately managed, are associated

to precarious health and impair the individuals' wellbeing, result in low productivity and display high risk of pathologies caused by occupational stress. It is considered there are six primary sources of stress at one's workplace: job requirements, control and autonomy in labour organization, managerial support, interhuman relations and collegial support, team role and adaptation to change.

In managerial light, the standards for each of the six fields bring regulations that allow the individual's adaptation in the organization, the awareness of these standards being in itself an organisational-stress reduction factor. The compliance with these issues is afferent to human-resource management.

✓ Data analysis on the awareness of professional duties and responsibilities, as well as of team roles, was made according to the answers given to the questions 1, 4, 11, 13, 17. The study highlights that only approximately two thirds of the subjects (63.25%) think it is always clear for them what they are expected to do at work, over three quarters of the respondents (78.25%) declare themselves to have the necessary skills so as to fully fulfil professional duties, over half of them (54.31%) claim to be aware of their professional duties and responsibilities, (55.38%) are aware of the purposes and goals of their professional activity 52.50% comprehend the role of their work within the education institution (graph 1).
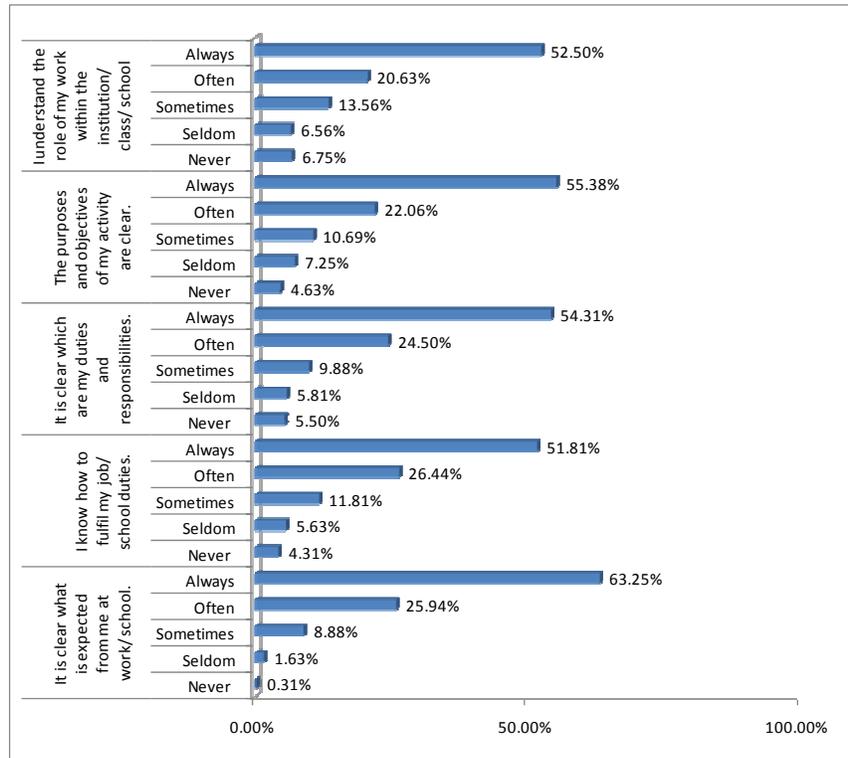
Graph 1. *Percentages of the surveyed subjects according to the awareness of their*
professional tasks and responsibilities, as well as of their team role

The analysis of these aspects shows deficiencies in the managerial system, underpinned by the percentage - ranging between one third and a half - of the respondents who admit that the required professional skills, duties and responsibilities; the goals and purposes of their activity, the role of their work within the educational institution are not always clear to them.

The inadequacy of the professional-training level to the ever-changing requirements of the positions within undergraduate education may constitute an additional stressor, owing to the workplace; a poorly-trained person will act under continuous stress, lest (s)he should lose his/her job. The workforce selection system, and the motivation for filing the position – only reduced to the financial aspect of everyday existence – doubled by a less stimulating organizational environment, the criteria for assessing and rewarding the workforce, centred on viewing the individual as mere task-performer, and not on perceiving him/her as "investment plan" for the organization have as effect the diminution of the interest in the undergraduate-education positions, the diminution of the loyalty and individual involvement, superficiality in complying with professional duties or solving professional problems, and passive attitude towards one's workplace and overall organization.

A reason for this generally admitted situation might be legislative instability, the inadaptability of the legislation to the

educational system needs, as well as the multiple barriers to the manager-employee and system-employee communication, inclusively the inadequate perception of the role held by the human resource in the undergraduate education system.

✓ As organizational culture aspects, specific to the educational establishments covered by our study, the following were approached:

• collegial support:

❖ it was analyzed by grouping the questions 7, 24, 27, 31 in the survey, which highlighted a low level of collegial support. This way, when their work becomes difficult, the study participants declare not to enjoy support, or only seldom, occasionally, from colleagues, in percentages up to 46.13%.

This situation might be caused by the poor approach, unfortunately perpetuated within the organizational culture afferent to undergraduate education, whereby organizational work is not achieved by semi-autonomous teams, which display self-control, proactive attitude, which commit themselves, undertake responsibilities, and participate in the decision-making and nurture "esprit de corps".

❖ the professional stressors afferent to intercollegial relations provide information through the answers to the questions 5, 14, 21, 34. This way, 69.19% declare they always and often deem themselves "harassed by unkind words or inappropriate behaviour" from colleagues. Over half of the study participants (50.31%) confirm that, within their organizations, there are constant or frequent conflicts. Over two thirds of the respondents – 69.01% - claim they always and often feel intimidation from colleagues. Over half of the surveyed subjects (54.81%) believe their work relations are always and often tense (graph 2).
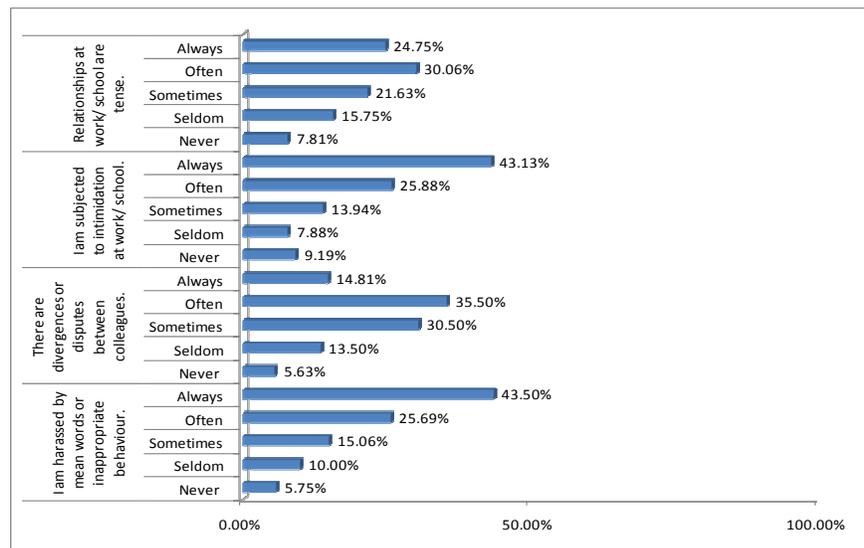
Graph 2. *Percentage of the surveyed subjects according to the professional stressors afferent to intercollegial relations*

The observational analysis of these data suggests a deficient organizational culture, lack of commitment and interest in favour of the overall organization, and draws the attention on the lack of availability and inter-individual respect, as well as for the teamwork; and suggests withal disregard, disinterest, and passivity towards organizational goals.

Unlike what would be deemed undesirable at organizational level, the intra-organizational conflict, yet at optimal level, is, in the light of the current approach of the human-resource management, a beneficent, stimulating force, necessary for change and progress at organizational level [9], [8], [10].

Organizational culture entails noticeable aspects, core beliefs and values, which take shape by common experiences, activities, gradually consolidating into a model for the newcomers. The leader's role is to comprehend, to mould and to create the organizational culture adequate to change [2]. The relations between employees may range from mere involvement in the attainment of the common goals, resulting in professionalism within the working environment, to leisure activities or common events held at the initiative of the organization, stimulating for the communication beyond strictly professional environment; the latter denoting a different vision of the human-resource management, targeting other types of relationships between employees.

✓ Awareness of the organizational requirements: the response cluster to the questions 3, 6, 9, 12, 16, 18, 20, 22, which provide information on the stressors related to the pace of work and to the activity volume, ranks first, with 62.57%; the risk determined by unrealistic time constraints in achieving the goals, ranks second (57.88%), as well as the impossibility of complying with the time standards required for certain activities. The imposition of a steady pace of work, reducing until disappearance the pauses necessary for the rest that restores the labour capacity ranks third (49.75%). The dispersion of the various activities (didactic, administrative, research) that must be simultaneously concluded, ranks fourth, with a percentage of 49.19%. The fifth rank is occupied by the effort to diminish the number of daily professional activities (46.94%); 40.31% of the respondents declare they have to work overtime, with a view to covering their workload (rank VI). The fast pace of work, necessary for accomplishing the multiple workloads is reckoned a risk factor for professional stress, by over a quarter of the respondents, who declare that they have to comply, always and often, with this overload at their workplace. The last rank (VIII) includes the activity intensity that 12.50% of the respondents declare to be exposed at.

In the literature [1], [2] it is widely accepted that one of the managerial principles posits that, when delegating a task, there must be likewise reached an agreement on the financial, human and temporal possibilities necessary for efficiently solving it. However, in practice, this principle is frequently infringed: additional tasks are allotted to the one who is known to be adequately trained and professionally committed so as to solve the task in due time and at optimal parameters, let alone the employee's workload (and whether (s)he can be allotted another task). Meanwhile, this managerial approach will result in the employee's overburdening, along with the onset of fatigue and the diminution of labour efficiency.

The data in the literature, upon organizational-culture management [1], [2] attest that team-role allotment, as managerial attribute, requires all collaborators' involvement at full capacity.

The existence and implementation of standards in the labour process enable objectively making decisions, allotting attributions in line with each collaborator's status and capacity, without underutilizing some, to the detriment of the others. The lack of activity and the staff's underutilization within a specialized team are equally unproductive as overload.

Control and autonomy in labour organization: the information is brought by the answers to the questions 2, 10, 15, 19, 25 and 30 in the survey. Data analysis shows that the percentage of the respondents who reckon they have no decision-making power as regards the management of their own activity ranges between 5.69% and 17.50% and the percentage of those who declare they have sporadic control over this decision range between 5.69% and 19.94%. If we sum up these answers, we notice that the percentage of those who are constantly impeded to make decisions in an organizational environment ranges between 11.38% and 37.44% (variation according to the question).

The autocratic style is characterized by the implication via command, by the subordinates' compliance and by either incen-tives or sanctions. The information transmission is unidirectional, downward [1].

The participative style supposes consulting the subordinates as regards future actions, as well as involving them in decision-adopting. Information transmission and communication are two-way, both vertically, and horizontally, producing the individual's integration in the group (consensus, team spirit), create synergy, rely on global action and may be used as self-accomplishment motivational factors [1].

The free style (laisser-faire) is characterized by high autonomy level granted to the subordinates, inclusively for actions outside the group [1].

✓ The presence of the managerial support in the organization is highlighted by the analysis of the answers to the questions 8, 23, 29, 33 and 35, and proves that in all organizations covered by the survey, there are high percentages (ranging between 14.57% and 19.38%) of people who claim never to benefit, or seldom, of managerial support (graph 3).
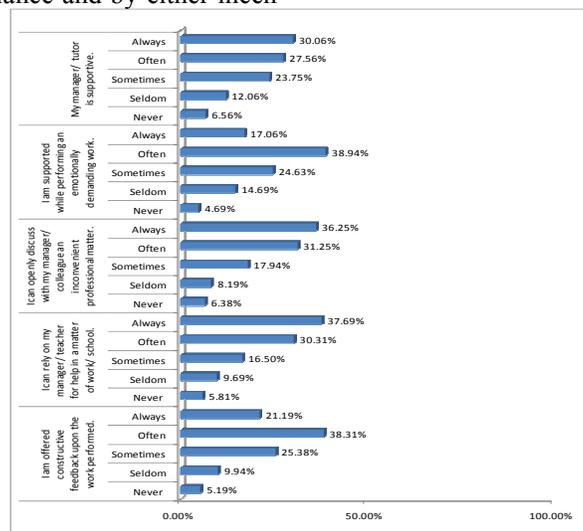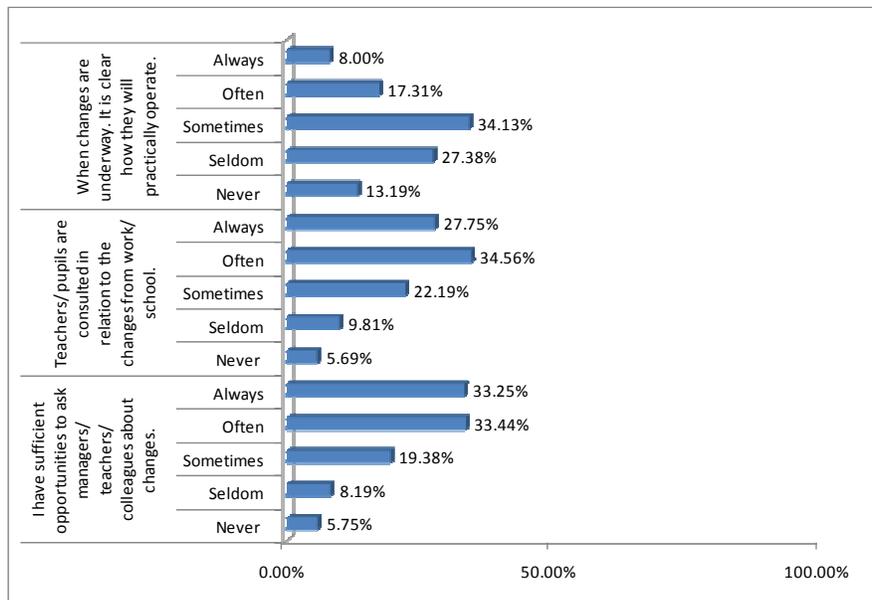

Graph 3. *Percentage of the surveyed subjects according to their declaration referring to managerial support*

Within an organization, communication and trust intensify and diminish in direct proportion. It is necessary to establish bonds of trust, which intuitively emerge, the human being having the propensity to build good relations with its environment [3].

The collaborators' evaluation is one of the managerial responsibilities that cannot be delegated. What is appraised or blamed, in the long term, by the manager, will end up influencing, over time, the organisational culture. The subordinates' evaluation must comply with clear-cut standards, known to all employees, which should represent values generally accepted by the organization, and whose constant should provide the frame for creating the stimulating, motivating organisational environment focused on high performance [1], [2].

✓ The adaptation to change was assessed by the answers to the questions 26, 28 and 32. The high percentage (62.31%) of the subjects who claim they are often and always consulted upon the changes to be implemented, as well as of those who claim they avail themselves of enough responsibilities to require further clarification from managers and colleagues (66.69%) upon the expected changes at organizational level, advocate for a primarily democratic decision-making process at managerial level, within the surveyed educational establishments. Out of all surveyed subjects, only a percentage of 25.31% declare themselves capable of comprehending the practical functionality of the changes to be implemented in the educational system (graph 4).

Graph 4. *Percentage of the surveyed subjects according to their adaptation to change*

The current educational system holds premises for an approach targeting the organizations specialized in change, yet it is only a strategic long-term approach. The managers' role in reducing the risk factors for professional stress imply

preoccupations for human-resource training and professional-development based on proactivity, which will lead, over time, to changes meant to be implemented into the organisational-culture foundations, meant to really influence the employees' attitudes and perception.

The introduction of innovative programs, inclusively in the educational systems, tends to raise expectations to new enthusiasm levels; however, prior to attaining genuine change, the management is often involved in the next initiative, leaving behind a doubtful workforce [4].

Traditional autocratic management styles are replaced by surveillance and management technique, which lay the stress on coordination and counselling. The outcome is the stimulation of self-worth, personal development and of, capability, trust; developing thereby the property feeling nurtured by the employee in relation to the organization (s)he works for [4].

This transformation at managerial level is the process whereby, in the literature, it is suggested that fear and distrust between management and workforce will be eliminated [4].

Although serious and well-intentioned efforts are being made towards "quality", genuine progress is often hindered by grudgingly made efforts, by the conviction that progress is only a temporary solution. This may result in wounded pride and suspicion, the members of the organization doubting that change might be implemented and would really function in their organization [4].

In order to promote authentic change within an organization, the manager must obtain permanent feedback on the needs felt towards improving one's workplace, for the benefit of one's collaborators; and must achieve and implement an authentic stress-management system at one's workplace [9], [8], [11], [7].

4. Conclusions

1. Most respondents belong to the urban environment, almost three quarters are of the feminine gender, the average age of the teaching staff members being X±S= 43.05±10.10 years old.
2. The study revealed deficiencies in the managerial system, related to the awareness of the professional duties and responsibilities.
3. Almost half of the respondents declare lack of support from their colleagues.
4. Over two thirds of the subjects reckon themselves verbally and behaviourally harassed, feel their relations at work to be tense, are intimidated by their colleagues; and intraorganizational conflicts are frequent.
5. Other declared occupational stressors are: workload, unrealistic time standards with fast pace of work, necessity to work overtime.
6. The autocratic management style is being suggested by two fifths of the respondents, who declare themselves in the impossibility to made decisions within their organizational environment, and almost one fifth declare never to benefit, or only seldom, from managerial support.
7. Out of all surveyed subjects, only a percentage of 25.31% declare themselves able to understand the practical functionality of the changes to be implemented within the educational system.

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