

MENTALITY IN THE PRACTICE OF HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN STATE PUBLIC LIBRARIES: A STATEMENT OF FACTS

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The events in December 1989 had spectacular consequences in all fields of life in Romania, on the cutting edge of politics but also in the domain of public services which is our interest. We do not refer to the highest level of importance or value hierarchy but the final stage of a determinist circuit such as civil society – central and local public administration – public services. The activity of state institutions in democratic societies would normally have little to do with the political doctrine of the leading party. Removing ideology from the inner, intimate functioning of such state institutions is a basic requirement in the long process of professional redressing, but unfortunately not a sufficient one in itself.

The actual state of public libraries 10 years after December 1989 has forced us to evaluate critically the main hindrances and the handicaps of initiating a line of development: first, the low level of technical-material equipment and secondly, the problem of human resources. These are mainly due to the lack of financial support; the first is a direct, the second a collateral consequence, but these are also due to inertia instead of a change of mentality which is otherwise specific to the transition period in Romania, and the strategy of adapting to new economic and socio-cultural conditions. While the development of heritage is fatally linked to issues of allocating the budget, the issue of human resources promises the possibility of initiating positive changes such as the re-evaluation of human potential and the reorganization of certain departments in the institution, perhaps its whole structure, with the help of managerial skills and with the assent of the whole staff.

We have experienced a complete lack of interest in the recognition of this worrying state of human resource management in state libraries: the few articles published in specialized journals on this topic treat the subject with precaution and remain on a general level. They suggest solutions for virtual problems, lacking the courage to point out that they are in fact existing ones. Therefore I thought it is important to initiate a debate by briefly describing symptoms in the human resource administration of these types of institutions today, commencing with my own experiences, adding those of other colleagues and identifying overlappings.

First of all we must delimit ourselves from the tendency of arguing that organizing a library and performing library activity are special; this is a false premise regarding human resource management in libraries and does not allow us to pinpoint the problems connected to employees who react according to the same psycho-social laws and theories as people working in different fields.

The management crisis, especially human resource management crisis does not only affect libraries but the whole national organizational range, state institutions and, surprisingly enough, a considerable part of private institutions.

However, unsystematic remarks which have been made without an investigative intention during experiences and contacts at various collaborations, seminars and meetings support the specific nature of human resource management in libraries, although we must underline that this is not generated by the professional profile but by completely different reasons. We will try to identify the most relevant ones and describe their working. We do not attempt an exhaustive presentation of human resource management issues, as every attempt of a complex analysis must be based on the results of rigorous investigations supported by the managerial team. Therefore we will confine ourselves to calling the attention of all those interested in the problem, be they holders of managerial positions or not, because the present situation is after all due to certain mentalities promoted by some and tolerated by others, mentalities which affect the whole working team of a library. We focused our research on state public libraries, "public"

meaning the target group of these libraries and “state” referring to funding sources. We are dealing with county, city and town libraries and less with village libraries which, although belong to the same category, have only one employee.

Human resource management in an institution is the responsibility of the general manager, the personnel manager and the heads of departments and services.

We will analyze first of all the situation of the Human Resources Department or Personnel Department as it is also called; we consider it the main cause of the gridlock in the efficient administration of human resources. We do not want to refer to a particular case but will underline some characteristics and common practices in libraries. This department usually has one employee who has a highly bureaucratic activity. His traditional task is to maintain all the activities connected to the employees of the library within legal limits: filing applications for contests for new posts, preparing papers for the newly employed, payment of salaries, filling in the service certificate and compiling the evidence of free days for every individual and preparing forms for employees leaving the institute whether it is their own decision or a dismissal. As it can be seen, strategies and policies of recruitment, selection, financial and non-financial motivation of the employees, professional training and promotion are missing from this otherwise considerable series of activities. Generally, the activity of this person employed at the Human Resources Department is under the badge of *maintaining*, that is, conforming to the legislative framework of the state and preserving the organizational equilibrium instead of *development*. Similarly, its contribution to essential processes such as the organization of the entrance exam and examination proper is more formal, these tasks being usually passed on to employees who have tasks that define the specificity of library work such as cataloguing or computer work. Other tasks such as those connected to professional training programs are farmed out to other people in the institution who deal with compiling lists for participants but do not themselves organize these programs that are created centrally, for the whole country. This state of affairs has two main reasons, namely, the great

amount of work for a single person employed in this department which leads to the removal of certain tasks that would normally be his responsibility and the deficient system of payment in state sponsored institutions which does not allow for stimulative wages depending on the amount of specific work in such a department. Another, more subtle and diffuse factor is the organizational tradition that has a conservative-dominating presence in almost all departments of the library.

This mixture of objective (financial) and subjective constraints (first of all the lack of interest in human resources, the collective treatment of human resources rather than an individual treatment which would imply filling in elaborate papers about employees and then orienting organizational strategy against a harmful tradition focusing on institutional output), as well as the medium or small number of employees of a public library (around 50) lead to the only compromised solution of employing an external collaborator, a specialist in the field of human resource management. However, experience and past knowledge show us that this idea is not popular with Romanian public libraries: the official motivation of the absence of initiatives in administration is still the deficit of the budget, but the real reason, immature management of human resources, transpires. They do not realize that there is an unused intra-institutional potential and this is due to a chronic deficiency of organization. Also, they do not realize that the success of any institution is based exclusively on the success of the individual, the employee as its constitutive element.

Regarding the tasks that should normally be done by the Human Resource Department, on account of its conception and coordination, tasks which are nevertheless not done by this department, we must say a few words about the staff development of the institution which encompasses the process of defining the number of employees, the process of recruitment, selection and employment, the evaluation of performance, reward, motivation and professional training. A first general observation is that if these are applied, they are done by heads of departments or persons named by them as representatives (training programs are an exception to this), with the assent and support of the admi-

nistrative council and the general manager, but the way of doing them shows a lack of understanding in the internal use of it, the only aim being the creation of a favourable image, that of an institution with a high professional level and a stable organisational structure. The gap between reality and this obsessively promoted image (a practice rooted in the mentality of the former regime) is shown by the respect for and application of these stages of human resource planning strategy.

A second general observation is a consequence of the first one. It is about the lack of a uniform, unified, general strategy of the whole organisation and particularly, of a strategy of human resources caused by the absence of a specialist in the field and, consequently, the gap between the administration of different services generated by the differences in skills of heads of services.

The first specific human resource problem in public libraries is the need for personnel. Unlike state funded productive institutions in general which were in a gradual regress after 1990 (the need for employees decreased radically), public libraries, those state funded institutions offering services have a permanent need for employees, the existing staff, mainly those from Public Relations being overtaxed. Public libraries are constrained by the pressure of the external environment: the explosion in book production and other cultural-informative products, the need of adopting new techniques of stocking information on modern, economic supports and, on the other hand, the diversification of users' requirements and the growth of their exigency together with orientation towards a larger span of interests and training. The great need for employees correlated with the lack of working places on the national market has so much simplified recruitment that this is generally reduced to a passive act of registering the application of those who are acquaintances of library employees, especially of those in leading positions. Thus, state public libraries use the most inadequate method of recruitment which is one of the fundamental processes in human resource management. They do not revert to alternative solutions of publicity, active and continuous search for employees and the advice of professional consultants, lists of potential candidates or marketing activity. The

method of recruiting personnel according to family ties is recognized by the specialty literature as being dominated by a high level of subjectivism, and the permanent process of exerting pressure in order to employ a certain person. Similarly, a symptom of this method is that the person thus supported is uninterested in the job itself; he is only interested in getting a job, sometimes for a short period only. This situation together with the very low wage of most public library employees resulted in the high turnover of staff in the period after 1989, librarianship appearing as a "provisional" profession lacking perspective which has had an extremely unfavourable influence on permanent employees. Regarding the process of selection itself, the main stage of the general plan of recruitment, the strategy used by public libraries consists of compiling the applicant's file containing the necessary papers according to the legislation in force, a written examination in librarianship (a list of subjects is given or just a bibliography) and, finally, the interview. More developed libraries which have a computer network also added a practical test of minimal computer operating skills for candidates who will work as librarians, and a more complex test for those applying for a job in the Information Laboratories.

We do not have anything to say against the written exam, however, the oral exam or interview is superfluous as it only checks the knowledge of basic concepts in librarianship, asking useless questions, repeating those from the written exam instead of focussing on the personality of the candidate, skills required by the post and finally, his motivation in library work. General practice in conducting interviews shows that there is a predetermined choice and this has an inhibitory effect on candidates who feel that they will be rejected.

The lack of communicating the minimal amount of information is another shortcoming of contests as well as of any other library activity. A great number of candidates, both successful and rejected, complained that posts are not specified: only the necessary level of education and the duration of employment (permanent, limited period) is stated. This is often a handicap for

those who participate in the interview: they may be asked questions about their motivation in applying for an unspecified job.

Professional training of librarians appears to be a permanent preoccupation of these institutions. The fact that the great majority of employees do not have a proper training was a strong argument for “qualifying” them in their profession. Centralized national programs run in two or more annual sessions and led by librarianship specialists could be beneficial if they would not be formalist, that is, if their only aim would not be the conferring of diplomas alleging a high level of professionalism. In fact, the formality of these actions can be seen from their unfolding but also the uneconomical way in which they are organized. The costs of all public libraries in the country to send their employees to courses, on the one hand, and the completely inadequate accommodation and therefore improper conditions for studying, meals and transport, on the other hand, makes us think that there is an interest, rooted in inertia, of maintaining this program, which otherwise cannot be successful since there are insufficient tutors and very few time allocated for a great number of people. After two sessions followed by two years of individual practice participants must take an exam to obtain the librarianship diploma. Moreover, the experiences of more generations of librarians show a revolting subjectivity in evaluating librarians: very often a prepared person gets lower marks than another, completely uninterested and unprepared librarian. This is a major factor of lack of motivation, even if it is the result of an inter-institutional experience, still belonging to the image and prestige of the librarianship profession (their own profession) which is degraded because of this practice.

Another extremely important stage of human resource management is the evaluation of employees’ performance, characterized by “generous” appreciations, most of the marks being “good” or “excellent”. Conflicts generated by bad appreciations are avoided this way, because open conflicts should be solved and this requires the precious time of the manager. The issue of evaluation is closely connected to setting up norms of work – which is never done. Heads or departments argue that

librarians are underpaid, they do not work in optimal conditions and therefore it would be abusive to set up very strict norms. They rather adopt a protective attitude towards their subordinates. This might seem fair at first sight, from the perspective of a redressing ethics, but it is in fact completely incorrect professionally because norming is only perceived through its negative connotations. However, norms do not have a punitive role, but they are conceived to guide the employee in his professional activity, to provide him with points of reference and be able to make corrections in his work. Similarly, unidirectional evaluation is also symptomatic whereas Western institutions acquire extremely interesting and useful data where colleagues evaluate each other and even their immediate superiors. The lack of work norms has another consequence: an employee might be asked to self-evaluate and the evaluation file contains a set of values the description of which he encounters for the first time. Thus, in the spirit of self-defence he evaluates his intentions rather than his results which is most often in line with the tolerant manner of evaluators: results are far from the objective critical spirit and they are completely compromised.

There is also the tendency towards a predetermined verdict. Evaluation proper, the process of collaboration which has as its aim a consensus with the employee does not influence the initial conviction which proves the dominance of preconceived ideas, the inability to communicate and the practice of authoritarianism.

Having in view the defective way of applying individual evaluations, rewards have few chances of being equitably distributed, even if this is intended. Practice shows us that the allocation of these rewards is not based on evaluations which, we admit, would be difficult to make. Their number is limited and they are divided between departments according to the number of employees which is an abusive and irrelevant quantitative criterion when the intention is to reward quality. An extreme tendency is the existence of permanent beneficiaries and the opposite tendency of benefiting members of a service by rotation, according to a "democratic" principle. It also happens that rewards are given to

those who have difficulties in family life, a praiseworthy human gesture but one which is alienated from its initial purpose. The core reason for these actions is low wages which do not allow for the minimum standards of decent life. This is an explanation but not an excuse.

Other forms of supplementary financial rewards, premiums, for example, are never given for exceptional activities but for participating in activities outside service or supplementary working hours. Consequently, we can tell that it is extra payment for extra work which is far from the concept of reward.

Moreover, librarians' wage being less than half of the medium net wage for several years, this situation led managers to view it unidimensionally, through the restrictive prism of finance. Naturally, Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of human needs which is part of the basic notions of human resource management, supports this view, explaining that if basic needs are not satisfied, and the individual passes on to satisfying superior needs, a permanent state of frustration is generated which persists until the problem is solved. However, even if there is no compensatory mechanism, motivation does not end here. The experience of the national system of public libraries shows that there are no attempts at other motivation, the impasse is probably considered insurmountable. Moreover, the motivation of employees is not a priority among the preoccupations of the management, it is merely a subject of theoretical discussions; those who practice it and recommend it for others seem to be highly idealistic.

The library staff is presently growing young and this age specificity which makes assertion and the exploitation of its fresh potential points towards the method of motivating by encouraging initiative. Unfortunately, experience shows that this is transformed in de-motivation and an acceptance of the organizational tradition: people who come up with new ideas are not being granted the minimum number of collaborators and means of applying these ideas. All this leads to a dismal failure.

Preserving the couple of antagonistic forces, leadership and "executants", is also a tender spot. This chronic conflict, even if not overt, is based on the fundamental error of conceiving

professional relations rigidly, in a strictly hierarchical manner and ignoring the fact that all employees of a state institution are colleagues and there cannot be an employer-employee relationship as in the private sector. Not even there should this be based on "power shows". This problem has as its basis the organisational tradition according to which the higher a person is on the ladder of hierarchy, the greater his chances in maintaining his position until the end of his career. The quasi-impenetrable partition between these two types of employees is also symptomatic for this type of relationship. The rare exception is when there are strong informal relations between a person from the level of "executants" and one or more people from the leadership level which allows access. The comparison of the organization chart showing formal relationships with the sociogram revealing informal relations is very important in diagnosing intra-institutional relations. However, a sociogram would mean making a diagnosis and recognizing the existence of an impasse, detecting a crisis in the activity of an institution, a procedure which has not yet been done in any public library in the country. The causal circle closes, finally pointing towards managerial strategies.

After 1989 the authoritarian leadership style specific first of all for state institutions, transformed from the dictatorial regime into a paternalist one. The main cause for the change in nuance was the replacement of the old totalitarian political regime which authorized the ideologically motivated leadership as the only one possible, with a democratic one, which does no longer tolerate authority imposed by political reasons but the one based firstly on professionalism. The new situation was difficult for those in leadership positions because they had to make an effort of conversion based on ability and willingness. Those who did not pass the threshold of ability were probably dismissed, others still had to pass the test of willingness to be changed. Some of those who remained in leading positions continue to practice authoritarianism, unable to get rid of the mentality crystallized during the years of the totalitarian regime. However, this is a less radical authoritarianism; they humanized it to a paternalist level. The new structure of human resources in libraries shows the tendency of

growing young on the level of “executants” while the average age of those in leading positions is advanced. The theory of transaction analysis in human resource management gives an interesting explanation to the behaviour specific to this new leadership style which is favoured by the structure of library staff. According to this theory the human ego is divided into three states corresponding to *parent*, *adult* and *child*, states existing simultaneously in the individual. Only one of these is manifested in the two relations, components of the transaction called interaction between two individuals. In the case of librarians and library managers, the relation of stimulus or challenge on the part of the former is on the common level of adult state of the two individuals whereas the answer relation marks a shift towards the adult state of the manager and a shift towards the child state of the subordinate in their relation which implies the display of the superiority of the parent level as compared to the infantile level. The attitude is characterized by the tolerance of the mature towards the immature which in cases of crisis is replaced by a severe correction without explanation, specific to familial relations. This leadership style displays a greater understanding of personal problems than of professional problems. We could say that the two specific dimensions of this leadership are in a compensatory relationship: authoritarianism is characterized by focussing on the task and the results in the detriment of problems linked to the staff while paternalism is characterized by an exaggerated attention to the problems of the subordinates in an erroneous relationship between parent and child, an attitude which leads to the diminishing of the spirit of responsibility. Sometimes nuances of a populist style leadership appear, where the solution of harmonizing relations is in fact false and the quality counterfeited according to Blake-Mouton’s “managerial grid” model. Similarly, it is symptomatic that the view of the management upon human nature comes closer to “theory X” which does not credit human resources, than to “theory Y” which is favourable for it, according to McGregor’s theory. Mistaking or replacing the objectives of the library with the personal ambition of those in managerial positions greatly influences leadership style. The tendency to take decisions

on top, without consulting the subordinates results in managing the institution by commands which generates frustration, tension and conflict. The advantages of the strategy of making decisions by consensus or co-participation (increasing the chance of accepting decisions taken by the employees and increasing satisfaction in work which is at a critical level and, last but not least, ensuring the most efficient use of human resources) are not perceived.

The present stage of the organizational life of state public libraries, their dimension and their leadership style are not in harmony. Public libraries, with insignificant differences in this respect, are in a transitory state between the stages of growth and maturity (although in some cases we can detect symptoms similar to decline, we have decided that these are in fact manifestations of a crisis produced by the radical transformations imposed by the general context), where the strategic planning of human resources theoretically plays a vital role, while practically it is not among the priorities of management strategies.

In most cases management strategy is inadequate, of an entrepreneurial type, centred on the permanent search for new opportunities of development and less on "problem solving". There is a "personalized plan of attack" which is the manager's own perspective regarding lines of development. This leadership style centralizes the whole power of decision in the hands of a single individual who has a limited number of collaborators who strictly respect the line dictated by him. However, the entrepreneurial model corresponds to the initial stage in the life-cycle of an organization when this is small, has few employees and a very simple structure or when it is still unstructured. From a historical point of view and on account of their structure and number of employees, state public libraries are far from this stage and therefore require a managerial strategy oriented towards the administrative field and the development of skills in the field of interpersonal relations which stresses the importance of the human factor. A common consequence of the concentration of power on "top" is the division of tasks without ensuring the means of work and a minimal authority necessary for their accomplishment which increases bureaucracy in everyday activities (through repeated

returns from the bottom to the top of the hierarchy for approvals and more precise instructions) and leads to operational chronophagy. Unlike the entrepreneur-manager who must be a specialist in the activity of his organization, library managers must be first of all experts in planning and coordinating the process of decision-making, organization, motivation and control; it is enough if their speciality is in line with the cultural-informative nature of the institution. The fact that most library managers are specialists in one of the library's fields of activity is an extra advantage but it is not compulsory. We underline this because managers often impose their points of view on the activity of certain departments of strictly specialized profile even though this goes beyond their competence. These situations generate a state of crisis with the subordinates because they are in the delicate situation of disapproving of or contradicting their superiors, and very often they have to do this categorically, risking that their opposition on professional grounds is interpreted as insubordination on a hierarchical, administrative level.

Similarly, a specific action of human resource management in libraries is the non-observance of the planning of daily activities and including urgent projects that have initially not been included in the plan. These burden the employees' agenda and compel them in some cases to renounce planned activities. This practice generates stress and a permanent state of uncertainty. The crisis generated by these unforeseen urgencies sometimes leads to the non-observance of organizational hierarchy, top managers addressing the executive employee directly, in order to save time and this offends their direct superordinate and can come in contradiction with orders given by him.

Lacking the skill of rigorously planning everyday activity and creating a long-term plan of activity, managers must continually remind employees of special activities that they have to do besides permanent tasks. It is symptomatic that this reminder that should go from top to bottom on the organizational hierarchy is often left to the informal system of communication, especially if the subject is unpopular (e.g. the necessity of doing overtime).

Communication, the process of transmitting information which is a fundamental condition of founding an organization has a special role in libraries: besides being the fundamental element of functioning it is also the process of doing special activity. Public libraries today are diverse sources of information for the community. They have a traditional pyramid structure, not very high but more developed on the horizontal; therefore they should not encounter communication problems in the hierarchy system of formal relations, but reality shows that information circulates mainly on a horizontal level, between departments on the same level, and on informal channels which are subjective, aleatory, defective and often lead to the distortion of the message. This can be explained by two causes, a technical and a strategic one. The first is the lack of a coherent system of transmitting information and an efficient procedure of official communication with detailed rules and a number of people responsible for covering the whole organizational area. People in leading positions are responsible for transmitting the information necessary for the activity of the subordinates, however, it seems that formal communication has no tradition whereas informal communication is automatic and comes natural, functioning with the help of ad-hoc groups, based on sympathies and common interests.

The second cause is of a strategic-intentional nature, linked to the conviction that monopoly of information ensures power as position and authority. This explains the decrease in the amount of information as we descend the organizational hierarchy. This mentality is deeply rooted in the unofficial tradition of state institutions and implicitly of public libraries and is propagated through inertia, based on a general passive attitude.

Organizational culture and climate also show signs of the mentality characteristic to human resource management in state public libraries. We have repeatedly referred to organizational tradition which contains a series of values (in the ambivalent meaning of the word) which are preserved and propagate in time, accompanying the institution, but lacking coherence, unity and official or general recognition on the part of all members of the institution. Organizational culture is conceived as a system of

beliefs and values specific to the members of an organization which determines to a great extent the efficiency of the leadership style whereas organizational climate refers to the conditions which determine the “personality” of the institution. Unfortunately, we cannot speak about an organizational culture or a well-defined personality in the case of libraries because of the inadequate leadership style which favours (positive or negative) discrimination, and employees turnover. However, there are groups formed according to the common (professional or other) interest of their members which fight for “survival” in a disorganized and austere system and come close to a homogeneity and cohesion of interests and aspirations specific to a genuine organizational subculture which is permanently in an antagonistic, conflictual relationship. The “hidden” nature is specific to almost all these groups, their life and organizational activity going on mostly on the level of the informal, its members being sometimes uninterested in the aims and objectives of the institution. Public libraries face today a crisis in the profession which has lost some of its prestige and its former social and cultural importance in favour of new rivals on the market such as the press, radio and TV.

In the enumeration of specific practices of human resource management in public libraries we have tried to avoid the frequent tendency of pointing out a problem and indicating immediately, even automatically, a whole series of solutions which often prove to be impracticable as they are not in harmony with the characteristics of the situation. We focussed on the descriptive, phenomenological aspect, which highlights the mentalities behind these manifestations. We hope that our approach, with all its inequalities, will raise the interest of all those who work in such institutions and will be understood as a mature, justified intention to fight against mentalities (by no means individuals), mentalities which perpetuate through inertia, increasing their effect day after day.

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