

Identity and Identification in Organizations: a Key to prevent and/or resolve crisis situations?

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Abstract

Many scholars have been studied identity and identification of individuals in organizations in which they operates and others have been studied crisis situations and proposed practical framework for stabilizing, than mastering, an unanticipated crisis. But, can identity and identification in organizations be a key to prevent or to resolve crisis situations?

The aim of this paper is to try to provide an affirmative response to this question and for this purpose we'll adopt a qualitative approach by means of a case study method in particular and behaviour observation.

1. Introduction and background

In the actual era characterized by great dynamism, the escalation of competition for business involves a complete rethinking of the strategy: to be a successful enterprise is the achievement of targets in a satisfactory condition. On this subject it must be considered an aspect of great importance: the success of a firm depends on individuals in which they operates. In this respect many scholars and business operators seek to make it possible that in every organization individuals find continuously stimuli to achieve the goals decided by the organization, people goals must be as much as possible to those of the organization in which they operate, in other words individuals must be motivated.

Speaking of motivation, a passion for work (Linstead S., Brewis J. 2007th; Elliott E., Dweck C. 1988; Locke E., 2000), involves first understanding the process of individual identification in the company (Grinberg L., 1982; Ashforth B.E. and Mael F.A., 1989), processes and ways in which the identification is expressed (Dutton J.E., Dukerich J.M. and Harquail C.V., 1994; Pratt M.G. 1998; Elsbach K.D.,1999). The level of people identification in the organization in fact depends on, among other things, the fact that each of them is not only a part of the firm where they works but also of other social groups: family, friends, etc. and their personal identity (Usai G., 2000).

Looking more thoroughly human behavior and the place where people works you reach what is called social identity: starting from the notions of identity they reach to understand how a person defines himself in relation to others, the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel H. 1981), to get then the definition of organizational identity, a subject on which many researchers have made valuable contributions (among others see Albert S., Wetten D.A., 1985; Gioia, D.A., Shultz, M. and Corley G., 2000; Hatch M.A. and Shultz M., 2004).

Therefore, if the identity, personal and social, keep primarily to the person as individual and member of a social group, the identification of himself with the organization in which he operates is a far more complex process, which leaves just the identity, individual and organizational. Based on these concepts in social studies on the meaning of the term "identification" various authors (Simon, 1947; Cornellissen J.P., Haslam S.A. and Balmer J.M.T., 2007) had show how the identification is a different concept such as the organizational identity and what could be factors that can create identification: commitment, self-esteem and organizational citizenship, responsibility and motivation, professionalism, leadership, management, to name a few .

But what happens when organizations go through crisis?

Individuals are “builders” of success or failure of organizations, so many scholars have been concentrated their attention onto crisis situations.

Pearson and Clair (1998) in their work stress the importance of multidisciplinary study approach (psychological, socio-political, technological, and so on) and defined an organizational crisis a “ ...a low-probability, high-impact event that threatens the viability of the organization and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made swiftly”. Other researchers (see also Gundel S., 2005) affirm that “classifying crises is the first step to keep them under control since they can be named and analysed. In this regard, analysing does not only mean carrying out theoretical research but it also includes progress in practically relevant measures, hopefully made possible by a typology serving as sufficient analysis framework”.

Because crisis are perceptions of events rather than events themselves and crisis are different from organization to organization such as individuals reactions, it is many important that valid, reliable assessment instruments are adopted as soon as possible to resolve crisis (Barton L., 2004; Conte C. et al., 2007).

2. Research question

The connection between identity and identification with crisis situations and crisis management is still not much observed. When we talk about crisis management we think to many kinds of sources of potential crisis: accidents and natural events that can create serious damage to organizations,; environmental disasters, not necessarily caused by a company but directly related to it, that can compromise the image of the same company; most common, financial disasters. In many cases the first response of companies in crisis situations is to dismiss their workforce.

But what’s human behaviour in crisis situations? Can identity be the key to prevent or to resolve crisis situation? And what kind of crisis?

The research idea is to study humans behaviour in those organizations that go through crisis situations to demonstrate that if there is a better individuals identification in organizations in which they operates it would be a great possibility to prevent or, even, resolve crisis situations.

3. Case study

The case study proposed would to confirm our research question. The examined case show the importance of workforce behaviour. It concern a medium sized firm working in the chemical sector. The quiet and successful life of this firm was upset by a terrible fire. The entire building was

destroyed. The rebirth was possible only with the immediate care of all the workers. What became immediately clear was the rebirth of a different climate among the people, a different relationship was created without the necessity to waste many words in order to start the actions for a new activity.

Identity assumes a wide meaning involving not only the manager and the board of directors but also the individuals working inside the firm.

This case study objective is to study how identity was a key to resolve the problem during the crisis and its subsequent phases and if this would be fundamental for the crisis solution.

4. Philosophical approach

The research proposed imply on the one hand human behaviours and on the other side typologies of organizations situations that involves, in particular, human beings. So, the philosophical approach is qualitative because we think it would the major system to study the problem as illustrated above as in the qualitative research the stress in on the understanding of the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants (Bryman A., Bell E., 2007).

The qualitative method, even using measuring instruments, is intended to illustrate the phenomenon studied, explain, understand the path without having to measure. Through this approach we can examine issues that quantitative research does not show, such as psycho-social, emotional. It lends itself to be used in cases in which the principle of contingency becomes important as the analysis of the phenomenon is to be contextualised, studied in his space and his time.

Blumer expresses the difference between quantitative and qualitative survey with two words: "definitive" and "sensitizing" that capture the salient aspects of both types (Bryman A., Bell, E., 2007).

This work is attributed great importance to the human value, to the knowledge and the social aspect. In view of this, you chose a method of qualitative research, which, despite the limitations it might create (risk of excessive involvement of the researcher and so on.) on the other hand it seemed the most appropriate to the study of the phenomenon as in this case one needs to have direct contact with reality and the people that it will operate.

This type of research provides various tools which can include interviews, structured and semi-structured, focus group, ethnography/participant observation, and so on.

This work aims to provide a positive answer to the research question so we think that the best way will be both empirical and theoretical.

The theoretical exploration is most important in this research because it involves two kinds of studies: one that refers to the identity theory and one that affects crisis management researches that many scholars attribute to risk management instead of the other, which prefer to consider as an autonomous theory: we can better understand crisis problems through a knowledge of previous researches only.

The empirical approach is the best way to study crisis situations and at the same time the human beings and their human behaviour. The case study proposed allowed us to understand the cases, to observe the mechanism and the processes of a case (Yin, 2003).

A single case study can correctly be used because:

- a) it represents a valid contribution to know and understand the theory;
- b) the survey is referred to a contemporary phenomenon placed on a real life context;
- c) it can be a revelatory case because there is still no specific studies in the literature about the problem of crisis situations in connection with the identity theories (revelatory case) (Yin, 2003).

At the same time, this work represents a pilot survey forwarded to subsequent studies and other investigations. Thus, it can be intended as the first step of a subsequent multiple-case study.

Furthermore, participant observation is one of the best-known methods of data collection as it entails the relatively prolonged immersion of the observer in a social setting in which he seeks to observe the behaviour of members and to elicit the meanings they attribute to their environment and behaviour (Bryman, A., Bell, E., 2007).

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