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STRATEGIES FOR COUNTERACTING PROFESSIONAL BURNOUT AT THE ORGANIZATIONAL AND INDIVIDUAL LEVEL AS WELL AS PROFESSIONAL ETHICS AS IMPORTANT FACTORS IN THE WORK OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Strategie przeciwdziałania wypaleniu zawodowemu na poziomie organizacyjnym i indywidualnym oraz etyka zawodowa jako istotne czynniki w pracy administracji publicznej

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Introduction

Burnout is sometimes called one of the most serious threats to all professionally active people. The problem of burnout is noticed by employers. The fight against it is becoming more and more common, and more and more employers are starting to treat the care for the well-being of their employees and their mental health as a priority, including it in the elementary principles related to ensuring proper health and safety conditions at work. Taking into account that most of the causes of burnout come from within the organization, when planning remedial actions, the primary focus should be on the organizational level. However, the individual level is equally important. It is also important to select these measures according to the organization's susceptibility to individual causes of burnout, so that the effect obtained is as good as possible.

The main objective of the paper was to show important factors in the work of public administration officials, namely the strategy of counteracting professional burnout at the organizational and individual level and professional ethics. These elements are closely related. Research methods such as observation and analysis were used in the presented paper.

1. Elements of the strategy to counteract professional burnout at the level of the organization

Counteracting excessive workload

Observation and analysis of the public administration environment has shown that work overload is a particular problem faced by employees. Therefore, in order to counteract professional burnout, it is necessary to implement mechanisms that allow for the examination of the actual workload, both at the level of the entire organization, its individual local units, and then also at the level of individual organizational units and, finally, individual employees. Such a diagnosis should be made systematically, so as to have precise data, because only on this basis it is possible to make appropriate management decisions¹.

The workload study should also be linked to the allocation of FTEs, so that any changes in staff take place in those units where the workload has significantly increased or decreased.

Adequate level of remuneration for civil servants

The feeling of being undervalued, which undermines self-esteem and is one of the most serious causes of progressive burnout, is closely related to the low salaries of civil servants. The basic salary is one of the elements of the reward system, and it may not be the most important if it is maintained at a level that allows you to meet your basic needs. However, if this

¹ B. Mańkowska, *Superwizja. Jak chronić się przed wypaleniem zawodowym i utratą zdrowia*, Wolters Kluwer Polska Sp. z o.o., Warszawa 2020, s.34

is not the case, employees adopt a more materialistic attitude and make their commitment to work and the results achieved dependent on purely financial benefits.

Stable and long-term HR policy

Of particular importance is the HR policy, which includes such issues as motivation, rewarding, evaluation and planning of further development. As a general rule, it should be stable and long-term. This is the first step in the right direction, but the success will certainly be determined by the next one, i.e. the conscious and consistent implementation of individual elements as part of a larger, coherent system. To this end, it is necessary to raise the awareness of the management staff, who are responsible for initiating activities in this area, but also of the employees themselves. Meanwhile, these activities, if carried out with full conviction and in a comprehensive manner, form a coherent system that provides the opportunity to thoughtfully manage the development and career of officials in public administration. In this way, they can feel that they are in control of their professional lives and believe that they will be rewarded for their effort and commitment.

Flexible working hours and alternative forms of employment to reconcile work and private life

The strength of work in public administration has always been the single-shift work in fixed hours, valued by most officials, which allowed for a relatively easy reconciliation of personal life with professional duties. It was especially praised by people who had children of preschool or school age to raise, because working in such a system enabled them to provide proper care in the afternoons. However, today, with the changes that have taken place in the surrounding world, traditional forms of employment are no longer sufficient. The answer to the needs of employees in this area may be to provide flexible working hours or shift work, which have not been used on a larger scale in public administration so far. So far, the barrier has been the proper organization of work and providing customer service at fixed, fixed hours, as well as remote access to IT systems necessary for effective work. When it comes to non-standard working hours, the transition to e-services means that stationary service in limited hours loses its original importance. However, when it comes to remote work, which until now seemed completely impossible to a wider extent, after the experience gained in connection with the coronavirus epidemic and the need to quickly switch to working from home, this issue appears in a completely new light. And although at the moment this area seems to pose the least threat to civil servants as a contribution to their professional burnout, it is worth approaching the issue of flexible forms of work with understanding, as it is certainly a prospective direction of changes in the labour market.

Open, two-way communication

Another important element of counteracting professional burnout of civil servants is taking care of proper, i.e. open and two-way communication within public administration. Without meeting this requirement, there is no question of being treated in a subjective way, of a sense of justice; It is also impossible to believe that the professional sphere is in control, and the issue of community in the workplace becomes highly questionable. These are all areas that play a special role in building job satisfaction and contribute to reducing the risk of burnout.

Practice shows that the issue of communication, although the most obvious, usually raises a lot of problems. Despite the multiplicity of communication channels and various forms of information transfer, one of the most common reasons for problems and conflicts at work is ignorance or misunderstanding. If the office is to be a friendly working environment and the official employed in it is to be convinced that he or she is part of a team in which he or she counts and whose opinion is important, the proper flow of information must be en-

sured, and communication should be based on the principle of honesty and openness. It should not be expected that the transparency and openness of management decisions will result in their full acceptance and support, but it will certainly contribute to a better atmosphere and mutual understanding. Without it, the risk of unnecessary stress caused by internal conflicts and thus burnout increases.

Fostering a culture open to ideas, change and innovation

A similar role in the fight against burnout syndrome as the open and two-way communication described above can be played by promoting an organizational culture that is open to ideas, changes and innovations. This is not an easy task, because public administration is not very creative and rather the basic rules of officials are to act according to established canons². Innovating the workplace as a result of bottom-up, non-imposed action breaks the monotony, allows employees to take control of certain areas of their working lives, and contributes to the development of the community. For this reason, it is worth supporting all forms of additional activity, especially if it can bring concrete benefits, both to the institution itself and to the officials employed in it. It often turns out that it is enough to create opportunities, and previously unknown reserves of energy and ingenuity of employees are activated, which they infect others, causing the risk of professional burnout in the entire environment to effectively decrease.

Training system

As research conducted by scientists dealing with the burnout syndrome has shown, its development is facilitated by deficits in interpersonal competences and low organizational skills³. For this reason, this is an area that should be given special attention by those in charge of public administration and by civil servants themselves. While knowledge and professional experience are aspects that have always been pillars of the development of public administration employees, there was a lack of time and resources for the development of soft skills. Meanwhile, these are the types of training that should be permanently introduced into individual professional development programs, responding to real needs in this area. In the context of counteracting professional burnout, it is worth taking advantage of training in the field of: effective coping with stress, working time management, setting goals and delegating tasks, as well as all kinds of training in the development of social competences (team management, assertiveness, conflict resolution skills, effective communication), etc.

Proper selection of training topics, as well as their high substantive level and free access to them are the basic elements that can break the existing barriers to development and contribute to the fact that many stressors at work will be easier for officials to deal with⁴. It is also a response to a number of challenges posed by the modern world, which we are not always able to deal with adequately. What is more, practice shows that in addition to specific knowledge and acquired skills, participation in training activates employees, opens them up to new perspectives and challenges, and allows them to establish contacts that later, in the face of emerging problems, provide unquestionable support.

Building a community

Although the people who make up the public administration, as well as the dependencies and relationships that exist between them, are one of the most important resources and

² Art. 7 Konstytucji RP.

³ B. Mańkowska, *Wypalenie zawodowe - źródła, mechanizmy, zapobieganie*, Harmonia, Gdańsk, 2017, s. 195.

⁴P. Stawiarska, *Wypalenie zawodowe w perspektywie wyzwań współczesnego świata*, Difin SA, Warszawa, 2016, s.38

strength of this organization, caring for the existence of the community should be the basic task of every boss who values the well-being of his employees. It turns out that a good, well-coordinated team is the best guarantee of achieving goals and overcoming any crises. It is worth considering creating a space for strengthening contacts between colleagues, during work or outside of it, and remember that in fact, building a community is not done with big actions, but with everyday work and manifests itself in the way we treat others on a daily basis – in accordance with the principles of respect, dignity, honesty, genuine care and interest.

Promoting active leisure and healthy lifestyles

In order to effectively counteract burnout, it is important to balance the stress resulting from various aspects of professional life with rest and health care⁵. And although in fact these are issues for which everyone is individually responsible, organizations with a high level of social responsibility also pay attention to them.

Stress prevention

All the actions proposed above are aimed at minimizing or even eliminating the causes of professional burnout among civil servants. Nevertheless, regardless of them, it is also worth addressing the stress itself, i.e. the direct reaction to the emerging primary sources of burnout mentioned above. The previously mentioned work overload, improper rewards, lack of control, fairness and a sense of community, and finally a conflict of values, are very strong psychosocial stressors related to the context of work⁶. Their long-term effects, which the individual is not able to resist, lead to chronic stress and, as a result, to professional burnout. It may turn out that the actions taken at the organizational level, which are described in detail above, will not be sufficient. Besides, stress, like the resulting burnout, largely depends on the personality of the individual and his or her susceptibility to particular stressors. Therefore, in order to counteract this phenomenon in the organization, but at the micro level, i.e. in relation to each of the officials experiencing stress, it is necessary to include activities at the organizational level aimed at preventing stress in the workplace⁷.

2. Counteracting burnout at the individual level

In order for the strategies taken at the level of the organization to counteract professional burnout of civil servants, they should also take into account individual conditions, because everyone has a different resistance *to stress* and reacts differently to stressors (*coping stress*)⁸. These are individual traits that largely depend on personality traits such as: optimism, level of self-esteem, timidity, but also on age, education or current family status. It turns out that burnout most often affects younger than older people, lonely people than those who have a family, statistically higher in women than in men, and in employees with shorter work experience⁹. Perfectionists and people who strongly identify with their work are particularly vulnerable to them¹⁰. In pursuit of new goals, without sufficient support, they begin to push new boundaries, time and again mobilizing themselves for the next task beyond their strength. If this situation lasts for months or years, the body is unable to regenerate and suffers burnout.

⁵ B. Mańkowska, *Superwizja. Jak chronić się przed wypaleniem zawodowym i utratą zdrowia*, Wolters Kluwer Polska Sp. z o.o., Warszawa 2020, s.69

⁶ Tamże, s. 199.

⁷ Z. Mockało, A. Najmiec, *Stres u pracowników zatrudnionych w bezpośrednim kontakcie z klientem na przykładzie wybranych działalności sektora usług*, CIOP-PIB, Warszawa 2017, s. 12

⁸ B. Mańkowska, *Wypalenie...*, *op. cit.*, s. 103.

⁹ M. Kowalska, J. Bugajska, D. Żołnierczyk-Zreda, *Częstość występowania zespołu wypalenia zawodowego wśród pracowników biurowych*, „Medycyna Pracy”, 2010, Nr 6, s. 615-623.

¹⁰ A. Witkiewicz, *Wypalenie zawodowe – jak to przetrwać?*, www.focus.pl/artykul/jak-przetrwac-wypalenie-zawodowe (12.10.2023).

Counteracting burnout syndrome at the individual level should therefore focus primarily on providing help and support in coping with stress. This applies both to stress that has already occurred as well as to stress that may occur in the future, hence the importance of monitoring stress among employees, which was mentioned in the section on stress prevention. Activities in this area should include both the physical sphere, starting with proper nutrition, through physical activity, and ending with skilful rest, but also the mental sphere, often with the support of professional therapeutic methods. The choice from an extremely wide range of available methods and tools should be made in close connection with a particular person, his or her personality, temperament, psychophysical and emotional state.

The answer to the syndrome of professional burnout of civil servants may also be the idea of *work-life balance*, i.e. achieving a state of balance between professional and personal life. This requires a large dose of self-awareness and consistency in action. It is important to know one's own needs and limitations, but also to be able to listen to the signals coming from inside one's own body, which is the best barometer of adverse changes.

The basic principles of *work-life balance* are:

- Live in harmony with yourself.
- Listen to yourself and don't ignore your body's signals.
- Set your priorities in life – what is important to you and what you are willing to give up.
- Skillfully set boundaries: for others (be assertive) and for yourself (let yourself go).
- Appreciate yourself – celebrate your successes, don't dwell on your failures.
- Give yourself the right to make mistakes – learn from them and treat them as the next step in the process of self-improvement.
- Give yourself the right to rest.
- Nurture your curiosity about the world.
- Cultivate daily rituals that bring you joy.
- Take care of relationships at work and outside of it – love and friendship are the best medicine for all problems and concerns.

Compliance with the above recommendations is the basis of daily physical and mental hygiene, guaranteeing health, well-being and satisfaction from work, i.e. everything that counterbalances the burnout syndrome.

3. Ethics of officials

All of the above-mentioned factors included in the strategy of counteracting professional burnout can have a very strong impact on professional ethics in public administration.

Professional ethics of administration (clerical ethics) includes ethical norms of civil servants, created on the basis of provisions contained in generally applicable normative acts (the Constitution of the Republic of Poland and statutes and regulations issued on their basis) and internal normative acts (statutes, regulations). Standards of conduct refer to professional and ethical behavior, providing a basis for its evaluation¹¹. Every reprehensible act of an official can be considered in two dimensions: ethics and law. Legally prohibited acts are actions involving dishonest behavior of officials, ethically reprehensible acts are associated with the dishonesty of the authorities in the public sphere, e.g. nepotism, cronyism¹². That is why it is so important to make office employees aware of the responsibility for unethical behaviour, not only in the case of committing a clerical offence, but also in the case of behaviour incon-

¹¹ Z. Szonert, *Administracja, jej etyka i pragmatyka służbowa*, Jagiellońskie Wyd. Naukowe, Kraków 2017, s. 106.

¹² M. Wypych, *Czym jest korupcja? informator prawny*, [https://www.batory.org.pl/publikacja/czym-jest-korupcja-informator-prawny/\(11-10-2023\)](https://www.batory.org.pl/publikacja/czym-jest-korupcja-informator-prawny/(11-10-2023))

sistent with the code of ethics. As Z. Szonert emphasizes, "The norms of statutory law are secured by state coercion, i.e. specific legal sanctions, while the application of moral law norms is secured by acts of social disapproval and condemnation in the event of non-compliance. The subject of legal regulation is primarily the external behaviour of people and other legal entities. The law does not provide for responsibility for beliefs or intentions alone. On the other hand, in the case of violation of moral norms, the object of condemnation may be the very fact of people's behavior in the sphere of their psychological experiences, their intentions and assessments, according to the principle of "do not do to your neighbor what you would not like to be done", the fact that we wish our neighbors ill, that we envy them, that we speak ill of them for no reason, etc." ¹³tags. An official's responsibility for behavior is conditioned by the relationship between law and morality.

Conclusions

Despite the many, as it turns out, factors contributing to the burnout of civil servants in public administration, it is not an inevitable process that cannot be stopped in any way. There are a number of actions presented in the paper which, if taken early enough and implemented in a consistent and systemic manner, can effectively counteract the professional burnout of civil servants. It is necessary to take care of strategies to counteract professional burnout at the organizational level as well as on an individual level. This requires a high level of awareness of the organization itself, as well as the attentiveness of the officials themselves and continuous work and improvement. Without a doubt, however, this effort is worth the price, as it guarantees long-term employee satisfaction, also determining the effectiveness and efficiency of the entire organization. Secondly, ensuring that there is no burnout will have a positive impact on maintaining professional ethics among public administration staff. It should also be remembered that the phenomenon of burnout can be cyclical, so it can occur many times throughout the entire working life. Unfortunately, there is no effective remedy that protects against the occurrence of the syndrome, nor is there one that is able to effectively immunize against it. That is why it is so important to properly prepare at the level of the organization and implement such mechanisms that will minimize the risk of professional burnout, effectively counteracting it. It is also extremely important, recommended by many experts on the subject, to be mindful, to listen to oneself and to the signals sent by one's own body, as well as to constantly work on oneself. These actions should be treated as prophylaxis, which will prevent the first symptoms of burnout or, if they do appear, will allow you to successfully emerge from the initial phase of burnout.

Summary:

Burnout syndrome is – as experts on the subject agree – one of the most important contemporary threats for all professionally active people. It also applies to public administration employees. And although the phenomenon itself in this professional group has not been comprehensively studied, there is no doubt that it is present among employees of today's public administration. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce strategies to counteract professional burnout already at the organizational level in order to minimize the causes of professional burnout, which may lead to a gradual spiral of discouragement among officials, growing in them a feeling of fatigue with work to the point of complete exhaustion, negatively affecting not only professional relations, but also the entire sphere of private contacts. The culmination of the whole process may be a feeling of complete inadequacy and a belief in the lack of self-worth, affecting not only the feeling of individual ineffectiveness, but also affecting the effectiveness of the entire organization, including professional ethics. The thesis consists of two

¹³ Z. Szonert, *Administracja, jej etyka i pragmatyka służbowa*, Jagiellońskie Wyd. Naukowe, Kraków 2017, s. 107.

main parts, in which aspects of the strategy for counteracting professional burnout at the organizational level and an outline of clerical ethics are presented.

Key words: professional ethics, organization, strategy, burnout, public administration

Streszczenie:

Strategie przeciwdziałania wypaleniu zawodowemu na poziomie organizacyjnym i indywidualnym oraz etyka zawodowa jako istotne czynniki w pracy administracji publicznej

Syndrom wypalenia zawodowego to – jak zgodnie twierdzą znawcy tematu – jedno z najważniejszych współczesnych zagrożeń dla wszystkich aktywnych zawodowo. Dotyczy ono również pracowników administracji publicznej. I choć samo zjawisko w tej grupie zawodowej nie zostało kompleksowo zbadane, nie ma wątpliwości, że jest obecne wśród pracowników dzisiejszej administracji publicznej. Dlatego też należy wprowadzać strategie przeciwdziałania wypaleniu zawodowemu już na poziomie organizacyjnym tak, by zminimalizować przyczyny wypalenia zawodowego, które mogą prowadzić do stopniowego nakręcania spirali zniechęcenia urzędników, narastania w nich uczucia zmęczenia pracą aż do całkowitego nią wyczerpania, negatywnie oddziałując nie tylko na relacje zawodowe, ale i całą sferę kontaktów prywatnych. Punktem kulminacyjnym całego procesu może stać się poczucie zupełnej nieprzydatności i przekonanie o braku własnej wartości, wpływające nie tylko na poczucie nieskuteczności indywidualnej, ale i oddziałujące na efektywność całej organizacji, w tym na etykę zawodową. Praca składa się z dwóch głównych części, w których to zostały przedstawione aspekty strategii przeciwdziałania wypaleniu zawodowemu na poziomie organizacyjnym oraz zarys etyki urzędniczej.

Słowa kluczowe: etyka zawodowa, organizacja, strategia, wypalenie zawodowe, administracja publiczna

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