THE NARRATIVES OF SALES TEAMS

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ABSTRACT

The narrative approach has deep roots in the science of psychology [1] , the scientific methodology of narrative content analysis can be applied successfully in organizational development. The analysis of narratives can contribute to a deeper understanding of the organizations. Narrative research may be a powerful tool in identifying areas of organizational development through the analysis of culture, values, leadership style, beliefs, cognitive schemas, and the mental representations characteristic of the given organization.

In our research we compared two groups of sales agents who are engaged in the same area, they work in the same sales representative position. Group 'A' achieves high performance whereas group 'B' achieves low performance. The tendentious differences between the two groups were examined using narrative psychological analysis. The research was looking for the psychological variables which may be indicative of success. Based on the affective and cognitive differences identified during the research, the psychological differences between the two groups' narratives could be drawn up. Three significant differences were identified between the general profile of successful and less successful salespeople, based on which development recommendations could be formulated as well.

In the narratives of successful salespeople the relative frequency of mentioning the word customer and mental activities was significantly higher, which highlights the significance of the relationship between sales success and personal cognitive influence. In addition, the less successful salespeople mentioned four times more negative emotions in their stories, especially in the general stories, which may indicate that they work under strong frustration, unable to find an explanation for their difficulties. This pattern predicts the loss of motivation and burnout risks, which is a commonly observed phenomenon in the field of sales. Based on the factors identified in the research, in this particular organization the training of less successful salespeople, the acquisition of communication techniques affecting sales and training for strengthening the understanding of the customers' perspective may be effective development tools.

Keywords: narrative psychology, content analysis, sales, organizational development

INTRODUCTION

Narrative psychology assumes a correlation between the story and the identity. It informs about the processes and states of self-organization based on the content and structural features of the stories. While construing these stories in the given point of time the individual's current psychological events are displayed, and we can gain insight into these using the analytical methods. Narrative analysis can be applied both for the examination of individual identity through individual stories as well as for group identity through the analysis of the group's stories [2].

The analysis of stories about the organization can provide insight into constructs specific to the organization which build up the organizational culture. The uniqueness and social psychological relevance of organizational reality can be connected to the theoretical framework of social psychology through the contexts of social representations and narratives. For the group, social representation is the construction of social reality. Social representation is a set of concepts and explanations formed in connection with given cultural objects in a particular social group, naive theories to be used for the group, concepts created and used to navigate around in relation to the phenomena of everyday life. According to the social representation theory, reality is made up by people and "To the greater extent we share such global representation with other people, the more such a world created by us 'here and now' appears to exist beyond us, autonomously "[3].

In his research, Moscovici has shown that the same phenomena are shaped, made familiar and usable differently across different groups of society [4]. There are two significant moments in the process of developing social representations: anchoring (places the unknown into familiar categories) and objectification (forming into a familiar, concrete experience). Different groups with their specific social identity [5] can anchor and objectify phenomena in different ways, id est, same phenomena can be represented in different forms and constructions in the individual subgroups. The social representations are in their totality the own behavioral practices and ideas about the world of the individual subgroups. The companies, organizations as subgroups of society create their own social representation of reality at the level of workplace communities, and this particular reality construction can be made researchable through the narratives.

COMPARISON OF TWO SALES TEAMS WITHIN AN ORGANIZATION

In this narrative psychological study, the participants –30 sales agents of a business organization - were asked to answer our questionnaire by writing short stories. The stories were freely chosen by the participants of the research, the only requirement was that the story must relate to their sales work. During the analysis of the stories two analysis methods were applied. First, the frequent words were analysed by NOOJ software application [6]. Second, the linguistic markers which indicate psychological variables were determined, applying NARRCAT - narrative psychological content analysis – method [6],

In this research we compare two sales groups of 15 and 15 people respectively, who perform the same active regional sales representative job within the same company.   The resources, organizational and market opportunities of the salesperson participating in the research are the same. The difference between the two groups is the performance achieved: group 'A' reaches a high performance, while group 'B' performs lower. Each participant was asked to tell three short stories of everyday work, a generally characteristic everyday story, a success story and one about a failure. In the narratives we were looking for tendentious differences between the two groups, as well as psychological variables that may be indicators of success in this job.

At the first level of analysis we analysed the frequently used content words using the NOOJ linguistic analysis program. An interesting pattern emerged. Both groups mentioned the word 'customer' most often. However, in group 'A' the mention of the word customer is three times more frequent and verbs referring to the mental activity (I know, convince, interested, I talked to) were common in its context, while in group 'B' these verbs were missing. (Table 1) The attribution of the failure stories confirmed this pattern as well. (Table 2).

Table 1
Common content words in the narratives of group A and B

Group A	Group B
customer 32	customer 11
my work 9	sell 5
product 7	success 4
think 6	service 4
day 5	I went 4
I know 5	contract 4
successful 5	day 4
favourable 5	product 4
favourable 5	travel 4
convince 5	
interested 5	
told 5	

Table 2
Common content words in the failure stories off group A and B

Group A	Group B
customer 8	I feel 5
I know 5	into my mind 4
needed 4	time 3
understands 3	corporations 2
asks 2	good 2
favourable 2	product 2
indeed 2	conclude 2
conversation 2	customer 2
argue 2	unsuccessful 2
I tell 2	per day 2
interests 2	
successful 2	
lady 2	
turns 2	
want 2	
unsuccessfulness 2	
knows 2	
I know 2	

We can conclude that group 'A' pays more attention to customers and better recognizes the significance of their own mental activity, the importance of paying attention to the customer, and the importance of the relationship between persuasion, reasoning and sales results. Salespeople of group 'A' are better educated, curious of the customers way of thinking, and they often argue. The higher number of content words related to mental activity clearly seen in the stories of Group A.

An example from the stories of group 'A': "It has been hard to make him understand that this was a much better contract. It turned out that the reason for this was that he thought he must further pay the fee of the previous period. Once we have clarified it, he was happy with this change."

An example from the stories of group 'B': "In vain I did try everything. The customers were dismissive, they did not want to listen to me either. "

At the next phase of the analysis the NARRCAT system was applied). The automatic content analysis of the narratives of the two sales group highlighted two interesting further difference.

First, the stories of group 'B' expressed two and a half times more negative emotions (p = 0.064) (Table 3).

Table 3
Proportion of negative emotions in the narratives of group A and B

Variable	Group	N	Relative frequency
Negative emotions	A	15	0,021
	B	15	0,052

Second, group 'B' expressed the most negative emotions in the general and success stories, opposite to group 'A' which expressed the most of negative emotions in the failure stories (as it is generally expected). (Figure 1).
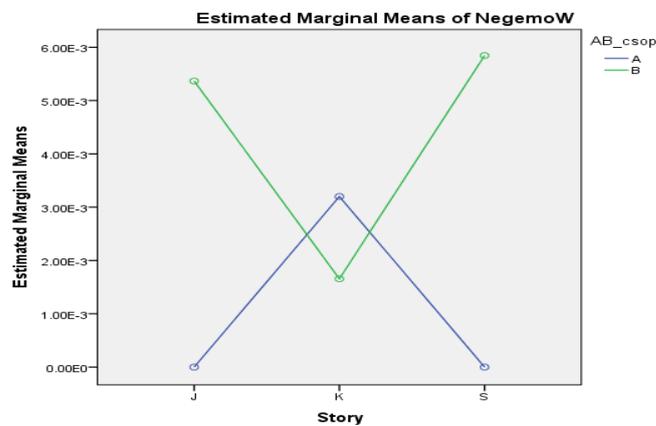

Figure 1
Relative frequency of negative emotions in the narratives of group A and B

DISCUSSION

These results provided important insights why the performance level of the two teams of sales representatives differs. The analysis of frequent contect words highlighted the main difference in their cognitive approach, while the NARRCAT analysis uncovered the main difference in their emotional pattern.

The less successful group 'B' of salespeople do not mention their own mental contribution, that is, its cognitive influence on sales. For them, the sales activity is rather a "we go and do" thing, thus there is less chance of affecting the results with communication styles, elaborated techniques. The activity management focus is stronger, and their work is less focused on sales techniques. Since they are not able to affect the success of the meetings, they experience many negative emotions during the sales activity, and this high degree of uncertainty is assumedly associated with high stress. The daily work can be described as an activity full of hard feelings, happening in a hostile territory where they do not understand the customers' behaviour. The failures, without understanding their causes, can be survived by aversion. The high level of expressing negative emotions in the everyday and the success stories alludes to motivational difficulties and to the risk

of burnout as well. (It is known from other research, that high negative emotion expression, together with denial and self-reference is an indicator of a strong burnout and depression. [7].

The development opportunities clearly lie in the improvement of sales related knowledge, in the acquisition of sales affecting communication techniques, and in training strengthening the understanding of customers' perspective. The difference between the successful sales profiles and less successful sales profiles drawn-up in the organization could be reduced with these trainings. The negative emotions experienced in the sales activity are likely to be reduced if the salespeople better understand the aspects of the customers, and realistically see their opportunities of influencing. The reduction of negative emotions promotes the long-term maintenance of proper motivation, and reduce staff turnover as well. In addition, the re-measurement of the narratives allows for tracking changes.

CONCLUSIONS

This study provided an example how analysing narratives can contribute to understanding and developing organizations. This research of two teams of sales agents highlighted vital differences between the two groups, which are important aspects to explain the different performance level of the teams, and also to set directions for their training and development. The research of more samples of sales teams could further strengthen these current findings.

Narrative analysis is a new area to exploit in organization development. Based on the elaborated scientific methods important factors can be identified and measured in organizations, organizational groups, which could contribute to the organizational diagnosis. Qualitative and quantitative research methods can provide us with new insights of organizational reality, of important, current phenomena. Narrative analysis can reveal important differences between individuals and groups of individuals which may facilitate the understanding of efficiency. The re-examination of narratives gives an opportunity to measure changes occurring over time.

Narrative research may be suitable for the investigation of organizational culture as well. Group narratives about the organization carry the common representations of the organizations which may uncover the social representations [4] that can specifically be connected to the organization's social identity [5]: characteristic of the organization as a group at the social psychological level , below the level of the national culture, but above the individual the level. Psychological characteristics of a company can be explored based on the stories about the organization [8].

The company, as a group may have group identity and own social representations that are specific to the company and explain the behaviour of the group as well as the attitudes, views and emotions in a given context of individuals as group members. We can assume that the company as a group needs representation of reality which can be told with narrative coherence, can maintain

group identity, and is able to meet the basic needs of the individual identity (positive self-esteem, self-efficiency, continuity, independence).

According to the narrative psychological approach, the company has its own unique reality construction within its social and economic environment, thus narrative approach may support explaining why and how different corporate strategy and organizational behaviour develops under the same environmental conditions.. It might be a further direction of research to answer why the same environmental change is interpreted by two organizations completely differently, and why they give completely different answers to the same phenomenon. Through the analysis of the narratives it may become subject of research how an organization can 'make a new unknown factor familiar', how it can connect it to its earlier narrative story preserving narrative coherence.

The narrative psychological analysis fits well with today's most advanced organizational and management research which emphasize the need for a deeper understanding of organizational culture.

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