The organizational change of a Social Security Centre of Occupational Activities: An action-research project

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1. ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT AND INTERVENTION REQUEST

Scope and Request
Request: to analyze the problems identified and felt by the organizational members in one of the Porto’s Solidarity and Social Security Occupational Activities Centre.
Request origin: the Center’s Director.

The context: An Occupational Activities Centre (CAO’s)

Nature: Redefined government structures with the purpose to develop adequate activities for young adults with severe mental disorder and handicap (prior Special Educational Centers).

CAO’s objectives:
- To give its beneficiaries the opportunity to:
  - Develop socially useful and strictly occupational activities;
  - Permanent physical, mental and social technical support;
  - Participate in cultural, sportive and recreational activities.

2. INTERVENTION/ACTION PROCESS

PHASE 1: THE FIRST WORK JOURNEYS – MAKING A DIAGNOSIS

Aim: Diagnosing, in a collaborative way, the workers and organization’s problems and needs, considering the new formal nature of the organization, imposed by law—CAO

Method: Action-research methodology, using Focus-group.

Procedure:
- The 8 hours session was organized in 4 specific moments. Following a script participants reflected about their job position in the Center and their perceived constraints.

Results:
- Personnel development needs in mental disorder and handicap
- Personnel mental and physical burnout due to occupation
- Organizational communication problems;
- Implicit conflict between the existing professional groups;
- Organizational financial, material and human resources deficiencies.

PHASE 2: GETTING THE WORK DONE

1st step: Workers job analysis and Center’s functioning

Aims:
- Gather data about the organizational processes:
  - Workers’ job;
  - Articulation between workers job and Center’s objectives;
  - Identifying problems present in the Center’s everyday processes;
- Establish a strong relation between Intervention Team and organizational members.

Gathering data techniques: individual and collective interviews; diaries

Procedure: interviews where held at the Center; diaries where given to each workers and them returned when completed.

Results:
- Existence in the Center of a autonomous changing dynamic;
- Disorientation and lack of knowledge about basic Center’s process and objectives;
- Workers critical attitude towards the Center’s structure and workflow

2nd step: Building a collective proposal of a new organizational structure

Moment A – Negotiating

1. Presenting to the Center’s Direction a model of a specific process of intervention
- Defining the organizational Vision
- Teams were created: Improvement Teams and Coordination Team

2. Global Assembly to present and submit the planned intervention process model

Moment B – A collective elaboration of an organizational structure

Aims: Promote a collective knowledge of the Center’s work reality and to elaborate a collective proposal of a new organizational structure

Procedure:
- Improvement Teams met twice a month
- Coordination Team met once every three month
- Intervention team met twice a month

Results:
- Improvement Teams proposals
  1. Relating to the Center’s beneficiaries:
     - Extensive list of “socially useful” activities to be developed
     - Beneficiaries Integration process in the Center’s thematic developmental areas
     - Beneficiaries Integration process in external settings
  2. Relating to the Center’s workflow and processes:
     - Annual technical meetings plan;
     - Communication processes;
     - Cafeteria’s reorganization.

Coordinating Team outputs
- Appropriate coping strategies related with Improvement Teams setbacks;
- Insights regarding the disbelief and scepticism of some organizational members;
- Creation of a specific group to discuss the Cafeteria’s reorganization proposal.

Moment C – Renegotiating

The intervention structure was changed in reaction to workers tiredness and anxiety;
One unique team was created – a Work Team;
Global assembly to submit the redefined intervention model.

Moment D – A collective proposal of an organizational structure after renegotiating

Aims: Continue the Teams prior work and present an organizational structure proposal, following the renegotiated intervention structure

Procedure:
Work team weekly meetings, with working dynamic similar to the prior teams

Results:
- Center’s Coordinator’s role and model;
- A new work thematic structure (including a new area - Manual Activities)
- 2 multi spaces (beneficiaries pleasure and spare time activities);
- Daily registration of the beneficiaries’ presence in the Center
- Rules in which to base the definition of the beneficiaries’ activities schedule
- Center’s annual meeting plan;
- Center’s beneficiaries preliminary evaluation report;
- Creation of an Implementation Team to facilitate the introduction of changes;
- General assembly to present the new organizational structure and inform about the Implementation Team
- Monthly meetings with the facilitator to evaluate the implementation process.

The final proposal was well received.
But, Implementation Team received with suspicious – its perceived importance in the organizational change process was diminished.

3rd step: Implementing the approved organizational redesign proposal

Presently at course

3. REFLECTING ABOUT THE INTERVENTION PROCESS

The process of a collective construction of an organizational redesign proposal wasn’t a pacific nor easy process as we initially supposed given the motivation and commitment showed by all organizational members towards change, considering:
- We found distinguished positions, inflexible attitudes and individual interpretations of reality that sometimes collided and compromised a collective conciliation;
- The Center’s Director implicit objectives didn’t correspond to the negotiated and explicit objectives – intervention manipulation attempt;
- Organizational members concern in pointing those who, at the contrary of themselves, were allegedly opposing the change process – intervention manipulation attempt;
- Parallel and autonomous introducing changes to the Center’s functioning during the intervention process without considering or acknowledging the Intervention Team
- Creating the Reflection group (after the First Work Journeys)
- Initializing pedagogical meetings (during the Intervention phase);
- Choosing Improvement teams representative;
- Resisting to the Implementation Team.

“Change doesn’t happen in great jumps” (Galpin, 2000: 24), it happens throughout a process that takes place during a considerable period of time.