

The strategic approach in organizations

Roberta Mariotti ¹

Abstract

This paper is dedicated to the strategic and systematic approach used in the managerial field. The author will briefly present some guidelines that characterize the it discuss **work methods** in the organizational sector and in particular I will discuss about the consultation, training and supervision that had been carried out for what is probably the biggest, most impressive and hierarchical organization in our country: the Italian Army.

¹ *Affiliated Psychotherapist Centro di Terapia Strategica (Rimini)*

This session of the convention is dedicated to the strategic and systematic approach used in the managerial field. I will briefly present some guidelines that characterize our work methods in the organizational sector and in particular I will speak about the consultation, training and supervision that we have carried out for what is probably the biggest, most impressive and hierarchical organization in our country: the Italian Army.

Just like in clinical circles, Prof. Giafranco Cecchin urged us to avoid 3 major errors that we as therapists might commit. Therefore our work was organized to avoid the following:

- to act as experts who are simply there to dispense formulas;
- to act as specialists who makes organizational diagnosis which often are useless in problem solving and serve only to provoke considerable resistance to change;
- to act as moralists, we must remember that it is not our job to tell the company how to work or which their mission should be.

As strategic consultants, we support Edgar Schein's theory, one of the major exponents of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He defines this method as process consultation, in other words, the help process where the consultant is a catalyst in the organizational change, to help people help themselves, to reactivate the resources that are blocked and to move towards a real change, so as to solve the dysfunction. From this point of view, the work of the strategic consultant consists in taking advantage of the potential that lies within the organization in order to produce – claims F. Jullien, philosopher and scholar of Chinese culture – maximum results with minimum effort. In other words, teaching people to use their resources to produce small changes, which in turn trigger a chain of changes. This appears to be the most efficient method not only to bring about significant and substantial changes in their way of working, but also to maintain the results achieved and help people face new challenges with greater awareness of their resources.

To illustrate how this method functions in organizations, I will briefly describe some important points of the consultation carried out with the Italian Army. This is a particular structure with a well-defined hierarchy, in which the application of strategies is the basis for daily operations, both in peacekeeping missions and during war.

As you well know, the process of change in the Armed Forces and the gradual transformation of this institution into a company is not only an extremely important event. In some aspects it was a very delicate task because the evolution was obliged to take into account the current personnel, with many years of service and the new recruits, steering them all towards a new mission: to build a voluntary army of professionals. In fact, in recent years the evolution of the global strategic situation has brought the Army personnel face to face with the challenge of re-organizing the Armed Forces to prepare it for internal change, given the setting up of a volunteer army of professionals and of the recent introduction of women. This was, as you can imagine, no small challenge, and due to which the Army had to revise the training course for all personnel in service and the selection process for the new recruits. The internal re-organization led to the transformation of the usual iter of careers, which up till then was based on experience, on the length of service and the suitability decided upon by an internal competition. The new route was “selective training” carried out by a team of specialists in the field of assessment and training and was aimed at identifying the people considered most suitable to take up various positions in the hierarchical levels. This brought about an enormous change in the organizational structure,

since the assessment of suitability for a position or office is no longer based on the length of service but on the abilities and skills shown by the existing personnel and by the new recruits. In other words, the Armed Forces reviewed the training course and the career of all personnel, setting up continuous training, following the “lesson learnt” method – the lessons learnt from the experience acquired at each level. In this way, the army personnel are prepared, both individually and as a team, before taking on a task or new position. The aim of this new “selective training” course, in which the personnel is trained and at the same time the most suitable are selected for precise strategic roles, besides emphasizing the technical-professional aspects, is also to identify and cultivate the relational and communication skills of those who will be responsible for managing on various levels the human resources available. It is for this reason that the army created a work group made up of officials from different areas, experts in conducting learning groups and with out-door didactic method experience, to be in charge of the permanent training of personnel at every level and rank.

Since 1999, we have carried out consultation-training-supervision with this group of officials with the primary aim being to give a systematic nature and methodological discipline to their pilot experience of “selective training”. Our work was done according to the research-intervention method, through the direct observation and analysis of video recordings of the “selective training” carried out by the officials of the army. This consented a refinement and intense verification of the efficiency of the model and of the effects on the changes introduced by us. Then, with this initial group we set up a protocol of “selective training” that ensured a strict approach, assessment of the effects yet also the necessary flexibility to adapt it to the various roles and hierarchical levels. It is important to underline that this protocol was not entirely designed *ex novo*, it represents an evolution of the model that previous trainers had already used. In other words, we worked with people who had been previously trained, who had their own method of intervention and we simply inserted and patched up some techniques and strategies to render the protocol more rigorous, systematic, repeatable, effective and efficient. We basically guided the group of officials to evolve their model, not to abandon it for another one, but to add some new elements, which would make it more rigorous and verifiable in its effects.

The first hurdle encountered by the trainers was the inability to communicate to the public the activities to be carried out. This was a lesson for all but at the same time it was selective because some individuals were more suitable than others for particular roles, based on the skills and abilities demonstrated during experience activities. These activities were specially designed to assess certain characteristics such as leadership skills, problem solving, stress management, etc. To help the trainers get across to the group the importance of this new selective training activity, we firstly observed their way of communicating, and then we taught them the use of some communication techniques to increase their communicative effectiveness. We suggested to the trainers to immediately define, during the presentation of the experience activities, their role as trainers and selectors, to present the whole team and explain their task using the metaphor of the coach who must form a football team for example (men’s most popular sport in our country). When a coach must choose a team he faces four different situations:

- he has motivated players with excellent physical and technical skills. Usually these become the regulars;

- he has motivated players, but at the moment they have not developed good technical skills. In this case they can train, work hard and when the coach thinks they are ready, he will send them on;
- he has players with great physical and technical skills but they are demotivated. In this case, if he cannot motivate them, he will be forced to leave them on the sideline;
- finally, he may have players without great physical and technical skills and even demotivated. Obviously a good coach must exclude these players because they will not help the team win.

In this way the trainers take on a clear and unambiguous position: if you are motivated we are your trainers, if you are not, we are your denigrators. If you are both motivated and skillful, we can work together. This represents the ideal way to avoid ambivalence.

Besides working on communication, one of the crucial points of the protocol on which we intervene, re-elaborating the previous model, is how to “contextualize” the training experience.

We began with a model that had as a fundamental technique, the experience of “outdoor games”, guided experiences that led to learning specific leadership and collaboration skills. At the end of each activity (outdoor games) the trainers held a debriefing dedicated to the lesson learnt. In this phase the “decontextualization” rule was in force, where the participants reflected on the experience acquired during the games, on how they solved the problems or difficult situations, on the obstacles encountered, without relating the experience to their work context. In relation to this rule, valid for the outdoor training, the trainers found it difficult to make the group aware that what they were doing was not just a game, but an activity in which they learnt something and that something was to be transferred into their working reality. We then studied the trainers at work and with them we saw what was necessary to modify both in their presentation of the activities and in the entire protocol. Our next step was to show them how to introduce the contextualization rule, indicating how to teach the subjects in selective-training to transfer the concrete examples learnt in the activities into their work context. In this phase it was clearly fundamental that trainers should avoid giving concrete answers but with the use of strategic conversation, they could stimulate the participants to find the answers themselves. In fact, we had proposed using the debriefing to analyze the outdoor experience on three distinct levels, albeit linked: the emotional level (“what did you feel?”), the problem solving level (“what did you learn?”), the level of transferring the game experience to real life daily work (contextualization). In this way, the debriefing became the most important part of the outdoor experience and consequently, the trainers took greater care in selecting the games and dedicated more time to this reflection phase and to the transferal into daily practice. Finally, the introduction of the contextualization made it easier to detect aptitudes, or the lack of aptitudes of the participants, because when people must talk about their situations or their experiences, they are usually more forthcoming and this is more important both for the selective process and for the pure training process.

The contextualization exercise was taken up again in a different form after the outdoor activities. In order to guide each component of the group to adapt the lesson learnt in the previous days to his daily practice, we inserted a particular exercise: during the training the participants had prepared a 15 minute speech on how what they had learnt during the training could be transferred to their work context. Afterwards, each participant would have made this speech to the others in an effort to convince them. The aim of this exercise was to

persuade the others in order to persuade themselves. In fact, the more you can persuade others of the usefulness of self-learning, the more we ourselves are persuaded. But this is not only limited to a form of self-deception, in fact, it represents a useful means of increasing our self esteem and self-efficiency, an important aspect not only from a training point of view but also as a selective criteria. The strategy that we suggested to adopt during this exercise was to avoid interrupting the participants during their speech, to allow each of them to express themselves. On the other hand, the trainer should have initially stimulated the group to interrupt, so as to create a situation between the speaker and the group in which the resources of the single speaker could emerge.

Finally, at the end of the protocol, we introduced an element, which represented the framework of the training process. During the final individual interviews, the trainers were to have the participants repeat what they had learnt and how they could implement it in their context; they were to end the interview with this phrase. "Every day from now on ask yourself: 'What would I do differently now to what I normally do, if I were sure to have acquired something that has changed me? And every day, do something small differently. In three months one of us will come to visit you to see what you have done differently'".

This final phase turned out to be very useful, in so far as it allowed the participants to return to their daily situation with some small change but with the awareness that they had participated in a training process that left them with something. This is also the case for who was not deemed suitable for a particular role or office.

At the end of the work carried out with the first group of officials (followed by new groups, including also psychologists), who were the real protagonists in the systematic application of the evolved protocol, the results were very encouraging. In fact, the examination of the effects has already shown the first and significant changes in attitude of the participants in the "selective training" course as well as the greater ability of the trainers to favor a rapid and verifiable transfer of the lesson learnt to the concrete work situations. In brief, by teaching the trainers advanced strategies and methodologies to be integrated in procedures already in use, adding strategic adaptations, this transferred their training operations into concrete situations, transforming the lesson learnt by each participant directly into their own reality.

We believe that this case is one of the best example of adaptability and flexibility of a problem solving process in specific situations. The entire supervision-training process was carried out by guiding the participants, psychologists, doctors-psychiatrists, and experts in training and selection, to change without apparently changing. When the change has come about by their doing, they realize and agree with the final result.

In this sense, strategic change is something, which is never forced or drastically imposed, it is something that, through particular tactics and maneuvers occurs inevitable, because it is experienced as a natural evolution of the events. As the ancient stratagem philosophy goes, it is important to know how to grasp the "inclination" of a situation in order to introduce the most apparently natural evolution.

Further reading:

G. Nardone, R. Mariotti, R. Milanese, A. Fiorenza (2000), *La terapia dell'azienda malata – Problem solving strategico per organizzazioni*, Ponte alle Grazie, Milano.

Address reprint requests to:
Roberta Mariotti
Centro di Terapia Strategica,
Rimini, Italia
info@robertamariotti.it