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THE QUALITY OF CULTURAL SERVICES IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMIC CRISIS CONTEXT

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Abstract: *It suffices to browse the websites of only a few of the most noteworthy Romanian cultural organizations – including the website of the Ministry of Culture – to conclude that quality policies are missing. In fact, these are not the only policies that are missing, but this topic should be discussed in another paper. The objective of this paper is to analyze the progresses and the opportunities, as well as the problems and the challenges that the Romanian society and economy are facing as far as culture is concerned at the beginning of the new millennium, in the particular context of the global economic crisis: specifically, we will focus on the role of cultural organization managers in implementing quality management as the main factor in assuring the competitiveness needed to overcome the crisis. Cultural organization managers generally admit that a change is needed in order to cope with competitive pressure, but few understand how this change should be implemented. To avoid the issues associated with “change programs”, the management of cultural organizations must focus on the structure of processes, recognizing the roles and responsibilities of their employees in the processes in which they are involved.*

Keywords: quality management; culture; cultural organizations; consumer; cultural services; competitiveness; global economic crisis

JEL Classification: G01; Z19

1. Defining service quality in general and cultural service quality in particular

Concerns about service quality are far more recent (20-30 years) than the concerns regarding product quality (more than 100 years). Many of the specific aspects of product quality can be adapted to service quality, with certain particularities, since services are immaterial goods. Most economists think of services as a system of utilities where the beneficiaries purchase or use not a good, but a certain utility, which provides them certain advantages or satisfactions that cannot be turned, in most cases, into tangible goods and are destined to satisfy certain personal, social or cultural needs.

The American Marketing Association (1960) defines services as *activities, benefits, or utilities offered on the market or provided in association with the sale of a material good*. This definition points out to the notion of activity as an essential component of services. Moreover, it includes the commercial services provided in association with the sale of a material good in the general field of services. K. J. Blois (1974) defines services as *any activity that provides benefits without necessarily*

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involving an exchange of tangible goods. Though incomplete, this definition points out to another characteristic of services: intangibility. Kotler *et al.* (2015) states that a service is *any activity (or benefit) that a person can give another person and which is essentially intangible and does not result in an ownership of something.*

All the above definitions concern services as a whole and point out the elements that distinguish them from goods. Let us now see how the experts in cultural management define cultural services.

Maria Moldoveanu and Ioan-Franc Valeriu (1997, p. 20) define cultural services as activities provided to the benefit of culture consumers, with or without their direct participation, in order to meet certain needs and produce the satisfactions that they expect.

Cultural services are a distinct category of services. Their quality is exclusively evaluated by the consumers and only after the service has been provided. They purchase such services before they perceive their value. A material good is self-defined, while a service is not (Olteanu and Cetina, 1994, p. 36).

Consumers are the ones who “define” the service. Initially, they lack sufficient information about its value. For instance, information about the artists who will perform in a show, about pricing or other sale facilities, or about advertising messages will help shape a first perception of the service; but this perception in no way guarantees a fair evaluation of the cultural service. This is why “intangibility” and “inseparability” define these services to a large extent.

By the content of the services provided and by the means used to provide them, cultural services are thus classified (Moldoveanu and Ioan-Franc, 1997, p. 50):

1. Performing arts: theater, film, music, dance, arts ensembles, festivals;
2. Fine arts: art galleries and exhibitions, private collections, handicrafts;
3. Cultural creations provided through specific media and specialized distribution services:

- film, film studios, movie theaters, film societies
- books, magazines, publishing houses, book fairs and exhibitions, public library services;
- art photography;
- audio-video cassettes and discs.

4. The formal system that promotes culture in communities: libraries, museums, theaters, concert halls and symphony orchestras, opera houses, community cultural centers, agencies specialized in cultural tourism.

5. Mass-media, together with the technical means for the reception, creation and broadcast of the messages: written press, radio, television, press agencies, studios, newsrooms, distribution networks.

By the nature of their relation to the cultural products, cultural services are divided in:

- services that distribute cultural creations: editorial services, public libraries, museum services;
- services that create culture themselves: theater-for-television services, film production, music performances.

By the consumers' degree of participation:

- services that cannot be provided in the absence of consumers: live performances, book fairs;
- services that do not require the consumers' participation, although the audience is an influencing factor: editorial activities, art exhibitions, radio broadcasts.

Cultural services can be further set apart using criteria such as: markets, distribution, cost effectiveness, comprehensibility of value standards, persuasion ability.

Regardless of the content of the services and of the nature of the means used to provide them, they deliver information, knowledge, values, symbols, models and ideals meant to satisfy a variety of human needs:

- need for knowledge/information;
- need for action and participation;
- need for control of one's context;
- need for self-realization, for self-assertion and for social prestige;
- need for justice;
- need for security;
- other psychological needs such as the need for imagination, for escape from one's everyday environment etc.

The growing demand for culture and the diversification of the types of services call for the implementation of the service quality management system, according to the ISO 9001: 2008 standard, which establishes the requirements for the quality management system in all fields. So, in order to certify the quality management of a cultural organization, these requirements will have to be met.

Implementing quality management involves a complex of procedures and management practices that imply mobilizing the stakeholders of a community towards satisfying the needs and expectations of the cultural services' users. This requires indisputable skills and extensive organizing abilities from managers.

Quality management in cultural organizations implies a managerial state of mind and conduct that are open to initiatives and value innovation, as well as an ethical grouping of services in the improvement process that is about to be achieved. And this can be accomplished, above all,

(especially in public libraries, documentation centers and archives) with the help of technology, especially new technologies that allow the amassment of information and knowledge, the accessibility of information and a high-quality communication. These tools will help managers to dedicate themselves to developing human resources and to optimizing the skills of their teams.

Therefore, the managerial method for implementing quality will be evaluated as a result of the ability to articulate the skills, the collective knowledge and the existing cooperation networks. The effectiveness of these internal connections derives from the manager's ability to appropriately organize and schedule the work of his teams while agreeing to increase the autonomy of his employees. The higher the responsibilities given to teams, the easier it will be for each service to achieve its political, administrative and financial objectives.

However, let us consider the rigidity of the organizational system that currently exists in most communities, the strong hierarchical backbone of professional relationships, the far too centralized management approach, the *status* already earned by managers to the detriment of efficiency, the concepts of work ethics that apply to the many employees; all these act as strong hindrances in developing human resources and skills. Moreover, they cause the manager of a territorial cultural agency to develop a strong frustration due to his perception that the collective values of the public service that he runs suffer from exclusion. More often than not, this leads to a strong lack of motivation in the teams of the cultural sectors, teams whose experiences, origins, skills and individual values are extremely diverse and very particular.

We cannot simply decree the autonomy of a cultural sector employee or of a team from a cultural organization while, at the same time, continuing to enforce and to control – in an inflexible, rigid and authoritarian way – how they perform their tasks.

Efficient management is when managers let themselves innovate and are dedicated to their work beyond the organization's strict rules and the specific operations involved by their office. Leaving room for maneuver and encouraging employees to take initiatives and responsibilities favors the full expression of their abilities, aptitudes, knowledge and skills, as well as long-term continuity, which is a valuable aid for managers in accomplishing their tasks.

Managers can achieve genuine control of the cultural activity only when they are result-oriented and focused on achieving objectives that have been clearly communicated and explained. To that end, cultural organizations need flexibility – especially in cultural programming – to prevent the atrophy of employee initiative and motivation.

However, with a highly authoritarian management culture, it seems difficult nowadays to favor initiative and the development of those skills required by teams to pursue their goals and the ethical

values of quality with dedication. Unfortunately, in culture, the beginning of the new millennium finds us with very low levels of training and education (continuing and/or initial) as far as cultural management is concerned.

In the long run, these deficiencies usually result in cultural organizations which have a very rigid structure, are highly bureaucratic and manage human resources like they do any other administrative task. While such management practices are still very much alive in many communities, for the past few years we have witnessed a strong political and administrative will at work, encouraging the transition to a genuine modern management of the quality policy in cultural organizations.

Acting autonomously does not mean not getting help when one needs help. Management's duty is to support individual and collective training efforts and participation, to identify deviations and skill deficiencies, and to assess and validate each employee's significant contributions. This line of development is incompatible with an authoritarian management that does not leave room for negotiation, debate, dialogue and for changes and readjustments that need to be undertaken by the entire organization. Before allowing employees to act autonomously, management must start to delegate and become associative.

Among the major responsibilities of managers are the continuous development of their own skills and of the skills of their employees, the motivation of the teams and the mobilization of team members towards reaching their objectives.

Managers will seek to rally employee representatives around a number of common objectives, thus establishing a common language. Efficient interpersonal communication within the cultural organization is of the essence. And, if this is complemented with a high-quality human resources policy – which will help build real strongholds by employing the right middle and proximity managers in the first line of action – that cultural organization will have yet another invaluable asset.

2. Quality management in the cultural organization

Quality management in the cultural organization will prevail if it is not looked upon as a simple decision relay. Its role is a strategic one. Faced with implementation difficulties, quality management needs extensive room for maneuver.

As far as managers are concerned, they need to delegate more decision-making power to their team members, allowing them to realistically identify the performance indicators, to reward and, finally, to confirm the skills of the organization members.

Briefly put, management is responsible to arbitrate and prioritize, after using processes of consultation and guiding, in order to facilitate the standardization and recording of professional practices, the establishing of differential diagnoses and the analysis of the dysfunctions and problems that arise in a management dynamic aimed at enduring progress. Finally, skill evaluation cannot be unilateral – skills must be validated by peers and, of course, by superiors. This is based on the comparison between the means provided by the organization and the means mobilized by the employee of the cultural sector. To this end, the evaluation requires a clear definition of the responsibility areas and of the room for maneuver each employee is given in order to explore and evolve.

It is imperative that management be aware of the skills, abilities and aspirations of each employee from the cultural sectors in order to be able to design, in the medium term, a human resources policy that will take into consideration the evolution of the markets, the new technologies, as well as the “users” expectations regarding the cultural offer on a local, regional, central or even global scale.

The personalized and distinctive nature of skills calls for the redefining of the forms of appreciation and recognition, especially in terms of compensation, employment and workforce contribution. This will make the necessary difference by creating a management leverage that will take into account each employee’s real effort.

It is equally imperative to shift from a purely administrative management of personnel to an actual human resources management. This step requires the rethinking not only of the employee’s status, but also of the labor legislation and of the existing logic of compensation.

Measuring, ranking and equitably evaluating employees’ output in order to compensate them for their efforts means reviewing the place and the attributes of the administrative function of the workforce in the entire public cultural sector. This activity, which implies several responsibilities, has to do especially with favoring/rewarding individual initiative and requires a much higher degree of professionalism from the local HR function in order to increase the accuracy of the assessment of the teams’ technical assets. This type of activity is shared with superiors, especially with middle managers whose proximity to and understanding of the lower employees’ actual problems are essential in developing their skills.

While promoting the tools of human resources management, HR specialists must also make sure they design the policies of skill development and the evaluation criteria that best fit the cultural field and the latest changes in its professions. This is all the more so since the logic of skill management encompasses: analyzing the cultural organization’s mission and activities, writing the

job descriptions, creating coherent candidate profiles and identifying the skills inseparably required by each position, while also keeping in mind the constant evaluation of collective and individual skills. The key to objectively identifying the skills required for a project to be successful is the thorough analysis of the actual everyday work of the teams involved in the cultural sectors.

It is necessary to part with today's purely administrative management of personnel, which is focused exclusively on recruitment, compensation and conflict management. For this, it is important to identify new performance indicators that are much more competitive and are more adapted to the changes of the economic systems as far as human resources management is concerned. Transferred to cultural organizations, human resources management will empower HR professionals to dedicate themselves to identifying, monitoring and evaluating skills.

3. The annual report – a new management tool in cultural services

The die is cast! No time to waste! The end of the year is near... This is undoubtedly the time for the unavoidable budget arbitrations, the team evaluation meetings and the result appraisals for the actions run during the year. Far too seldom is it also the time to synchronize the inevitable prospects for the coming year between ourselves, our elected officials and our teams...

The evolution of new technologies, the multitude of regulations and a tense economic context are pressuring cultural services, now more than ever, to permanently adopt a logic of innovation in order to survive in an increasingly difficult and complex environment. To cope with these pressures that weaken our activity, we must become aware of our invaluable asset: human potential. Sadly though, it seems that our so-called management "tactics" make us drift aimlessly quite often.

Indeed, more and more often, we seem to be separated from our teams. Few are the managers who would be able to achieve, as far as participatory management is concerned, something the likes of an annual report – a document that should be enriched with a well-founded set of clearly-defined, relevant indicators that would serve the evaluation process. The annual report should also help build the identity of each team and stimulate each employee to continually improve their skills. It is an important element in the integration of all employees from no matter what cultural sector into the global project of their organizational structure, where they should be able to act effectively and should be given perceivable and achievable objectives that make sense in the complex local landscape that they very familiar with.

In the current economic landscape, cultural services are faced with powerful constraints: minimizing expenditure, optimizing human, financial and material resources, quality and evaluation

requirements... All these factors require culture professionals to permanently adapt in order to be able to improve the services provided to various audience categories.

Thus, among the structural evolutions needed in our management methods, it goes without saying that we must show not only initiative, but also creativity. We need to be able to adhere, with our teams, to a dynamic of change, a change that demands that we take our management practices out of their isolation and that we seek employee involvement and participation more and more, so that our staff may fully take on the mission of the public cultural service: to meet the population's cultural needs in an optimum way and in the long term. To do that, we must be able to inform, together with our teams, for the entire duration of the year, to show homogenous and coherent indicators that are easy to follow and to assess, and to evaluate every cultural action on our agenda. However, few are the teams who can effectively combine these valuable guiding tools that give meaning, visibility and purpose to their actions – and who are also able to give a report.

It would be interesting to learn why so many cultural services fail to seek inspiration in this invaluable management tool. Is it the lack of time? The lack of skill? Or is it maybe the fear of failure? Sometimes, the lack of transparency can create an illusion of *comfort*. This may help conceal certain deficiencies and dilute our responsibility for our own disappointments and defeats.

It is not always easy to change our usual work methods for new ones that involve more sharing, more delegating and far better representation and visibility of our management skills. During crises, our conception of management should feel strengthened with values such as active listening and respect. More succinctly put, we must take on a new result-focused culture that will redefine our management practices in the public cultural service.

The annual report can prove to be not only a viable management tool, but also an efficient test of our skills. It is an essential asset for a new type of management approach – participatory management, which motivates teams and contains the essence itself of quality management. This requirement – as seen today in public libraries – tends to spread to the whole spectrum of cultural services and has become a legal and regulated requirement. This shows us the importance that we must attach to our ability to anticipate from now on.

4. Certifying the quality of the cultural offer management

During these years of deep crisis, when most of our fellow countrymen are going through a hard time, it is no longer possible to manage cultural sectors like an amateur i.e. without implementing efficient and effective management practices. Moreover, during this time of the year, when the

services of the cultural organization are carefully building the first draft of its primitive budget, improving management practices becomes urgent.

Managing public money responsibly means understanding that each of our actions has a cost and that financing is not unlimited, like it used to be. This does not mean that our services to users will sacrifice quality to fit the budget. But going over the budget means unhappy users. This equation is all the more unacceptable in that going over the budget is done by investing unreasonably much in one user, at the expense of another user, whom we simply ignored.

Fortunately, more and more culture professionals share the willingness to implement an efficient and effective management style. However, in order to be able to provide quality cultural services while saving money at the same time, we must choose a management style where we feel responsible both for the excesses and for the hassles that come with the job. To be able to take on this responsibility, we should change our mentality and acquire management notions that we currently lack. It is a far more exciting objective than always lamenting about how politics prevents us from providing quality services to users and how... no user has ever died from subpar services so far.

So much remains to be done that one can easily get dizzy thinking about it: we must double our efforts in negotiating every contract, every menial service, every sheet of paper... We must always seek to make the transition from the public markets to procedures for... everything; and in very particular ways.

So when will we, as managers of cultural organizations, finally become involved in an authentic search for quality certification of our management practices, which we will then use to evaluate our financial methods and cut costs? To achieve the certification of our management practices, it is not necessary to behave like snipers or to become engulfed in an exhausting, solitary and isolated quest; on the contrary, we must initiate a team activity whose results depend on how much each member of the team feels responsible and involved in attaining the common goal.

Sooner or later, together with the members of the organization, we will have to address and solve the problems that affect us. We will also have to penalize every abuse in the system on the spot; to acknowledge and to accept, without feeling embarrassed, the fact that we are not ready to work in this way yet. We will have to accept a major change in order to manage the inevitable reforms that are coming our way. Better anticipate them!

For what is expected of us after a long period of management? To evaluate each of our practices, to validate them, to make adjustments in the vast array of cultural services that we offer our users every day. We also need to establish, using objective, measurable and well-calibrated criteria, a maximum cost that we may not exceed.

To achieve all of the above, do we not need to accept specific training? Do we not need to work closely with our colleagues? Why would we find all this demeaning? Step by step, the lines are moving slowly but surely. Mentalities are progressively changing. Let us not forget that this is a change, not an upheaval; an evolution, not a revolution.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it is important that we dismiss the ultimatum that our elected officials keep giving us every day (“Do more with less!”), which we would find offending if we did not have a sense of humor! Instead, let us focus on moving forward. To do that, I imagine we need to build a plan of operations that intertwine and continue one another at the same time. Improving processes in the cultural organization will depend on this structure – and quality will result from this improvement. Every stage in the process, which we will not only have to build from scratch, but also standardize, will require evaluation, which, in turn, will require criteria. If criteria are not established accurately, the entire structure may crumble. So these quality criteria are the foundation of our mission. In the end, these quality objectives will need to be rethought and confronted with other experiences as often as possible, so as to never lose sight of... the ultimate requirement. For, in the cultural sector too, project management will need to decide, sooner or later, to move to the certification of its processes, which will increase the quality of the management of the services provided to the audiences and will, obviously, act as a guarantee of our professionalism.

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