

CONSIDERATIONS ON CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AT THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL (MODEL APPROACH TO CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN A PUBLIC INSTITUTION)

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to capture the parameters of “authority” regarding decision making in public management in the presence of internal institutional conflict. I will focus on the methods used by the decision actors in order to solve the conflict and on the used techniques (able to influence the civil servants work environment). Identification and awareness of the skills capable to solve conflicts, equally doubled by the goal to provide solutions for concrete situations will assist in preventing or reducing conflict altogether.

Keywords: Conflict management, work climate, professional conflict, conflict situation psychology

INTRODUCTION

The changing process affecting an organisation involves the leaders and staff who must all work together in a harmonious climate. The “golden dream” for many managers is that their staff should function well reaching their objectives’ target at the maximum level by working together in a happy environment. It is obvious that in real life situations like these are not being common. Each employee has his/her own set of objectives which often do not match the objectives of the organization where they work. The relating and involvement process of employees forming the organisation appears to be in different grades and in different understanding levels regarding the need for change. Even if change is accepted as necessary it is not definite that all the organisation members understand its meaning in the same way and within the same co-ordinates. This scenario is where conflict may arise. Managing the existing and potential problems is a process which takes a great amount of time and effort and is not always finalised.

I will continue this paper by presenting a small research that I initiated within the organization where I am currently working, the General Direction of Social Work and Child Protection Arad (DGASPC). I am aiming to capture some parameters of “authority” regarding decision making in conflict management

within the mentioned organization. I am focusing on the methods used for solving conflict by the Manager of the Institution. The techniques used here are influencing the work environment of civil servants, the climate being a key factor in getting performance.

PRACTICAL OPERATING METHODS REGARDING CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

1.1 Purpose of Research

The present research aims to capture some parameters of the "authority" used in the decision-making process while managing a conflict within the public administration institutions.

Research hypothesis

The method used in solving conflicts by the manager of a public Institution is influencing the teams of public servants work environment. The work climate represented here is a key factor in obtaining performance.

Objectives of the research

- I. To identify the factors that determine the appropriate work climate to enable public servants to carry out their duties;
- II. To determine if there is an appropriate environment for public servants to carry out their duties ;
- III. To define the term "conflict" at institutional level;
- IV. To identify the existence of a professional conflict, within the office, service or institution;
- V. To rank which are the main causes of professional conflicts;
- VI. To assess the relationships between civil servants in clerical roles and those appointed to management positions;
- VII. To estimate the best way to solve conflicts in general and not just in exceptional circumstances.

1.2 Theoretical and factual documentation

According to Crawley.J, the methodical, theoretical and scientific support of this paper is based on the management's principles, theories and dynamics of the conflict. It is also based on the styles used in conflict management and the National Law and Policies regarding public servant's status and their roles of conduct. Deutsch.

The main methods used in the conflict management research were: the theoretical review (re-assessing current Law and Policy, Government decisions, Resort Ministries Annual Report); finding suitable information (the analysis of statistical data at national and local level); obtaining the sociological information in the field using a survey, observation and case studies; applying the survey to a large number of public servants within the organisation (DGASPC ARAD) and the content analysis (resources of scientifically and practical conferences and public speeches).

1.3 The sampling process

The Survey domain includes civil servants within the public Institution (DGASPC Arad).

The sampling unit is represented by a "public servant" and the volume of the sample comprises 30 civil servants, representing 50% of all subjects; the remaining others are not part of this study. The leader and colleagues with clerical roles were randomly selected from each department.

The 30 public servants were appointed as follows: 15 civil servants in management roles and 15 civil servants in clerical roles.

1.4 The description of research instrument. Concepts implementation

The Instrument of research used is **the sociological survey**.

While implementing the survey the following references were used:

1. Chelcea, S. (1975) "The questionnaire in sociological investigation", Scientific and Encyclopaedic Publishing House, Bucharest.
2. Novak A., (1996) "Questioning public opinion", Students Publishing House, Bucharest.
3. Miftode V, (1995) "Sociological Methodology", Scientific Publishing House, Bucharest.

The survey was compiled on the basis of the concepts, settling dimensions, variables, indicators and indices.

Concept: Conflict Management (in a public institution)

Dimensions:

- A) The existence/absence of a favourable climate and conflict within the workplace;
- B) The factors that influence the climate within the workplace;
- C) The appropriate method used for conflict management;

Dimension: A) The existence/absence of a favourable climate and conflict within the workplace;

Indicators: - The approval of the existence/absence of a favourable climate and professional conflicts;

- The expressed desire to continue working within the same team (office or department);

- The Stated intention to spend free time together with the colleagues from the same office, department and institution;

- Identifying the reaction of the leader in a situation where there is another way of solving the problem;

Dimension: B) The factors that influence the climate within the work place;

Indicators: -The causes that generate conflicts;

- Definition of conflict

- The factors that influence the work climate

Dimension: C) Suitable style of managing conflict;

Indicators: -The method used to approach the conflict, considered as being the most appropriate in general

-Deciding over one method of conflict management in general (withdrawal, settling, compromise, forcing and disagreeing).

DEVELOPING ITEMS ACCORDING TO THE FUNCTIONING PROCESS

Following the elaboration stage of the matter according to the functioning process, the result was the working tool: the survey. This consisted of 17 questions as detailed in Annex 1.

THE PRIMARY RESULTS OF THE STUDY, DATA ANALYSIS AND GENERAL OPINIONS

A public institution's mission is to serve, in the best way possible, the interests of citizens while respecting the existing legal framework and promoting the values of professionalism, efficiency and respect for the people involved with the institution.

The Manager of the public institution will not be able to act by himself, but must act together with other civil servants. The method used by the manager to train the civil servants in dealing with specific activities of the institution, the method used to resolve conflict and to establish a positive climate, will lead to the expected results thereby generating motivation and work satisfaction.

Identifying the climate as a synonym for the work environment or the confidence of the group I consider that a positive institutional climate can increase the confidence within the group. This will reflect on the employee's actions towards achieving the organization's tasks and goals. In contrast to this positive environment, the negative climate represents a source of disturbance and malfunction for both actions: the activity of civil servants, as well as the activity of the whole institution.

Looking at the survey's results, all civil servants within the institution DGASPC Arad, have agreed 100% that the climate within the office and department is very important in order to achieve the tasks required for the job.

I would say that the management style addressed has implications which can reflect directly or indirectly on the organizational climate of the group. According to this, a climate can be influenced by the following factors: the decisions of the manager, the management style, the method used in conflict management, the mode of cooperation for synchronizing work, the existence of clear and precise tasks etc.

Through this research I will analyze the answers to each question included in the survey.

The results for the second question of the survey are detailed in the table below. The subjects answered the following question: "Which of the following

factors do you consider as being the most important for generating a positive work environment in order to carry out tasks in a civil servant role?

	a) the manager's unresponsiveness	b) the manager's assertiveness	c) clear, precise tasks	d) absence of professional conflicts	e) cooperation	TOTAL
1. Management positions	0	0	12	1	2	15
2. Clerical staff	0	1	8	2	4	15
TOTAL	0	1	20	3	6	30

As reflected in the above answers, both categories of civil servants, those appointed to clerical roles as well as those appointed to leading positions, consider that clear and precise tasks are necessary– 20 responses. The need for communication and cooperation arises in order to accomplish such a task in the provision, decision, organising process, (apart from the command process), coordination and control process. Therefore a proportion of 87% of public servants questioned consider the existence of clear, precise tasks and the need for cooperation as being very important.

Conflict management is well accomplished if the parties involved have a cooperative manner rather than a competitive one. Cooperation involves: openness in communication, a willingness to help, a confident attitude, an orientation towards increasing mutual authority rather than differentiating the authority and the fact of showing sympathy to common interests and not emphasizing the opposing interests. In contrast to cooperation, competition generates: poor communication, attempts to intensify the differences regarding authority between staff, the emergence of professional conflicts, etc.

I believe that within the mentioned Institute, civil servants appreciate the factors that determine the beneficial climate to enable duties to be carried out. As a result of this information objective no. 1 of this research was fulfilled.

Question no. 3 of the survey states: "Do you consider that there is a favourable work environment for carrying out duties within the office, department and your Institution?" The subjects responded that in very high proportion, and to a large extent, the work climate represents a favourable environment for service tasks. These answers proved to be encouraging and according to these findings the objective no. 2 was fulfilled. This objective reflects an estimation of the existence/absence of a favourable work climate.

	a) to a very large degree	b) to a large degree	c) to some degree	d) to a small degree	e) to a very small extent/degree	TOTAL
1.Management positions	11	2	1	0	0	15
2.Clerical staff	10	3	2	0	0	15
TOTAL	21	5	3	1	0	30

Question no. 4 of the survey is: "Assuming you are offered a job with the slightest possible advantage beside your current place of employment, would you move there?"

This research shows there were differences between the two categories of civil servants. 13 civil servants appointed to leading positions have avoided answering the question. 10 out of the 15 civil servants appointed to clerical roles are not willing to change their workplace.

	a) Yes	b) No	c) I do not know	TOTAL
1.Management positions	1	2	12	15
2. Clerical staff	3	10	2	15
TOTAL	4	12	14	30

Question no. 5 of the questionnaire states: "In the case of organising a trip with colleagues, during out of work hours, would you attend?" The various replies are shown in the table below:

	a) Yes	b) No	c) I do not know	TOTAL
1.Management positions	12	1	2	15
2.Clerical staff	11	3	1	15
TOTAL	23	4	3	30

The survey shows that 78% of the investigated persons want to spend their spare time together with colleagues.

Research shows that conflicts can arise between civil servants occupying a leading position and the clerical staff. Discussion shows that conflicts can happen between employees within the same role, even colleagues.

- If one of the colleagues has a negative attitude we must try to understand his way of thinking, what he feels and wants. The outside work meetings, which are not necessary to happen on a regular basis, help in knowing each other better and contribute to the cooperation and communication within the workplace. Through objective no. 3 of the research the subjects were asked to define the term "conflict". Therefore the conflict has been defined by them as follows:
- The conflict is the state of tension created as a result of discrepancy of opinions or complaints;
- Lack of collaboration and awareness of the problems;
- Differences of opinion;
- Clashes of interests, disagreement, violent discussion;
- Misunderstanding in the way of obtaining the required results, Etc.

Question no. 7 the answers are outlined below. The question states: "Conflicts can lead to effects ...?"

	a) Negative	b) Positive	c) Both negative and positive effects	TOTAL
1.Management positions	1	8	6	15
2.Clerical staff	3	5	10	15
TOTAL	4	13	16	30

The answers shown in the table above indicate that there are no significant differences in their responses for the two categories of civil servants.

Taking into consideration that this paper has exposed the positive and beneficial effects of conflict management, I will specify only negative effects as listed by the subjects in their survey. Negative effects listed are:

- strained state of mind;
- lack of concentration regarding important issues;
- decreased professional activity, failure to comply with tasks;
- leaving the workplace;
- lack of communication, cooperation and mutual support, etc.

The research will now look at question no. 9 of the questionnaire. This states: "How do you think your boss would react if you suggest (or wish to suggest) another way of solving a problem faster/effectively?" Note: In the following table the subject "He" refers to the manager.

	a) He will not listen	b) He listens but delays analyzing the proposed solution	c) He listens, analyzes, and claims that his version is the best	d) We compare and contrast the opinions and he accepts the best solving solution	TOTAL
1.Management positions	0	1	1	13	15
2. Clerical staff	0	4	1	10	15
TOTAL	0	5	2	23	30

Findings shows that a percentage of 77 out of the 30 subjects questioned believe the leader will listen to their opinions and together they will compare and contrast their views. The leader will accept the fact that the new way of dealing with the problem is the best and he will choose to apply it. Following this, it can be noticed that between the two categories of civil servants there is a good relationship. Taking into account this point of view the objective no. 6 of the research was achieved.

Some people, as they move forward on the hierarchical scale to success and find themselves in authoritative roles, gradually lose their ability to listen, receive messages, emphasize on the procedure of giving orders/expressing what and how to do it.

In the various relationships between civil servants as well as their relationships with the public, civil servants must be capable of properly receiving the messages in order to reach the following results:

- a. Encourage others – when the employees realise that you are listening to them they will waive all or part of their offensive attitude;
- b. Getting all the information -we all know that it is important to obtain as much relevant information as possible in order to solve problems and to be able to take the right decisions;
- c. Problem solving, conflict management- the misunderstandings and problems will be better resolved when public servants listen to each other;
- d. Understanding people better – listening carefully to a person will show you how she thinks, how she feels and what the purpose of the message she wants to deliver is.

Regarding question 10 of the questionnaire the answers are shown in the following table.

Question 10 states: "How will you react during a meeting if you are accused of not solving a task in your role correctly/on time?"

	a) You get up and leave the room to impress your leader	b) You listen to accusations brought to you and you take responsibility for these because your boss will not listen or try to understand you	c) You explain politely that you have performed the tasks well but it is a misunderstanding, and you'll be understood	TOTAL
1.Management positions	0	3	12	15
2. Clerical staff	0	0	15	15
TOTAL	0	3	27	30

This survey suggests that 90% of officials have "courage" to express their opinion and believe they will be understood by their leader.

I consider that receiving feedback is important because it can generate a positive and team orientated work environment. A good manager must "keep both his eyes and ears open" because there is an enormous amount of information communicated to us. The majority of people with whom we interact, will provide feedback if they feel safe on the way we relate to them as well as regarding our reaction when receiving their information.

Taking into account the feedback findings, a manager will:

- remain open to information and not be defensive;
- be thankful to the person delivering the message and show that feedback was achieved, regardless of how bad the situation was;
- clarify to what extent the person giving feedback understands the situation;
- assess the progress of the feedback and try to broaden the field of feedback;
- establish basic rules with the people asked for feedback, in order for them to feel comfortable with the process and with the parameters involved.

The answers to the question 11 are detailed in the table below. The question states: "Which of the reasons listed below do you think is the most common cause for generating conflict at work?"

	a) Colleagues who do not make all possible efforts	b) Lack of communication	c) Refusal of taking responsibility	d) Criticism and unfounded accusations	e) Preferential treatment	f) Being ignorant	TOTAL
1. Management Positions	4	5	1	3	1	1	15
2. Clerical staff	2	6	3	1	1	2	15
TOTAL	6	11	4	4	2	3	30

The most common cause met (generally in public organizations), is: "lack of communication"-36%; This was followed by: "colleagues who do not make every possible effort" – 10%. These results respond to objective no. 5 of this research.

In relation to question no. 12 of the questionnaire the answers are outlined in the table below. The question states: "Are there any conflicts within your service/department?"

	a) Yes	b) No	c) Sometimes	TOTAL
1. Management positions	2	4	9	15
2. Clerical staff	3	2	10	15
TOTAL	5	6	19	30

Analysing the answers to the above question (no.12) shows a percentage of 63% of subjects believe that in the workplace there are sometimes conflicts. Taking into account the existence of a positive work environment for solving tasks, we can consider that the managers are finding the most appropriate approach to managing conflicts. This situation often has positive and constructive effects for the public organization. These findings responded to the objective no. 4 of this research.

The table below outlines the answers for question no.13 of the questionnaire.

Q 13 states: "What matters most, in a conflict situation?"

	a) people's feelings	b) focusing on facts	c) ending the conflict as soon as possible	d) people can benefit from disagreements	e) the disagreements are rarely resolved satisfactorily	TOTAL
1. Management positions	4	5	3	3	0	15
2. Clerical staff	6	2	2	3	2	15
TOTAL	10	7	5	6	2	30

According to the information in the table above it can be noticed that "people's feelings" are very important followed by "focusing on the facts".

As regards to questions no. 14 and 15 of the questionnaire:

Q14: "Which technique do you believe is used by the head office or service leader to manage conflict situations in general?"

Q15: "Which do you consider as being the best method of managing conflict situations (in general and not in exceptional circumstances)?"

The answers to these questions were very similar for both categories of employees.

	a) Withdrawal	b) Settlement	c) Acting in force	d) Compromise	e) Confrontation	TOTAL
1. Management positions	0	4	1	0	10	15
2. Clerical staff	1	7	0	0	7	15
TOTAL	1	11	1	0	17	30

Looking at the above table, we can notice that 17 out of the 30 subjects questioned consider the best way of solving conflict is verbal disagreement followed by the settlement situation.

The method used in solving a conflict situation within the public organization in question seems to be the verbal disagreement, this method being the most appreciated.

The survey results reveal there are no significant differences in the responses of the two **categories of civil servants**.

SURVEY CONCLUSIONS

Taking into account the results obtained, we have demonstrated that the research hypothesis was analyzed and supported by references. As a conclusion it can be stated that: the method used by the manager of a public organization in conflict management is influencing the work climate within the civil servants collectively. This climate represents a key factor in obtaining performance.

NOTE:

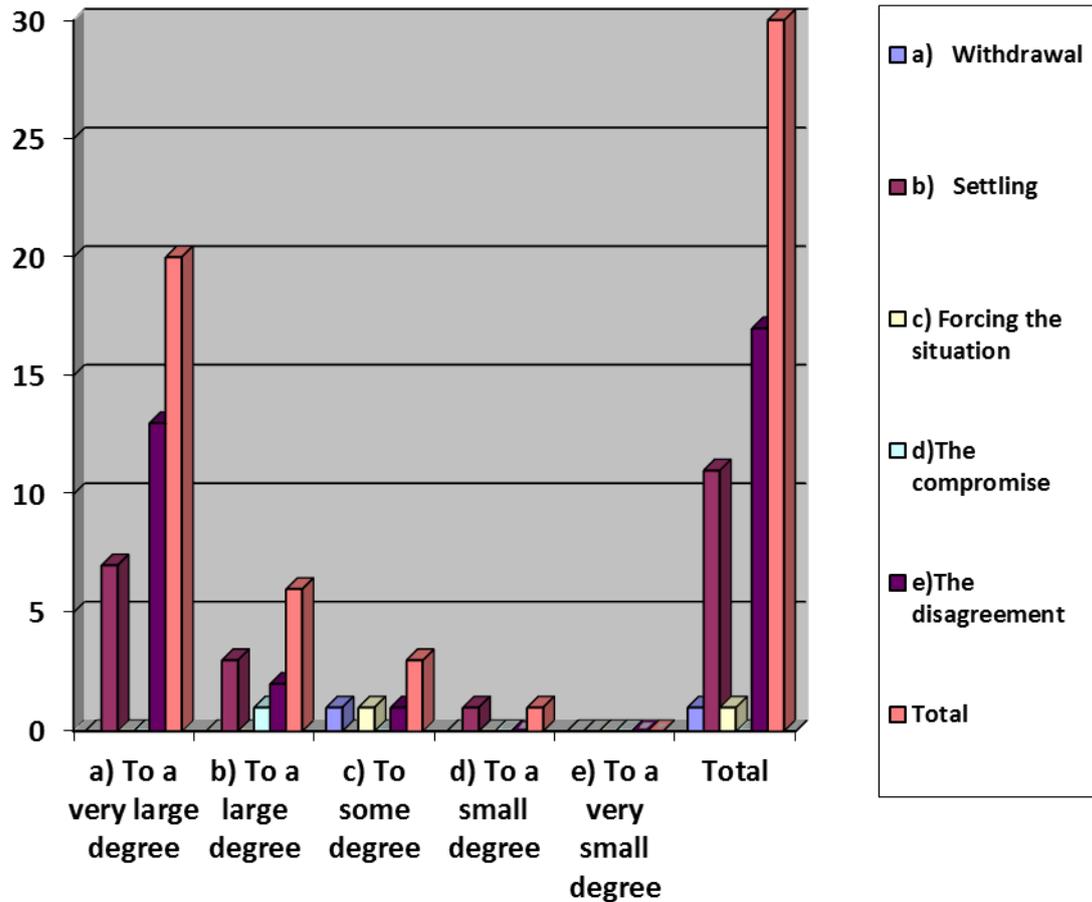
1 = the method used for managing conflict by the organization manager

2 = the favourable climate to carrying out the duties of public servants

Table 1

2 1	a) To a very large degree	b) To a large degree	c) To some degree	d) To a small degree	e) To a very small degree	Total
a) Withdrawal	0	0	1	0	0	1
b) Settling	7	3	0	1	0	11
c) Forcing the situation	0	0	1	0	0	1
d) The compromise	0	1	0	0	0	0
e) The disagreement	13	2	1	0	0	17
Total	20	6	3	1	0	30

CHART 1



FINAL CONCLUSION

"Conflict" is a natural part of our existence. If we don't consider it as a negative and destructive force, but try to explain its nature and identify the causes and forces involved, the conflict can become an opportunity of personal development. It can also become a chance of developing the capacity to approach conflicts in a constructive way.

A public organization's mission is to serve the best interests of the citizens, within the existing legal framework, promoting values of professionalism, efficiency and respect for the people around it.

These requirements are in line with the legal provisions which specify: "civil servants have an obligation to perform with professionalism, impartiality and in accordance with the law their office duties. Civil servants should avoid getting involved in any actions that could bring damage to anyone's image, local authorities representatives or can compromise the reputation of a corporate body of public servants" (art. 42, Law 188/1999 on the status of public servants).

General rules of professional conduct of public servants states that public officials have the obligation to provide a quality public service, for the benefit of citizens; civil servants are required to demonstrate a professional manner, to ensure administrative transparency in accordance with the law. By respecting these rules the public servants aim to earn and maintain public confidence as regards the integrity, impartiality and effectiveness of public authorities and organizations (article 5, paragraph 1, Law 7/2004 on the code of conduct of public servants)

Within their work activity, public servants have the obligation to respect freedom of opinion and not be influenced by any personal issues or popularity. In expressing opinions, civil servants must demonstrate a comforting attitude and must avoid generating conflict due to the exchange of opinions. (As stated in article 8, paragraph 2- Law 7/2004 relating to the conduct code of public servant)

Civil servants are obliged to demonstrate an attitude of respect, good faith, fairness and receptiveness in the relationship with colleagues within the organization in which they work as well as with other people. (As stated in article no. 12, Law 7/2004 relating to the conduct code of public servants).

According to the information researched through this paper some of the key obligations of public servants were outlined. Findings emphasize on the existence of a peaceful work environment in order to complete the tasks successfully. The climate represents the reinforcement factor of the group in its actions towards the accomplishment of responsibilities and objectives within the public organization.

The results of this short research are significant and these findings can be considered a starting point in reconsidering the management approach within the public organization.

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Appendix 1

THE SURVEY

This survey is anonymous. It encourages you to reflect on the issues related to a good working relationship between public servants, public management and clerical staff.

In order to accomplish an effective investigation, please answer the questions sincerely, after analyzing each situation in detail. Please tick only one answer.

Thank you!

Q1: Do you believe the climate in your office/department represents an important factor in order to accomplish the appropriate tasks?

1. To a very large extent
2. To a large extent
3. To some extent
4. To a small extent
5. To a very small extent

Q2: Which of the following factors do you consider as being the most important for generating a positive work environment in order to carry out tasks in a civil servant role?

- a) Manager's unresponsiveness as regards solving tasks (imagine yourself in a managing position and try to relate to your next line manager)
- b) Manager's assertiveness
- c) Clear, precise tasks
- d) Absence of professional conflicts

e) Cooperation

Q 3: Do you consider there is a favourable work environment for carrying out duties within the office, department and your Institution?

- a) To a very large extent
- b) To a large extent
- c) To some extent
- d) To a small extent
- e) To a very small extent

Q 4: Assuming you are offered a job having the slightest possible advantage beside your current place of employment, would you move there?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) I don't know

Q 5: In the case of organising a trip with colleagues, during out of work hours, do you wish to attend?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. I don't know

Q 6 Please define the term conflict at Institutional level.

Q 7 Conflict situations lead to effects:

- a. Negative
- b. Positive
- c. Both positive and negative

Q 8 If answering with a) to the question no.7 please detail some negative effects for these circumstances.

Q9 "How do you think your manager would react if you suggest (or wish to suggest) another way of solving a problem faster/effective?"

- a) He will not listen
- b) He listens but delays analyzing the proposed solution
- c) Listens, analyzes, and claims that his version is the best
- d) We compare and contrast the opinions and he accepts the best solution

Q10 How will you react during a meeting if you are accused of not solving a task in your role correctly/on time?

- a) You get up and leave the room to impress your leader
- b) You listen to accusations brought to you and take responsibility for these because the boss will not listen or try to understand you
- c) You explain politely that you have performed the tasks well but there is a misunderstanding,

Q 11 Which of the reasons listed below do you think is the most common cause for generating conflicts at work?

- a) Colleagues who do not make every possible effort
- b) Lack of communication

- c) Refusal to take responsibility
- d) Criticism and unfounded accusations
- e) Preferential treatment
- f) Being ignorant

Q 12 Are there any conflicts within your service/department?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Sometimes

Q 13 What matters most, in a conflict situation?

- a) people's feelings
- b) focusing on facts
- c) ending the conflict as soon as possible
- d) people can benefit from disagreements
- e) the disagreements are rarely resolved satisfactorily

Q14: "Which technique do you believe is used by the head office or service leader to manage conflict situations in general?

- a) Withdrawal
- b) Settlement
- c) Acting in force
- d) Compromise
- e) Confrontation

Q15: "Which do you consider as being the best method of managing conflict situations (in general and not in exceptional circumstances)?"

Q16: Amount of years worked:

- a) under 10 years
- b) over 10 years

Q17: I am named in a public function of:

- a) Management position
- b) Clerical role