

ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION AND EFFICIENT MANAGEMENT IN THE OFFICE

Dumitru FILIPEANU¹, Mihaela CANANĂ²

¹Lecturer, PhD, "Gh. Asachi" Technical University of Iași

²Journalist, PhD, Iași

Corresponding author: filipeanu@hotmail.com

Abstract

Communication has become a universal, all-embracing concept as, nowadays, everything communicates. At present, it goes without saying that all human activities are based on and have their source in communication, people becoming more and more aware of the fact that any modern society, institution or company depends on and operates by the various communication processes and networks they develop, which grant their coherence. The situation is the same for all types of human relations. Consequently, one may observe that all communication and organizational actions depend reciprocally on one another. In other words, communication is the very substance of a society, especially important being to control the manner in which we, people, communicate. In relation with this, the present study aims at analyzing the mode in which a better and more efficient communication may be realized at organizational level, in two directions, namely the biunivocal superior - subaltern, and, respectively, the mate-mate relation. Practically, the here discussed theme involved the manner in which one perceives - at both collective and personal level - the types and modalities of communication, for assuring a more efficient activity at all levels of the human society. The concrete objectives considered in the present investigation were: evaluation of the manner of perception of the main procedures by which people communicate: passive-submissive, aggressive or assertive; analysis of the impact produced upon the efficiency of the three mentioned communication types at the working place; why is assertive communication considered as assuring a more fruitful collaboration, along with the transmission and interreception of good ideas.

Keywords: *institutional communication, passive-submissive communication, aggressive communication, assertive communication, efficiency at work*

1. INTRODUCTION

The sentence "my job is my second house" has already become a common assertion - which is really true, if considering that a large part of one's day is spent at work. However, the feelings with which one arrives in his office differ from

one individual to another. Some are happy to come, as they are motivated both professionally and/or financially, others do this for mere living. The interpersonal relations we develop place us in one category or another, no matter if involved here is the chief-subaltern or mate-mate communication. A relaxed, pleasant atmosphere, encouraging professionalism, is the ideal of any employee, whichever his position in the company, in any domain of activity. An ideal difficult to attain, indeed, as demonstrated by the daily experience and reality. Unfortunately, in too few cases focus is put on a performant communication at work. In most cases, the only scope of the boss is to attain the proposed performance parameters, while that of the subalterns is to do minimum work for receiving the negotiated wages. When very precise objectives are to be accomplished, nobody will ever take into consideration the feelings and aspirations of the employees, the more so that the number of those who apply for a job is much higher than the number of available positions. Under such circumstances, quite naturally, the relations among employees are obviously affected by unorthodox attitudes and practices, on one hand, for the preservation of job, and by an ermetic management, with no interest in a real feed-back, on the other.

2. MATERIALS AND METHOD

The present study analyzed 1,000 questionnaires, addressed equally to men and women, 500 of them working in public institutions and 500 - in private structures.

Out of the total number of 1,000 questionnaires, 360 were rejected - either because not all questions

had been answered or because they did not correspond to the requirements of analysis.

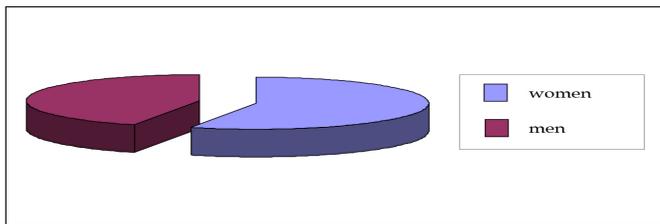


Fig. 1. Sex distribution of subjects, after elimination of the incorrectly filled-in questionnaires

The final number of participants to the study was of 640: 360 women (56.25%) and 280 men (43.75%) (Fig. 1). Out of the women, 230 (63.8%) are hired in private structures and 130 (36.2%) work in public institutions, while, in the group of men, 160 (57.14%) work in private institutions and 120 (42.86%) - in public companies (Fig. 2).

All the 1,000 subjects interviewed by the questionnaire agreed to participate to the study and signed a "File of informed consent".

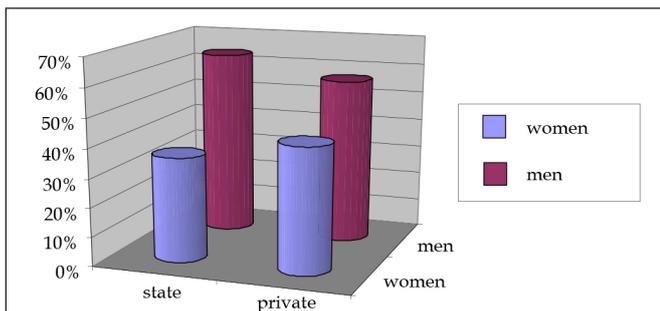


Fig. 2. Distribution of subjects on sexes (women/men), according to their job in private or public institutions

The variables of research

1. Informed consent questionnaire, by which all participants to the study fully agreed to participate into, confidentiality being assured, by protection of their identification data, on one side for not suffering possible repercussions at work - for the responses they gave - on the other, for obtaining sincere responses.

2. Independent variables of research: sex (women/men), studies (8 classes, 12 classes, high education), age (18-29 years, 30-39 years, 40-49 years, 50-59 years, over 60 years), working place (public/private institutions), position (management/execution function).

3. RESULTS

The interviewed subjects answered 10 questions, which evidenced the type of communication they prefer at work, in relation with the chief-subaltern, subaltern-chief, colleague-colleague relations, respectively, passive/submissive, aggressive, assertive communication. The observation made was that, in public institutions, the assertive type of communication (42%) and the passive/submissive one (38%) occur in almost equal ratios, while the aggressive-type communication registers a ratio of 20% (Fig. 3), the last one being present in a 17% ratio among mates and in only 3% in the chief-subaltern relation.

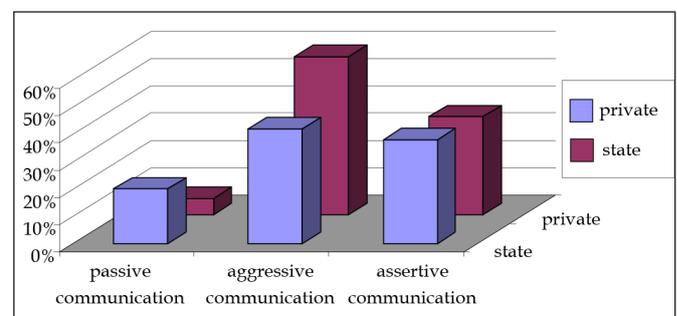


Fig. 3. Types of communication applied, as a function of job - in public or private institutions

Among the subjects working in private institutions, the ratios are substantially modified, as follows: aggressive-type communication - 58%, assertive-type communication - 36%, and passive/submissive type communication - 6%, the explanation being that public employees are much protected at work, comparatively with those from private structures. Public employees have trade unions representing their interests, and collective labour contracts stipulating all their rights. If the possible mistakes they can make are analyzed and gradually sanctioned, private employees are much more severely punished, radical measures being frequently applied from the very beginning. From the perspective of the sex of the interviewed subjects, women are much more open to accept all the above-mentioned behavioural models, their reasons being, on one side, the need for financial stability and, on the other, the fact that they are much more timorous

in the relations with their superiors. Instead, they much more rarely accept an aggressive manner of communication, for example, from the part of their colleagues.

By the responses they give, men demonstrate an exactly opposed attitude: they accept the aggressive behaviour of their mates, and react when their superiors have a similar attitude.

A possible explanation might involve the ancestral nature of men's behaviour, who are much more permissive with a colleague than with a superior of theirs.

On the other hand, men believe that they can more easily change their job, as they know that, if absolutely necessary, they are also capable of making unqualified works, requiring simple physical force.

Statistical analysis on the manner of accepting the discussed communication models, as a function of the education level of the interviewed subjects, evidenced that high educated people prefer assertive communication (78%), 18% of them prefer passive/submissive communication and only 4% of them accept an aggressive communication, as well.

A possible explanation is that college graduates prefer a communication based on arguments, respectful, capable of developing and maintaining an authentic relation. A somehow similar attitude - expressed statistically - is evidenced in subjects with only 8 classes of study (69% - assertive communication, 23% - passive/submissive communication and 8% - aggressive communication), however the main reason is that, having no position to defend, they may change their job much more easily than the other professional categories, up to accepting even unqualified work (Fig. 4).

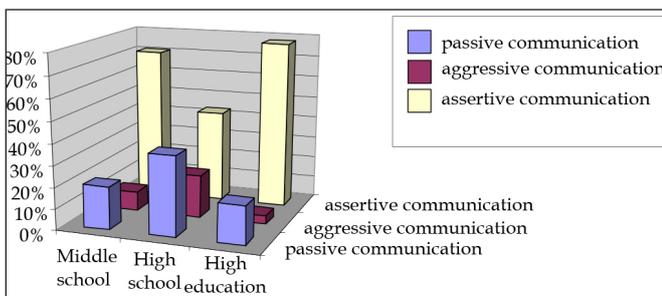


Fig. 4. Types of communication accepted by respondents as a function of their education level

The ones ready to accept a combined behaviour, representing, in sensibly equal ratios, the assertive (41%), aggressive (21%) and passive/submissive (38%) behaviour were the subjects with high school education (12 lyceum classes). The responses given as a function of their level of study were quite similar in both women and men.

Another modality of interpreting the responses considered the age of the interviewed ones. Statistical interpretation was based on the group of age to which the subjects belonged. Significant differences were observed in the mode in which communication at work is appreciated, between the beginners of a professional career and those who will be soon retired. The category of people who prefer assertive communication includes the 18-29 year (78%) and 30-39 year (61%) age groups. The ratios of those who agree with a type of aggressive communication, as well, are almost negligible in the 18-29 year (3%) and 30-39 year (5%) groups, the remaining ones appreciating a passive/submissive behaviour (Fig. 5).

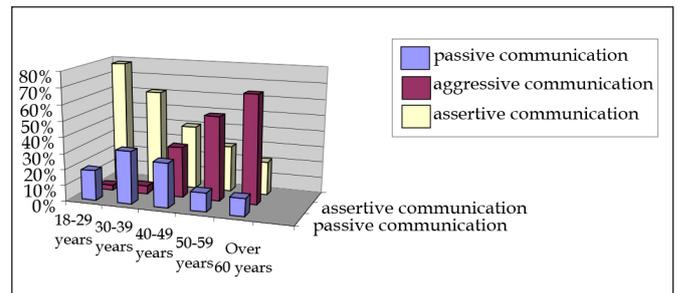


Fig. 5. Types of communication preferred as a function of subjects' age

Instead, many of the persons belonging to the 50-59 year and over 60 year groups of age - respectively 53% of the 50-59 year group and 68% of those over 60 - accept an aggressive behaviour at work.

Most probably, this attitude is the result of their fear of not losing the job, the more so that, in the Romanian society of today, age hardly permits them to find another one.

The most balanced responses were given by the subjects belonging to the 40-49 year group of age, as follows: passive/submissive communication: 28%, aggressive communication: 32%, assertive communication: 40%.

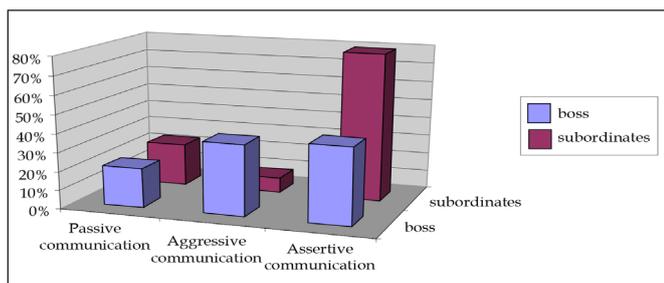


Fig. 6. Type of communication preferred by respondents *versus* their professional position

The statistical analysis developed in relation with the professional position held by the participants to the study showed that the leaders choose - in their communication with their subordinates - both the assertive- (41%) and the aggressive-type (38%) behaviour.

Instead, employees with executive jobs prefer, in most cases, an assertive-type institutional communication (79%), and only 8% of them seem to accept an aggressive-type of communication (Fig. 6).

4. DISCUSSION

Institutionalized interpersonal communication represents the only organizational instrument by means of which messages, ideas, expectations, results can be transmitted, at both mate-mate and chief-subaltern level.

Everyday communication may be viewed as an instrument we need and utilize on a regular basis (Egan, 1998), as, whichever the domain of activity, and in each moment of our life, we transmit and receive messages, therefore we communicate.

In spite of this, in quite numerous situations, when conflicts appear in the office, the main culpable aspect is communication (Bower & Bower, 1976). It was observed that, in many cases, the messages we deliver arrive in an altered, modified form.

Therefore, the conclusion of the specialists - substantiated by the experiments and studies performed by researchers of the field - is that important is not only the message (Radan, 1992) but, equally, the manner in which it is "wrapped", respectively the form in which it is transmitted (Borchers, 1999). In other words, if we do not act

as good communicators, our aptitudes, values and endowments may be incorrectly judged or misinterpreted.

According to the manner in which a conversation is developed between and/or among individuals, three main modalities by which people communicate have been theoretically established (Jakubowski & Lange, 1978): passive/submissive, aggressive and assertive communication; in an either conscious or unconscious manner, each of us assumes one of these three roles (Pease & Garner, 1999).

When analyzing passive/submissive communication, one should not forget that the one who transmits the message has to be especially obliging in front of his interlocutor (Ludlow & Panton, 1992). In this respect, approval from the part of the communication partner and avoidance of any possible conflicts are essential.

An individual with a passive/submissive behaviour (Radan, 1992) prefers to yield in favour of the others, a situation frequently inducing frustration and negative intimate emotions. The only explanation lies in the desire of not irritating the others, even if he is convinced that his, and not his interlocutors' opinion is the correct one (Chelcea, 2004).

This type of persons may be also recognized by the low voice in which they initiate a discussion, by the fixed smile on their face and a quite uncommon politeness. That is why, they are in danger of becoming the "victims" of the people around them, always ready to take advantage of such situations (Hibbels & Weaver, 1989). Distrust in one's own forces, the apprehension that one's opinions will not be accepted make the passive/submissive subjects accept the domination of the others.

It is only rarely that this category of subjects appears to leave behind this routine, artificially created by themselves (Nelson-Jones, 1996). As a matter of fact, they surprise the others when, in the moment in which they are incapable to play this role, any longer, they fail and manifest an aggressive behaviour (Coman & Coman, 2002). Specialists define this moment as "the effect of the last straw" (Lange & Jakubowski, 1980).

Characteristic for aggressive communication is the type of individual who never gives up his

ideas, which he tries to impose to his interlocutors (Cornelius & Faire, 1996).

Such a subject is capable of contradicting himself for hours and hours, of offering different – more or less valid – arguments to support his assertions. He hardly takes into consideration the opinions and wishes of the others, because he is constantly and exclusively concerned with his own ideas and needs. Or, in his opinion, this can be achieved only if having a permanent control upon everything (Griffin, 1991).

He is inflexible, making use – either consciously or unconsciously – of any type of manipulation techniques, once he knows that involved here are his own interests – that should be satisfied at all costs. Apparently, he delivers a reliable discourse, involving mainly a sort of aggressivity which usually tires out his interlocutor, “paralysing” his will and making him finally accept the opinions of the “aggressor” (Nelson-Jones, 1995).

In quite numerous cases, such behaviour is accepted in a consumistic society, which is more focused on the result of some approach and less interested in the modality of its accomplishment (Gambrill & Richey, 1975).

Usually, the persons resorting to an aggressive communication pattern have negative opinions about their interlocutors and, quite frequently, create unfounded conflicts.

Quite commonly, we are surprised to hear eulogistic words addressed to those “who crush the others under their heels” (Hibbels & Weaver, 1989) for attaining their scopes.

Specialists assert that each of us is capable of such behaviour, in certain moments of our life: for example, when we have an altercation with someone.

However, what is unanimously accepted should not become a behavioural pattern as, on long term, this cannot be successful (Borchers, 1999).

Statistics showed that, in time, the persons who choose an aggressive communication will lose most of the persons around them, coming to be avoided and neglected (Birkenbihl, 1998).

The experience of the developed societies demonstrated that the most productive type of communication is assertivity (Radan, 1992).

In the Romanian society, the concept of assertivity is new, being taken over from

Americans; generally speaking, it means to be able to say “no” without regretting this (Nelson-Jones, 1996), more exactly to behave spontaneously, sincerely and directly, to defend your rights and your dignity, yet without affecting the others (Egan, 1998).

The persons who choose this pattern of communication have the ability to choose a middle course – among the already mentioned behavioural types. Assertive persons may express their opinions in a civilized manner, yet preserving – in spite of the calm inflexion of their voice – the attitude of leader (Radan, 1992).

Those who prefer this model of communication have an open, relaxed bodily attitude, and are capable of harmonizing their verbal and non-verbal messages (Jakubowski & Lange, 1978).

Such a type of subject can be hardly manipulated, the more so that his interlocutors are attracted by his speech, which will be always supported by plausible arguments.

At the same time, he can give up his ideas if his interlocutors provide sound arguments against his logic (Coman & Coman, 2002), which is the main reason for which all people around him see in him an even-tempered, correct person, who may be a good leader (Lange & Jakubowski, 1980), as well as a good listener of his subalterns.

Most important of all is that this pattern of communication will be more easily understood and followed by the rest of the group or persons involved.

Unfortunately, we do not come on earth equipped with the technique of assertive communication at hand, it has to be learnt (Griffin, 1991) patiently, as this communication model represents the optimum solution for working in a relaxed and productive atmosphere.

All studies have demonstrated that most of us have the natural tendency of behaving and communicating either submissively or aggressively (Jakubowski & Lange, 1978).

Even if, in the social jungle of today, many people feel the need to defend their territory and to impose their ideas by force (Bower & Bower, 1976), numerous means of placing themselves above the primary need of dominating or of being dominated are available to us all (Gambrill & Richey, 1975).

A comparative analysis of the three behavioural types discussed in the present study shows that an assertive behavior seems much closer to the aggressive one than the passive behavior (Chelcea, 2004; Ludlow & Panton, 1992).

A considerable difference is observed between the two, namely that, in assertive behavior, the rights and freedom of the others are not violated, as in the case of an aggressive behavior (Cornelius & Faire, 1996).

In this respect, the first thing to do is to be highly aware of the role one intends to play in one's intercourses with the others.

5. CONCLUSIONS

1. Interpersonal communication represents a fundamental form of psycho-social interaction, involving changes of signals, messages, etc.

2. The model of assertive communication may increase self-esteem and contribute to the establishment of authentic fellow-like relations, therefore to a more efficient activity at post.

3. Most of the subjects participating to the study evidenced the problems caused by the way in which communication is developed in the institutional group. The main reason for such a situation is neglectation of the fact that communication does not simply mean transmitting of a message. Equally important is the receiver and also realization of a feedback.

4. Application of the assertive communication model may be the key factor for an efficient cooperation, equally for the biunivocal colleague-colleague and for the superior-subaltern relation.

5. As the scope of communication is not only of transmitting a message but also of receiving an answer and especially of obtaining some result, a change of attitude, of behaviour, of the actual manner of communication, is necessary.

6. When some conflict or crisis bursts at work, the general state induced is of agitation, of aggressivity. However, it has been demonstrated that such reactions will not solve the issues, on the contrary, will make them even more complicated. That is why the assertive behaviour is best suited for making good decisions in difficult situations.

7. The persons who, at their post, display an inhibiting behaviour, have a prescriptive language, prefer to perturb or to block communication with the others, have a hermetic-type manner of speaking, built up an equivocal dialogue, frequently interrupt the conversation, develop stereotypes and egocentric monologues, are predisposed to provoking conflicts and general tensional states.

8. Assertive communication appears as a relatively new manner of establishing relations in the Romanian society. However, numerous of the employees of various institutions - be them public or private - are more and more attracted by this type of communication. Happily - if considering that they represent the future of our society -, to this category there belong young subjects, from the 18-39 year group of age.

References

- BIRKENBIHL, V (1998) *Antrenamentul comunicării sau arta de a ne înțelege*. Bucuresti: Gemma Pres Publishing House.
- BORCHERS, T (1999) *Interpersonal Communication*. Allyn&Bacon.
- BOWER, SA & BOWER, GH (1976) *Asserting Yourself*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- COMAN, A & COMAN, C (2002) *Tehnici de comunicare și negociere. Curs practic*. Universitatea Transilvania Brasov.
- CHELCEA, S (2004) *Comunicarea nonverbală în spațiul public*. Bucuresti: Tritonic Publishing House, p.167-184.
- CORNELIUS, H & FAIRE, S (1996) *Știința rezolvării conflictelor*. București: Scientific and Technological publishing House.
- EGAN, G (1998) *The Skilled Helper*. (6th ed.) Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.
- GAMBRILL, E & RICHEY, C (1975) An assertion inventory for use in assessment and research. *Behavior Therapy*, 6, 1975, p. 550-561.
- GRIFFIN, E (1991) *A First Look at Communication Theory*. McGraw-Hill, Inc.
- HIBBELS, S & WEAVER, RL (1989) *Communicating Effectively*, New York: Random House.
- JAKUBOWSKI, P & LANGE, A (1978) *The Assertive Option*. Illinois: Research Press Co.
- LANGE, A & JAKUBOWSKI, P (1980) *Responsible Assertive Behavior*. Illinois: Research Press Co.
- LUDLOW, R & PANTON, F. (1992). *The Essence Effective Communication*. UK: Prentice Hall International.
- NELSON-JONES, R (1995) (2nd ed.). *Human Relationship Skills*. Biddles Ltd.

- NELSON-JONES, R (1996) *Relating Skills*. Redwood Books, Trowbridge, Wiltshire.
- PEASE, A & GARNER, A (1999) *Limbajul vorbirii. Artă conversației*. București: Polimark Publishing House.
- RADAN, M (1992) *Ce este comportamentul asertiv?*, Ceașu, V. (coord.). (1992). Cabinet de psihologie 2.
- București: Romanian Academy Publishing House, p.73-80.
- RADAN, Miruna. *Alternativa asertivă și dezvoltarea personalității omului modern*, Ceașu, V. (coord.). (1992). Cabinet de psihologie 2. București: Romanian Academy Publishing House, p.180-185.