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THE SYMBOLIC ENACTMENT OF POWER IN THE CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

(abstract)

Owing to the function they fulfil, those who manage the organizations, including the directors of the cultural centres, which this dissertation is about, attempt to build (enact) a symbolic representation of their leadership. In consequence, they plan, take appropriate actions and use suitable tools to perform them. Such actions, tools or signals are called signs in the following dissertation. A similar perspective has as been adopted by *inter alia* Antonina Kłoskowska.

The dissertation entitled “The symbolic enactment of power in the cultural institutions” is placed in the field of management, whose theoretical foundation was built on semiology and postmodernism. Semiology, a scientific concept developed by Ferdinand de Saussure, is linked to “the life of signs in the society”. In the postmodern approach to semiology (e.g. Umberto Eco, Roland Barthes), in turn, there is no one understanding of a sign; which means that not every decision a manager takes will be interpreted in the same way as the manager assumes. As a result, the final symbolic representation of power may turn not to be that favourable.

One of the most fundamental principles of the postmodern approach is social constructivism. The above-mentioned conception has been highly acclaimed by the scholars representing the field of management (e.g. Gareth Morgan, Barbara Czarniawska, Monika Kostera), so has it aroused the interest in the following work. It has been assumed that reality is socially constructed on the grounds of continual interpersonal interactions, which as well lead to symbolic exchanges between them. In the following dissertation an emphasis has been put on a specific kind of exchange, that is the transmission of signs between a director/manager and an employee. Since high importance in constructivism is assumed by the subjective understanding of reality, a director of the cultural centre should both pay attention to what signs s/he uses in the contacts with his/her employees, but also, or primarily, how such signs are interpreted.

The epistemological assumptions enabled us to formulate a research problem and put it in the form of a question: what representation of power do the directors of the cultural centres build in the minds of their employees using the signs they make. To address the question, the anthropological interviews with the employees and the directors of four Polish cultural institutions were conducted. The interpretation of the research data resulted in

distinguishing four separate persons of the symbolic enactment of power. In turn, with reference to the postmodern perspective in the management studies, the aforementioned persons were given metaphorical names: the enactment of power in the style of a “teddy bear”, a “guardian”, a “formalist” and a “chameleon”.

The symbolic enactment of power in the style of a “teddy bear” was characteristic of director Stefan. On the basis of the signs he showed, the employees perceived him in a twofold manner: as a friendly and delicate “teddy bear-teddy” and a friendly and firm “teddy bear-bear”. The representation of power which stayed in the consciousness of the employees was, after all, compatible with what Stefan had assumed.

Irena followed the style of a “guardian”. The said representation did not fully comply with what she strived for. She wanted to be perceived as a reliable, but friendly manager. Yet, the enactment of power of the style of a “guardian-guard (a controller of work) prevailed over a “guardian-host” (a leader of the organization).

The interpretation of signs director Lucyna formed was infrequently negative. The employees perceived her as a “formalist”, a person attaching too much importance to formal and office work. However, it happened that signs intertwined, thanks to which she managed to reduce the distance between her and her employees. Still though, the style characteristic of a “formalist-colleague” yielded to a “formalist-clerkess”.

The style of a “chameleon” was ascribed to director Zdzisław. Depending on the circumstances, he behaved as a chameleon. He changed a repertoire of signs and from a plain, not elegant superior, as he was perceived, he changed into a “real” manager. The employees, however, were aware of such camouflage. Thus, the symbolic enactment of power by Zdzisław was to be observed in two ways: a real one – a “chameleon-keeper” and a fake one – a “chameleon-dignitary”.

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