

## The Organizational Consultancy and Communication in the Covid-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

*In the context of the requirements of physical distance and health security imposed by the global Covid-19 pandemic situation, it is necessary to adapt consulting services and organizational communication. The aim of the paper is to identify the adaptation measures taken by economic organizations and entities, in their concern to facilitate the communication of information of public interest, necessary to make effective decisions on adaptation to the restrictions generated by the pandemic crisis. Crisis management consultancy and support for combating the effects of the crisis in the community are areas that become the concern of specialized practitioners professional services for managers and can focus their services on the staff of an organization in isolation imposed by the authorities or performing work activities at home, adaptation being made to reduce the effects of the pandemic on the organizations and communities in which they operate.*

**Key words:** organizational consultancy, organizational communication, Covid-19, online, philosophical practice.

**J.E.L. classification :** M10, M14

### 1. Introduction

The Covid-19 crisis is generated by the existence and effects of the pandemic to which all mankind is subjected and to which the possibility of response is limited, due to the fact that an invisible entity attacks human beings and produces victims, testing thus the medical centers, which are in a position not to have the necessary means to effectively fight the pandemic Covid-19 virus, through its presence in most countries. All states have had defensive reactions, taking harsh individual isolation measures, that have led to the cessation of day-to-day activities, except for those necessary for human existence and the functioning of the vital structures of a society, meaning that governments have stated with some ease "the state of emergency", as being the only immediate solution, derived from the extent of the global pandemic, but also from the lack of information about the mode of action and effects of the Covid-19 virus, which soon became a global pandemic. The measures taken by the closure of economies, by stopping current production and service activities, in the context of the beginning pandemic of a global crisis, have generated negative effects for all economies, implicitly attracting increased financial effort, in an attempt to compensate for losses at the level of organizations but also at the level of the person, who were obliged to take firm measures to protect public health and people working in each economic sector. Thus, some of the activities, if their specificity allowed, were transferred to the work format at home, employees using online connections to communicate with the organization.

Starting from the analysis of these experiences and the unwanted measures to which all mankind has been subjected, we believe that the use of specific elements of counseling, including that derived from philosophical practice, along with some specific forms of communication in crisis situations, can help us to overcome crisis, by rediscovering the common good followed by the activation of a real human solidarity, which has as main directive the protection of each person, which will implicitly lead to the protection of the whole society. We believe that both philosophical practice, in the form of counseling and consulting applied to individuals and organizations, together with a segment of communication, that of organizational communication, have a huge potential for support for all state entities and institutions involved in combating the global pandemic, and for that reason we consider that the real involvement of specialists and practitioners in these specializations is necessary, in order to be attracted as experts in decision-making teams, both at medical and crisis management level, or who can offer their specialized services to both individuals or groups of people who need support in understanding and accepting the restrictive measures to which they are subjected, or by attracting them to the level of organizations operating in the economy, which have been affected by the crisis in various forms. The paper presents some adaptations that can be made to the forms of philosophical practice, applied ethics and organizational communication, by presenting services that can be carried out online or by rethinking activities, especially those specific to organizational consulting, which must be adapted to new requirements of physical distance or the health norms imposed by the pandemic state. Among the major effects of the state of emergency, in which a large part of the planet's people were forced to accept them immediately, by ceasing activities, isolation at home, combined with work from home (if the specificity of activities allowed this possibility, and using the Internet as a means of communication), that effects was felt mainly by those who repositioned their activity at home, as well as by their families, but also by the economic entities and the communities in which they are located.

## **2. Theoretical background**

To talk about adaptations of the philosophical practice of the pandemic crisis, it is necessary to briefly review the philosophical theory of utilitarianism, initiated by Jeremy Bentham (Buckingham, 2011: 190) and continued by John Stuart Mill, (Mill, 2014), who supports the application of the principle common good, taken for the benefit of as many people as possible, a theory that we believe should be the basis of decisions of an organization or community, interpretation in the sense that a person can make decisions that affect only his person, not that of to harm others by his decisions or actions. In order to understand and accept the measures taken by the states of the world in combating the effects of the Covid-19 virus pandemic, we also consider the fact that human society can be seen as a social contract, an idea developed by philosophers Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Edmund Burke (Buckingham, 2011: 172), and later by Jean Jacques Rousseau, who stands out by presenting a model of social contract, in the book of the same name (Rousseau, 2016). A direct involvement of philosophical practice in the life of the society affected by the pandemic crisis they can have practitioners and ethics specialists in organizational consulting, as well as communication and decision-making consultants, the specialists who can successfully work in teams of leaders and managers, and who were surprised due to the effects of the pandemic crisis, they were forced to make quick decisions, caused by government measures to cease activities or to transfer activities online or at the employee's home, to avoid the health risk of the person, by attack of the pandemic virus.

The global pandemic has brought many challenges to company leadership, which are subject to unprecedented medical restrictions, which have required a rapid adaptation of production strategies, followed by a rethinking of product and material flows to meet the requirements of protection of the staff but also of the community where they work. The actions of the leaders have changed radically, by amplifying and taking of responsible measures to ensure care for the other members of the organization but also for all members of community.

If prior to the pandemic crisis, leadership had a dominant tendency for the personal development of the management team, to achieve a set performance targets, followed by the organizational and social leadership, reflected by the social responsibility measures of the organization, now priorities are changed, and they focusing on the last two categories of leadership stated, both organizationally and socially, in order to respond promptly to all the challenges posed by the pandemic crisis. The need to develop social leadership was anticipated by the spiritual leader Dalai Lama, who had a dialogue with economist Sander Tideman in 2015, and they highlighted the need to implement social leadership in business (Tideman, 201: 265), thus influencing the common goal pursued, through rapid changes and adaptations, as an effect of the crisis facing humanity.

Taking the measures for pandemic, the government have affected both sectors of the economy, both public and private, with serious influences on jobs, unemployment at first being of a technical nature, through the partial remuneration of employees, during the state of emergency, after which the unemployment became effective through the closure of economic activities or the bankruptcy of companies. Another part of the activities was relocated in the form of work at home, where the characteristic of the activity and the logistics offered favored relocation, a measure that deeply affected many groups of workers, their families but also organizations that reduced certain sectors of activity managed to protect the health of employees. In support of those who have had the chance to relocate at home, counseling specialists can intervene by offering online counseling sessions, which can be conducted either individually, at the initiative of the person or as a group, at the initiative of the employer who appreciates and knows the efficiency intervention of a specialist, to resolve the problems caused by restrictions imposed to limit the spread of the pandemic and protect communities. To combat the pandemic crisis we are going through, many practitioners met online in July 2020 at the annual meeting of practitioners, at which Vaughana Feary, vice president of the American Association (APPA) launched the topic of debate, about how philosophical practitioners can intervene in the context of the crisis caused by the Covid-19? (Feary, 2020), some of the papers presented were published in the journal *Philosophical Practice*, which provided ample editorial space for a special session on specific topics to combat the effects of this global crisis.

A concern in this regard was made by Brazilian practitioner André Almeida who presented at the International Conference of Philosophical Practitioners ([www.icpp2020.ru](http://www.icpp2020.ru)) a model for using philosophical practice as a way to support business executives during crises (Almeida, 2020), and he brings arguments in favor of philosophical practice, which provides tools to support the leaders of organizations. Almeida's approach is based on the premise that directors are constantly faced with choices that may be contrary to the ethics or performance required of the company, which involve dilemmas regarding making optimal decisions about dismissing employees, reducing or closing the business. In times of crisis the choices that leaders have to make are special, with effects on communities, which is why philosophical practice offers practical solutions and good specialists who can provide support to managers in times of crisis, they can act directly or in mixed coaching teams, along with other specialists involved in supporting leaders, for making difficult decisions.

Given the conditions of physical security, especially those of physical distance imposed by the authorities, we also consider the practices of individual or group philosophical counseling, which can be done online by specialized practitioners, the virtual environment becoming a safe work option, being used successfully by both parties involved in the process, by using connections or online communication applications, in audio-video format, which becomes a real meeting place, virtual this time, used for an effective counseling process or applied consulting.

The practitioners who worked during this period to individually counsel the people affected by the pandemic, they considered necessary the adaptation of the counseling practice methodology, aimed at observing the manifestations of the counselee, they are concerned to reduce and combat the emotional effects of the pandemic on the person, taking into account the fear of virus, according with the real risk of contamination, effects which also affected the health of the person, with major risks to his life, due to the severity of the disease and due to ineffective medications to fight with this disease. The pandemic has radically changed the lives of most people, by exposing all of humanity to

pandemic risk, but also by the uncertainties generated by it, which highlights the fragility of the human being in front of an invisible enemy, which requires the development the awareness of the person and to the community level (Repetti, 2020), a process in which philosophical practitioners and specialized consultants can be actively and efficiently involved, especially if they are included in work teams, to provide specialized service packages to the vulnerable staff within the organization, which has been the subject to the pandemic restrictions.

American consultant and practitioner Eklof Todd shows the possibility of philosophy to get involved in solving global crisis problems, which are similar to other major problems that philosophers have or have faced and solved many times (Eklof, 2020), referring to well-known philosophers, such as Thales of Miletus, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Søren Kierkegaard, William James, John Dewey, Erich Fromm and Lou Marinoff, philosophers who also considered the healing side of philosophy, which can be applied in combating the effects of the current crisis. If prior to the pandemic, practitioner Lou Marinoff frequently used in his philosophical practice references to philosophical works, which were studied and discussed with the counselee persons, in the form of bibliotherapy (Haşegan, 2018: 158), the concept can be taken up by other practitioners interested in the counseling and consultancy offered, referring to works of literature that addressed the theme of pandemics, the author referring to the novel *Plague* by Albert Camus or other works from the universal literature in which useful ideas for current counseling practices are identified (Jones, 2020), and these can be recommended as life lessons to clients to understand the course of events in other times, in which humanity has faced such pandemics or crises.

### **3. Research methodology**

In order to carry out this work, we started from the observation of the pandemic crisis situation faced by all countries of the world, local communities and implicitly economic and service organizations, as well as institutions called to ensure the protection of public health; followed by studying the actions and measures that have been taken, especially at the level of business organizations, to reorganize the activity and adapt to the restrictions imposed in combating the effects of pandemic. By studying the scientific papers and communications made by the specialists and practitioners in organizational consulting, we aim to generate questions that lead us to finding arguments to support the opportunity to implement working methods and tools specific to the field of philosophical practice for organizations, adapted to new forms of work, namely the presentation of online organizational consultancy, as a necessary solution to meet the requirements of physical distance from participants in the counseling process, with particular reference to management teams facing optimal measures for crisis management. The research is also extended to the crisis measures taken in the communication process of organizations, the way in which it was adapted to the crisis situation, and the reporting to the existing theoretical model, specific to the crisis communication of organizations. The argumentative analysis used is also based on the formulation of questions to generate answers, followed by observations on the effects of the crisis on the organization and the community, as well as the generation of conclusions on improving crisis management, organizational communication and marketing, as support measures. and improving the work of organizations to overcome and limit the effects of the crisis.

### **4. Findings**

#### **4.1. Characteristics of adapting consulting to the online mode**

In order to highlight these specific features generated by the adaptation of organizational or group consultancy to the online environment, we must show what are the advantages that support these changes, in addition to the urgency imposed by the severity of the pandemic, which accelerated the transition to online communication; in this field of consulting, considered so far to be one dedicated to direct meetings between the specialist and the participants in the process. A first advantage of such

counseling, conducted online, is the elimination of so-called space-time limitations, which were often imposed in direct meetings, which were held in specialized locations or offices, often with a limited time available which results from the agenda of the counseling participants, offering them moments of reflection, which can be useful to achieve the stated purpose of the counseling process.

Another advantage is given by the so-called *the screen effect*, which can generate a disinhibition states on the participants in the process, who benefit from the facilities offered by the screen of a computer or telephone, through which video communication with the counseling specialist takes place (Weinberg, Rolnick, 2020: 356), followed by the advantage of ensuring the confidentiality of the counseling and consulting process (Weinberg, Rolnick, 2020: 379) resulting from the same organized framework of the consulting process, and which is applied to all communication between the specialist and the recipient of his service, including on correspondence that takes place before or during the process, through the use of other means of electronic communication, such as email, working groups or forums, applications or platforms that allow meetings such as videoconferencing, and which allow the participation of groups of people who can benefit from the advice provided by a facilitator specialized in organizational consultancy or group counseling. The next benefit is provided by technology, which in addition to facilitating online communication, also offers the option of recording a work session, if participants agree, so that the recorded material can be reviewed later by either party, a facility that can help achieve the objective proposed at the start of the counseling or consultancy process, or to provide clarification on the topic under discussion or the dilemma under discussion. The online format offered through the videoconferencing procedure will avoid any interpersonal interactions of the participants, throughout it, which take place spontaneously in face-to-face meetings, because the application used for online communication allows the facilitator for monitoring the participants on the same screen, and he will also establish the order in which they can intervene on the topic or subject under debate. We recommend that before starting an online workshop, the parties clearly define their conditions and rules to be followed throughout the procedure, review and ensure that they have the skills and abilities to use technology and programs that facilitate online communication, and take measures to ensure optimal working conditions, by eliminating disruptive factors (telephone, bell, noises, etc.) and avoiding interruptions during the consulting or counseling process.

#### **4.2. Aspects of organizational communication in times of crisis**

The communication is considered to be an important element in a defense system of each economic entity facing specific crisis situations (Haineş, 2008: 135), all the more applicable to the pandemic state in which humanity is now, this being one of the situations that can be considered a major crisis, which requires the adoption of rapid solutions to adapt economic activities to the conditions of physical distancing, in order to protect the health of all staff of the organization and the community. The management teams focused on an effective internal communication with all employees, in order to maintain the security and the feeling of belonging to an involved organization, concerned with protecting their lives, and ensuring continuity, specially if the specific activity allowed the relocation of activities that can be carried out from home, in the form of telework, or through organizational measures to ensure the desired distancing, to protect their health. Communication with employees during the covid-19 pandemic is a topic for researchers, who aim to track what they communicate and how they communicate with them. (Sanders et al., 2020).

To this sense, the investments have been made in the field of IT and connectivity, measures by which employees have been supported to carry out some activities from home, through online connections or applications, or through video communication platforms, which have ensured operational communication between the management team and departments or work sections within an organization. Digitization also had negative effects because it excluded from communication people who did not have access to the Internet, especially children from poor areas or those who do not know how to use a computer, such as retirees (Barnes, 2020).

In order to increase the compliance of all staff in compliance with preventive and protective measures, taken in the context of the pandemic, we believe that the entire communication process that takes place at the organizational level, must meet minimum requirements in order to communicate decisions regarding these aspects should be made operative, clearly, through crisis cells or compartments, made up of managers and specialists in organizational communication, compartments that become functional in crisis situations, of any area. The correct, efficient and operative information process of all the workers of an organization, on the pandemic effects within the organization, as well as the updating of the measures taken to combat it, must become a concern of each management team, by using online communication tools, in the form of the information addressed to all staff, or through communiqués addressed to the community in which the economic entity operates, in order to position itself in consensus with other measures taken within the community to protect the life and health of employees and their families.

In this field, the leadership has in attention the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) actions, to be destined including for community, referring about all organizational measures or actions for protect his employees, to combat the pandemic effects, and for doing that, they can use the press online or media communication tools for promoting the CSR reports in community where was included information about the impact of Covid-19 in organization activity. Leadership also has as its main concern to provide all employees with the necessary income or options to access emergency funds offered by the government in an attempt to offset the effects of the crisis, through measures taken that have severely affected some sectors, such as the hotels and restaurant services sector, which were forced to cease operations in a so-called the lockdown by world governments, which have led to huge losses in these areas, both for companies and this sector.

The communication strategies of an organization must take into account all the elements of the crisis, which affect both the organization and the people who position themselves in a certain way, to take into account emotional aspects generated by the evolution of the pandemic state, to carefully monitor the reactions obtained. following the organizational communication carried out, also aiming to achieve strategic communication, which can have the effect of reducing the effects caused by the pandemic, using for this purpose specialists who can send correct messages, which can influence or induce specific compliance behaviors , on compliance with the announced rules and measures imposed by the authorities to overcome the crisis. With the establishment of isolation state, people sought new directions of communication, using excessively and compulsively the social networks or other media streams, which often presented unverified and alarmist information, which led to the maintenance of a general state of panic or anxiety, also generated by the measures taken by the authorities to combat the pandemic crisis. An alarm signal on the excessive use of the Internet, which can significantly affect a person's self-perception, was recently maked by the American practitioner Alexander Schumm who makes references to philosophers such as: Marcus Aurelius, Kant, Heidegger, to supports his arguments recently published in the special issue of journal - *Philosophical Practice* (Schumm, 2020), drawing on the experience of practitioners in philosophy, actively involved in providing online services to both individuals and economic entities interested in this new type of counseling and consultancy.

#### **4.3. The pandemic adaptations of the practices for community**

The consultancy and applied ethics services are also useful in community entities or administrative institutions that have a decisive role in local crisis management, which had to making decisions for the community, especially when due to the high rate of contamination, they have established measures to quarantine or isolating affected areas, or entire communities, in order to protect the affected community by the pandemic virus. We also find the effects of the pandemic crisis in the smaller communities, such as senior care centers or support centers for disadvantaged people, who need specialized support to deal with the effects of the imposed isolation and to be aware of the need to comply with the rules for physical distance, to protect the health of the person and the group, a situation in which among the specialists who can be attracted in counseling activities may include

new specialists, the philosophical practitioners, with expertise in these sensitive areas, or experts in facilitating groups, who can use the meeting in online, in safety for all participants, to reduce the effects of the pandemic. The bioethics specialists come from philosophical practitioners area, and they can be attracted to support staff in the field of palliative care for patients, by organizing online meetings with them or with the assisted persons's families, to clarify issues related to the patient's suffering, but also other amplified fears of the pandemic. Moreover, at the level of some communities, we consider it necessary to create public debates in which the philosophical specialists, the ethicists and organizational consultants, along with other decision-makers for the community, can participate, to argue and combat some current trends that have occurred sporadically and only in small communities, through manifestations of exclusion or avoidance of persons who have been unlucky enough to become ill and who are stigmatized for doing so, although they have been declared cured and do not pose a danger to the family, or for this reason they having the problems with access to certain organizations, workplaces or other unexpected restrictions.

The organizational consultant is now the specialist who can include in his package of services the solution of this type of problem, which may occur in the selection of staff or promotion to certain positions, and through the advice provided, can influence firm measures or decisions to avoid any such discrimination, such as the exclusion or marginalization of persons in the organization who have contracted the disease caused by the Covid-19 virus but who have recovered and may present negative tests in order to be reintegrated into the organization or the community, where they belong.

## 5. Conclusions

The paper started from the study of the restrictive conditions generated by the global pandemic state, which imposed the new adaptations in the field of consulting services, provided by specialists through technology, which can facilitate remote meetings, ensuring the safety of individuals participating in individual counseling or organizational consultancy, to which we refer, as well as in making decisions by the leadership of companies, by involving them in social actions designed to support the community in times of crisis. All these adaptations presented, on the philosophical practices performed by specialists in various forms, have now become more than necessary for a human society undergoing a major crisis generated by the pandemic virus, adaptations that can play an important role in managing and limiting the effects of the global crisis who surprised the whole of humanity, and which imposed restrictive measures with future effects on the people, the national economies and contemporary society as a whole.

The topic approach in this paper can be continued and researched in the future by mixed teams, consisting of researchers concerned with economics and business, which can be joined by practitioners in the field of philosophy and ethics, or other specialists interested in developing the new professions, such: the ethics counselor or the organizational philosophical consultant, which are promoted as a new specializations of philosophical practice, with high potential in providing professional services for individuals, organizations, institutions and communities.

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