COMMUNICATION AND BUILDING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN PROJECT TEAMS IN NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

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Purpose: The aim of the study was to understand the role of communication and building positive relations in the NGO project team and to answer the following questions: (1) what factors and behaviors influence positive relations in the NGO project team? and (2) to what extent direct and indirect communication affect the efficiency of information flow?

Design/methodology/approach: The authors conducted a case study in a selected project team operating in a non-governmental organization in Poland.

Findings: The results of the study allow one to better understand the specific challenges the selected NGO project team was facing. Thus, they add new knowledge to the issues on effective communication and building positive relationships in NGO project teams. Moreover, the case study outcomes set the guidelines for further in-depth studies of a quantitative nature.

Research limitations/implications: Being aware of the limitations resulting from the deliberate selection of the project team for the study, an analysis of the answers obtained was undertaken, the results of which allow one to present the issues of communication and building positive relationships within project teams in non-governmental organizations. In order to make generalizations, further in-depth research in this area should be carried out.

Practical implications: In non-governmental organizations, authorities and project managers should increase their competences in the field of effective communication and building positive relationships in project teams in order to successfully implement projects.

Social implications: Knowledge of the methods of effective communication and building positive relationships in project teams allows to increase awareness among members of non-governmental organizations of how the ways of working and team involvement affect the success of projects.

Originality/value: A case study was conducted in a selected project team operating in an NGO on the importance of communication and building positive relationships. The article is addressed to people involved in NGO project management research and to third-sector entities.

Keywords: communication, relationship, project team, project management, non-governmental organizations.

Category of the paper: Case study.

1. Introduction

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operate in the economy alongside public administration and the private sector and form a separate community (Drucker, 1990; Etzioni, 1973; Marciszewska, 2017; Moroń, 2012; Ortega-Rodríguez et al., 2020). Increasingly, they achieve their goals through unique and complex endeavours, which are called projects (Marciszewska, 2019a, 2019b). Projects in non-governmental organizations slightly differ from those implemented in commercial entities. First of all, they are distinguished by the goal that is achieved in the project, values and motivation to act (Bogacz-Wojtanowska & Wrona, 2016; Stankiewicz & Seiler, 2013). The main goal of projects implemented by non-governmental organizations is to supplement activities for society, meet their needs or the needs of the members of the organization, and not monetary profit which, even if it appears, is not redistributed among the members of the organization (Anheier, 2005; Anheier & Kendall, 2000; Kwiecińska, 2008; Major & Spałek, 2019; Nanus & Dobbs, 1999; Trzciński, 2017a, 2017b). NGOs provide social services by raising funds from external sources or own profits generated (Herman & Heimovics, 1991). Peter Drucker has already stated that studies on management in entities of other sectors do not meet the needs of NGOs due to their specific nature. He drew attention to, inter alia, volunteers who operate in organizations next to paid employees and do not collect monetary remuneration for their work, the issue of their development, motivation and leadership of the team to which they belong (Drucker, 1990). An important element that arises in each project team are relationships that occur between individuals. They affect the flow of communication, cooperation, trust and the final result of the project. Building positive relationships, team integration and clear rules for the flow of information are especially important in project teams where people operate on a voluntary basis, because they allow the project team to unite and maintain the commitment of members throughout the project's duration (Trzciński, 2017a).

In the work of a project team, interpersonal relationships are just as important as in any other area of life, although they do not relate to one another in a natural way, and of the necessity to work with people who contribute to it. Members of the project team have no influence on who they will be working with, and thus with whom they will be communicating and forming relationships. The common goal pursued by the project team becomes the foundation of their interaction (Spalek, 2014). The balance between pursuing a set goal and maintaining positive relationships within the team makes the team work effectively (Bolstad, 2015). Relationships exist when basic conditions are met: people need to be aware of and count on one another, there must be some degree of mutual influence, social forms and expectations for one another must be agreed upon (Berger, 1993). Relations should be mutually satisfying, based on clear expectations, reciprocity and trust. The quality of relationships affects (Hamilton, 2008):

- Job satisfaction.
- Employee morale.
- Ability to meet the communication needs of others.
- Commitment to and knowledge of the enterprise.
- Improving creativity.
- Level of efficiency.
- Level of support.

Interpersonal relationships can also be defined as a set of communication relationships. Communication is a means of transmitting information for the implementation of the project. Communication management "includes processes required to ensure timely and correct planning, collection, creation, distribution, storage, retrieval, management, control, monitoring and final disposal of project information" (Project Management Institute, 2013, p. 281). The essence of project communication is to provide the right people with the right information at a given time, using the help of properly selected means (Wysocki & McGary, 2003). Thanks to communication, people influence and understand one another better and build relationships, groups and communities. Mutual understanding, control of emotions, compliance of verbal and non-verbal messages and trust promote the development of correct relationships and are the basis of good communication within the project team (Kandefer-Winter & Nadskakuła, 2016; Stoner et al., 1995).

Proper communication management of the project ensures effective cooperation of project team members and eliminates problems and conflicts (Trocki, 2012).The project manager, by using appropriate communication tools, is to build a strong, integrated and motivated project team with positive interpersonal relationships (Król, 2017; Musioł-Urbańczyk, 2010; Podgórska, 2018). Communication allows you to build a positive relationship, maintain it and inform you of changes occurring within it by conveying its character and essence. Each message contains content and a relational dimension. The relational dimension informs people about the relations and feelings that occur between the interlocutors. Relational messages meet social needs such as closeness, belonging, respect and control. Interpersonal relationships, in which a free and friendly atmosphere of action and supportive communication are important, ensure that the psychological and social needs of team members are met. Communication skills are important in maintaining positive relationships within the project team and in creating a climate of trust, cooperation and openness. Project teams that feel supported through a positive team atmosphere are more efficient (Hamilton, 2008). Factors influencing relationships are:

- Manner of delivering a message (verbal and non-verbal communication).
- Communication channel (direct and indirect communication).
- Type of relationship (official, unofficial).
- Attitude towards the team member (positive, negative).

There are 6 types of behavior supporting communication and 6 types of defensive communication (Gibb, 1961). Types of communication that support the achievement of project goals are: communication describing situations and feelings, commitment to joint problem solving, openness and honesty, empathic communication, equality of all team members and the open exchange of ideas. Defensive communication is characterized by: assessing, controlling and manipulating the activities of project team members, lack of interest and cooperation within the group, lack of trust among project team members, assigning power, status and value to selected people or ideas and a lack of flexibility towards new ideas. Defensive communication intensifies unhealthy competition, arouses negative emotions in the members of the project team and hinders the achievement of the goal.

The authors conducted a case study in a selected project team operating in a non-governmental organization regarding the importance of communication and building positive relationships. The purpose of the article is to present the importance of project implementation based on communication and the positive relationships of team members.

2. Materials and methods

The research was undertaken in the form of a case study within a specifically selected project team. The team was selected for research according to the following criteria: 4-6 people, people participating in the project acted on a voluntary basis, the team was constant throughout the project implementation period, the project involved direct and indirect communication, the project lasted from 2 to 4 months and was implemented in an association operating in Poland, having been present on the market for at least a year, in which at least 3 projects are implemented annually. The studied project team consisted of 5 people. The respondents implemented a social project as part of the Free Tea Association (FTA), which operates in Poland. The FTA has been a formally registered, non-governmental organization since 2017 and cooperates with domestic, foreign and international non-governmental organizations, public and private, as well as any other entities that support or want to support activities in accordance with the Association's articles of association. It bases its activities on the social work of members and volunteers. The Free Tea Association conducts activities for the development of ecological awareness and promotes pro-ecological behavior, the idea of sustainable development, social integration, and counteracts all types of discrimination. The FTA carries out an average of 6 projects a year and ensures that their activities reflect the beliefs of their members.

A survey among members of the project team was adopted as a research tool. The survey consisted of three parts: metrics, assessment of relationships among project team members, and an assessment of communication among project team members. The survey was conducted electronically. The examined team implemented a project regarding the organization of workshops and lectures on zero waste at the University of Silesia in Katowice. The project lasted 3 months and was successful in that all its goals were achieved and the results met the expectations of the project's stakeholders. The beneficiaries of the project were residents of the Silesian province that wanted to broaden their ecological knowledge. The following are the main characteristics of the selected project team:

- The team consisted of people aged 26-35, with varying levels of experience in project implementation.
- Relations between team members and the project manager were informal, all team members have equal rights.
- The role of the project manager is to coordinate activities, ensure timely implementation and formal closure of the project.
- The composition of the project team was consistent throughout the project's implementation period and consisted of 5 people.
- Team members belong to the NGO known as, 'The FTA' The project implemented by the team was part of the organization's statutory activity and was based on their knowledge and experience obtained in other projects. The project was financed by the Micro Grant program implemented by Katowice City of Gardens - Institute of Culture. No personal costs were incurred.

3. Results

The first part of the survey concerned the assessment of relationships within the project team under scrutiny: factors that shape relationships within the project team, behaviors and types of messages that shape relationships within the project team.

Figure 1 presents the assessment (average number) of the impact of selected factors on the development of positive relationships within the project team. Respondents stated that the greatest influence on shaping relations within the project team was the freedom to express opinions (5), forge a cordial atmosphere conducive to effective cooperation (4.8) and foster a degree of trust within the team (4.6). Team members rated the impact of all team members' involvement in the project higher (4.4) than their own (4.2). The respondents rated the degree of support within the team the lowest (4.2) and the sense of security in the project in the context of impact on relationships within the project team (4.0).
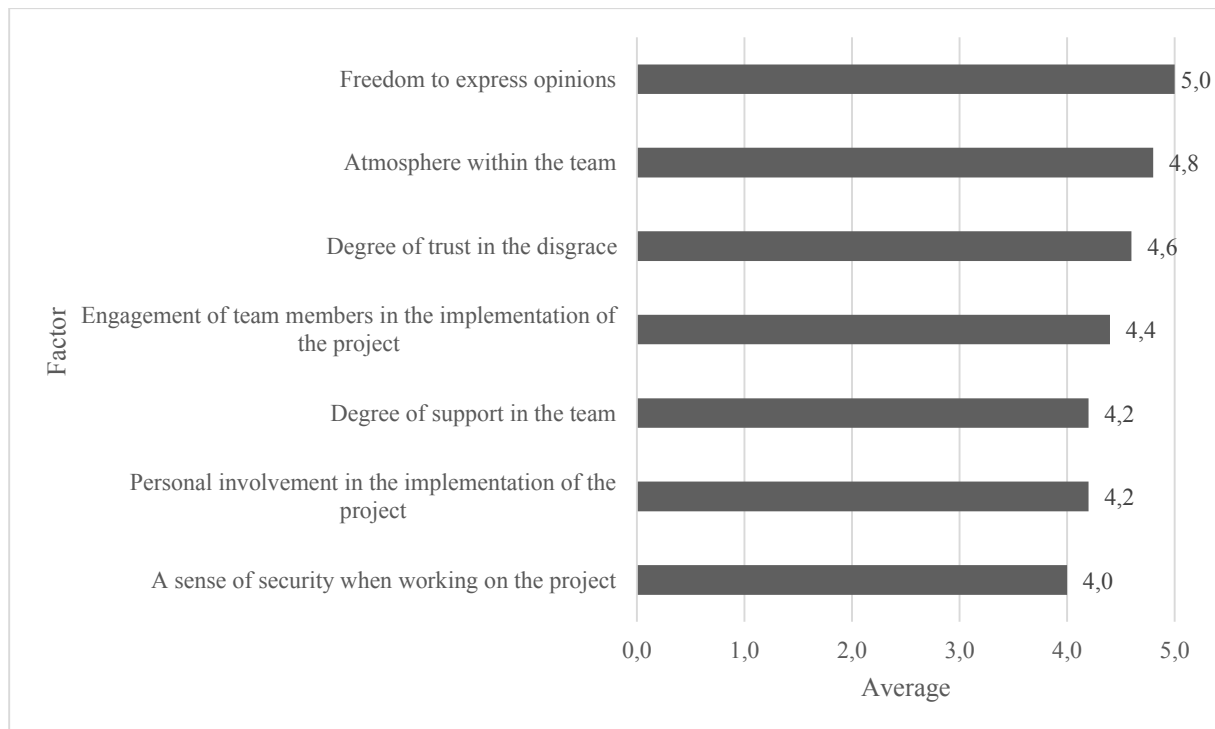
Figure 1. The average level of impact of selected factors on the formation of positive relationships in the team implementing the project under the Free Tea Association. Source: own study.

In the next question, the respondents had a choice of 23 statements that described both behaviors shaping a positive atmosphere of cooperation and supporting communication, as well as shaping a negative atmosphere of cooperation and characterizing defensive communication. All team members expressed that they felt appreciated, listened to and respected and that an open exchange of ideas and conversations among team members was conducted in an open and free manner. All team members associate positive project relationships with project success. 4 out of 5 members felt acceptance among the rest of the team and recognized that the project was oriented towards joint problem solving, openness, honesty, sharing information and that there was a positive cooperation environment. Three out of four team members said they felt support and empathy from other team members and that there was equality for all team members and a high level of trust. 2 out of 5 team members said that the degree of security in the project was high, communication was based on the description of the situation and feelings, and conflicts were resolved on an ongoing basis. The same number of people asserted that they contributed significantly to the project's results. The team did not examine: the assessing of the activities of project team members, controlling the activities of project team members, manipulating the activities of project team members, lack of interest from the project manager and lack of cooperation within the group, lack of trust between project team members, assigning power, status and values to selected people or ideas, lack of flexibility towards new ideas. Based on the choice of statements regarding the respondents' responses, it can be determined that the project only contained behaviors shaping a positive spirit of cooperation and supporting communication.

In the next part of the survey, the respondents expressed that the specificity of the project they carried out required direct and indirect communication from team members. Direct communication is face to face contact. Indirect transmission of information is carried out by means of electronic devices (Adams & Galanes, 2006). It is important whether the communication takes place directly or by using tools supporting distance work. The reception and impact of the message displayed on the computer screen is different, and different when we have personal contact with the caller. The frequency of use and effectiveness of individual communication channels were examined.

Table 1.
Evaluation of the frequency of use and the effectiveness of various communication channels as a team implementing the project within the framework of the FTA

Item	Communication	Responses	
		evaluation of the frequency of use in the project where 1 is not used at all, 5 are very often used	evaluation of effectiveness, where 1 is ineffective, 5 is very effective
1.	Direct communication (face-to-face meetings)	3,8	4,2
2.	Indirect communication		
3.	E-mail	4,8	4,0
4.	Telephone calls	4,8	4,0
5.	Virtual disks	4,8	4,0
6.	Video calling	4,8	3,4
7.	Online messengers	4,8	4,0

Source: own study.

The results presented in Table 1 show that in the examined project team, indirect communication (4.8) was used more often, which was conducted using emails, phone calls, virtual discs, video calls and online messengers. In terms of effectiveness, respondents rated video calls as a form of indirect communication (3.4). Other forms of communication were equally effective (4.0). Direct communication was used less frequently in the project (3.8) despite the fact that it was rated higher in terms of effectiveness (4.2) than any of the above-mentioned forms of indirect communication. Indirect communication dominated the project because in the organization, the majority of projects are implemented by means of remote communication due to care for the natural environment. Good practices in this area concern allowing employees to work remotely in order to limit the number of trips to meetings. The respondents admitted that they were aware and see differences in the effectiveness of using indirect communication, but the specificity of work on social projects does not allow its limitation, and even forces it to be used to a greater extent. In this case, the lower assessment of the effectiveness of indirect communication did not affect the success of the project. Team members emphasize, however, that complete elimination of direct communication is not possible because it is the team's face-to-face meetings that are the basis for building positive relationships within the team and involvement in the project. The board of the organization is constantly working to improve indirect communication and increase its effectiveness in subsequent projects.

4. Discussion and summary

This article attempts to answer the first research question 1) What factors and behaviors influence positive relations in the NGO project team? In the examined project team, the respondents indicated that freedom in expressing opinions, a positive vibe of cooperation and a high degree of trust within the team are the three most important factors shaping positive relations among its members.

Hamilton, in his research emphasizes that project teams that feel supported by a positive team atmosphere are more efficient. A feature that makes project teams succeed is the positive climate of cooperation which is created, amongst other things, by the ability to effectively communicate within the project team and to instill trust and mutual support. Positive relationships contribute to an increase in the sense of security and trust, making the expression of opinions and feelings happen more freely. Respect and active listening are the basic elements influencing good relations within the project team. Lack of respect and the inability to listen actively lead to ignorance or interruption of the interlocutor's statements. These behaviors negatively affect the atmosphere in the project team and cause communication disruptions. Negative relationships cause suspicion and distrust (Hamilton, 2008).

Freedom in expressing opinions, a positive vibe of cooperation and a high degree of trust are in line with the ideas of non-governmental organizations' activities mentioned in the literature on the subject. Bogacz-Wojtanowska in her research defined the features that characterize non-governmental organizations and they include, among others: the attitude of trust, participation and willingness to act together (Bogacz-Wojtanowska, 2006).

In the examined organization, in all implemented projects there was an informal type of contact between employees, equality between all members of the project team, friendly relations and a limiting of the role of the project manager to the coordinator of activities, which ensures the timeliness of their implementation and formal closure of the project. This approach is conducive to cooperation, proper understanding of the project goals, building positive relationships within the team and exchange of information. In addition, it makes ideas, opinions and views easy to readily exchange, during conflicts it is easier to get support and understanding and employees are more open and have a sense of collective responsibility for the project. The voluntariness of joining the organization, identifying each member with the organization's activities and prevailing positive relations in projects allows the creation of a friendly place for development, exchange of knowledge and self-fulfillment on various planes. Adler & Elmhorst in their research emphasize that the synergy of correct communication, relationships, cooperation and coordination leads to the success of the project. This approach most supports members' involvement in the project (Adler & Elmhorst, 2005).

It can be seen that in the studied project team, there were only behaviors shaping a positive sense of cooperation and supporting communication. In each case, positive responses were marked by at least two members of the project team. Morreale and all have shown in their research that the increase in positive interpersonal relationships increases the number and quality of relayed messages (Morreale i in., 2007). Negative behaviors and manifestations of defensive communication were not indicated by any study participant.

Another activity undertaken in this study was to obtain an answer to the second research question (2) to what extent direct and indirect communication affect the efficiency of information flow? Respondents contended that direct communication was more effective in the implemented project than indirect communication and greater supported building relationships within the group. Research confirms the achievements of other researchers in this area (Adler & Elmhorst, 2005; Kandefer-Winter & Nadskakuła, 2016; Major & Spałek, 2017).

The results of research in the field of communication and building positive relationships in project teams in non-governmental organizations extend the existing literature on the subject to include this issue. The authors, based on a case study conducted in a non-governmental organization, focused on the specificity of third sector organizations. The success of projects depends, to a large extent, on the way the teams work and are involved. In order to implement the project, members of project teams interact and enter into relationships with one another. In projects run by NGOs, aspects such as communication and positive relationships within a team are of particular importance. Members of social projects often do not receive remuneration for their work, so they should be motivated to act in a different way. Being aware of the limitations resulting from the conscious selection of the project team for the study, in order to make generalizations, further in-depth research in this area should be carried out.

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