

# ANALYZING THE SOCIAL IMAGE OF ORGANIZATIONS – A PRACTICAL APPLICATION ON THE COMMUNITY POLICE DEPARTMENT OF BRASOV CITY

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**Abstract:** *The paper presents the results of the research “The social image of an organization – the ratio between desirable image and designed image in the Community Police Department - Brasov City”. The research was conducted in 2007 and the purpose was to analyze the ratio between the institution’s self-image and its public image. The main result, which has the strongest implication upon an organization like the Local/Municipal Police, is the lack of power and authority (self-image) in an organization which is fundamentally structured on coercive power (created image).*

**Key words:** *organizational self image, organizational public image, Community Police Brasov.*

The purpose of the research “The social image of an organization – the ratio between desirable image and designed image in the Community Police Department of Brasov City” was to do a comparative analysis of the main components of organizational image in order to create the ground for a coherent public relation strategy. The main theoretical premise was that the consistency and robustness of organizational communication is the result of the degree of convergence between the two main perceived images: internal - “How we see ourselves” and external - “How others see us” (Leister and MacLachlan 1975; Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994, Massey, 2003). The projected image in a local community is, in the first place, the result of organizational self image. Doing a “mirror” analysis for

the main components of organizational images (both internal and public) enabled identifying the weaknesses in organizational image at the level of organizational identity and its public projection.

The exploratory research was conducted between November – December 2007. The method used for data collection about self-image was individual, semi-structured interviews, conducted with the managerial team of the Community Police Department of Brasov. The option for interviewing the managerial team was founded on two assumptions: first, the managerial position contains the public representation duty, and secondly, the managers are (or should be) opinion leaders. For data collection about the designed image were applied 30 individual semi-structured interviews and two focus-groups. The subjects were

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Brasov citizens who were selected on a theoretical sampling scheme. The selection criteria were: gender, the level of civic activism and the neighbor location. Most of the respondents were Presidents of Home-owners Associations and active members of those associations.

The main dimensions used in the operation scheme were: organization history, mission and aim, administrative capacity, image vulnerabilities, the projection (the vision about the future), commitment to the organization, identity marks in public space (uniform and the organizational name), the perception of the public image (notoriety, satisfaction level, adequate methods for enhancing the notoriety). In order to identify the characteristics of the designed image there were used the following dimensions: public agenda (the presence or absence of civic security), critical incidents regarding law and public order, the organization's history, mission and aim, administrative capacity, image vulnerabilities and methods for enhancing the notoriety. The paper presents the main results regarding four dimensions of those presented above: i. the advantages and disadvantages of affiliation to the organization, ii. the identity marks in public space – the institution name, iii. the vision about the future and iv. administrative capacity.

### **1. The Advantages and Disadvantages of Being Employed in the Community Police Department Brasov**

Of all image components, the view on commitment to the organization has the highest probability to be projected in the public space. The advantages and disadvantages of being a member of the organization were measured with the following questions: "If you have to determine a young high school graduate to apply for an open position – "community agent" – what do you say to him/her?" and "If you have to determine a young high

school graduate not to apply for an open position – "community agent" – what do you say to him/her?". The view of the managerial team concerning the positive aspects of organizational affiliation were: job security, the equity of employee-organization input and output ratio, social position, job content – expressed in task variety and a high level of job challenge and finally the work schedule. The main disadvantages were: wages, work conditions and associated duty risks.

Job security is an attractive factor: "*Listed advantages: it is a stable position, if you take your job seriously*", "The main advantage at this time is the fact that he/she has a secure job". Regarding the occupational prestige, being a civil servant is a status that defines organizational commitment and it is a positive aspect of internal image: "... *you have a certain status as a public servant, a status that you don't have if you work in a private company or in another public institution*". Furthermore, the power to punish and the perception that to be "a policeman" is "special" generate a new identity anchor: "*I will attract him (the community agent candidate) in the first place through the quality of police officer. Not everybody can be a policeman, that it is a fact. When you have the law in your hand and you can enforce the law... you are already at a superior level compared to the person who stays in front of you. This person, no matter if it is a director or a beggar, if it breaks the law, you already feel superior.*"

The public usefulness of the work and its contribution to the social welfare consolidate the positive view: "It is more than a necessary component for society"; "... *it is a pleasure and a satisfaction when you solve a problem when some people are disturbed by others. For instance, there are people who disturb public order and it is normal to have pleasure when people come to you and thank you because you help them*". The job content, especially the level of activism required by the job and

the unpredictability make the key word for the job's definition be "variety": *"You are in the middle of the events, you have the street pulse 24/7, you can be the eye witness or you can be the key element in handling some crises, you can help the citizen, you can be appreciated, you can be praised and considered a good example"; "It is an activity that has to be done in the street, and many prefer to work in the street and not in the office, you have a uniform, you have to work in a system which is almost militarized, you have many responsibilities, you have contact with the citizen, you never have two days the same, in five minutes you can have five incidents or even more to deal with, the whole activity is special."*

Regarding the equity of the employee – organization exchange, the rewards were the main inequity factor. The low level of salaries and the lack of flexibility of the payroll system generate an assumed underpaid status at organizational level. Nevertheless, the reestablishing of the perceived balance was done through the reevaluation of the view on effort: *"... for the money you get the effort is not too big, nobody makes you do hard work"*, or through the reevaluation of private companies, which are viewed as exploiting their employees: *"Yes, there are well paid jobs, but I know firms where the young men are over-worked 16 hours a day and they get five million (500 Romanian lei). So, here we are well paid."*

The main negative aspect is the wage rate – taking into account the fact that the respondents have evaluated this item comparatively with the wage rate applied in other similar institutions with responsibilities in public law and order: *"... it is not an easy job, it is a very risky job. We have the same responsibilities and risks as the National Police officers, but the differences between their salary and ours is quite big and we do the same work, we risk the same repercussions, including physical injury. The difference is that we*

*do the job for less money. We have to deal with an unfair situation, I said... unfair because The Fire Department and Gendarmerie, which are also public institutions... stimulate and reward the stress, the working conditions by pay rise."*

Working in the street, no matter what the weather conditions are, make the community agent's job be perceived as a "difficult" job: *"Disadvantages because they have to patrol in the rain, in the cold... they have to work with violent and difficult persons. You are exposed to danger any time! Usually, the people who break the law are under the influence of alcohol and they don't know what they are doing.";* *"I don't know who would want to stay 24 or 12 hours in the rain, cold, wind and so on."*

The portrait of the community agent is idyllic, the key term being *"suitable for the job"*, which enhances the idea of "vocational" profession: *"I would call him (the community agent candidate) and tell him: if you like order, honesty, discipline and fairness, I will strongly advise you to do this job. It is a job for the future; it is a job that cannot be done by everybody. Without a quality, without feeling something you cannot do it."*

Regarding the technical competencies, the military training is seen as a primary condition for developing work capacity in an organized environment.

This first dimension is characterized by a high favorability. The organizational self-image, as designed by the managerial staff, is mainly a positive one. An important possibility to develop this finding is not only for communication and organizational culture strategies, but also for recruiting and selection activities. The profile of the community agent obtained from the interviews with the managerial team provides the basic data for a realistic, targeted recruitment strategy.

## 2. The Vision of the Future

The future of the Community Police Department, in the respondents' view, is centered on the issue of authority and power deficit in relation with the citizens, but especially in relation with other institutions that have similar competencies. The perception of authority and power deficit in an institution that is structurally established on coercive power can generate many dysfunctional situations regarding organizational identity and the employees' self-esteem: *"There is a competence and power deficit. If a public institution is not invested with power and competence, it is not viable, it cannot act in the name of the State or in the name of the Law. It will have only a title... I am the modern Community Police Department of Brasov... and I can do nothing."* The key words *"enhance the authority and the competence"* define the institution's future, in the respondents' way of thinking: *"I saw the Community Police Department as a police force invested with authority and power. I should see this police force in 10 years from now... more competent and modern and with more authority"*.

The consequences of this self-perceived deficit and the lower position compared with other institutions (with similar responsibilities in public order issues) is the strongest threat to organizational identity coherence. If the answer to the question "How we see ourselves" is one which has negative connotations, it is probable for this fact to affect the institution's performance. This includes the relationship with other institutions: *"... nevertheless, our competencies are strangled and we have areas where institutions overlap"*.

The authority and power deficit in relation with the citizens is assigned to several sources. The first is the history connected with the public guards institution: *"At this time, many people call us <<guards>>. Nobody addresses us as*

*"community policeman", but as "guard". I am disturbed by the fact that people think we have the general training that the <<guards>> have. In that institution they hired people with low education or without any high school education. Some <<guards>> were corrupted... And automatically we have a problem, half a year we had to cope... It was hard... because the people didn't accept us in the street."* The second source is positioning the Community Police at a lower level than the National Police: *"The unfair treatment... our car is not respected in traffic! It is a big lack of respect because it is known that we have less power than the National Police"*. The third source is the technical (professional) community agents' lack of competency: *"One of the Community Police Department's defects is the weak professional training of our agents."* The wishes concerning the improvement of competencies especially in traffic and environment protection complete the projected image.

## 3. The Institution's Name and Administrative Capacity

The credibility of the institution is also influenced by the public resonance of its name. The pejorative connotations in Romanian of the word "community", as an effect of the association with "community dogs", are considered in general, as being unimportant or having little impact on the institution's credibility. Regarding alternative names for the institution, the respondents prefer "Local Police" or "Municipality Police": *"Local is appropriate because it is really in a local area and has competencies in this area."*; *"Local, for sure. Metropolitan I don't think. Local is the right name."*; *"I like Local or Metropolitan... if we think that we'll have a metropolis in Brasov."*; *"Neither Municipality Police because this would mean that we are with the Municipality... No. I say that Local is the*

right term. It is of the locality. “

The administrative capacity was analyzed from both sides: from the self-image perspective and the public image perspective. The self-image is mostly positive and has two main points: the good relationship with community members and the good visibility in public space: “*We are in the street and we are doing our job... and the citizen feels safer.*”; “*First of all, we covered, as an institution, all the city in 2007. To our joy and to the great disappointment of the National Police, we are more easily perceived in the street, we are there more frequently, more often... day and night we are in the city and this generates an important switch: the citizen comes to us in the first place.*” The negative aspects are related to the low professional competency of community agents, the alarming level of personnel turnover and the deficit regarding the possibilities to cover all the open jobs.

The public image contains both positive and negative aspects, but the favorability degree is low. The main positive aspect is the reaction time to citizens’ requirements: “*Certainly, when we call them, they come quickly... Most of the time it wasn’t necessary to call them, because they were already there.*” The great visibility in the neighborhood is another positive item: “*I am pleased because they are present in the streets. Especially when I come late at night I feel secure.*”

The respondents (citizens) underscore three negative aspects regarding the department’s administrative capacity. First about the level of professional training: “*...the fact that the Community Police exists is a good thing, but the problem is their training...it is not a good thing that they accept people who are desperately looking for a job*”; “*About the Community Police I don’t have many good words to say... most of them don’t have a proper training*”; “*I don’t know what school they have to go to, but I know that the other police force (National Police) have some*

*education, they graduate from Police Academy.*” The second item is about the deficit in the number of employees, and the third is related to their efficiency: “*I don’t think it normal that the agents are walking in groups, and it is easy to see that they do their job only to report to superiors*”; “*They don’t have results, they are just walking and talking. They are a bunch of incompetent people.*”

## Conclusions

The reflection of self-image in public space is not conditioned by the organization’s will, it is just a consequence which is difficult to be managed. In this sense, the consistency of self-image is the first condition for building a favorable public image. The organization’s development is related to trust, sympathy and public goodwill. And this is true especially for an institution with a structural public oriented conception. The degree of convergence between public and self organizational image indicates the degree of internal communication efficiency, the level of message coherence and not in the last place, the degree of image vulnerability.

The self image of the Community Police Department – Brasov City is a consistent and coherent image. There is a clear and assumed view regarding the institution’s history, its mission, objectives and organizational identity. The highest similarity (between self -image and citizens’ image) was found at the level of the organization’s view, objectives and organizational effectiveness. The low professional competence of the police agents, the turnover and the reduced number of agents – these are negative aspects related with organizational effectiveness. Such weaknesses were found in both images. Furthermore, the prompt actions, the citizen oriented philosophy, the good public visibility – these are positive aspects regarding

organizational effectiveness, also found in both images.

Regarding image misunderstanding and confusions, there is a relative balance between public and self image. The managerial staff considers that there are no major confusions, but the citizens interviewed said that there are many ambiguities between the Community Police image and the National Police image.

The self image is mostly a positive and favorable image. The managerial staff evaluates positively both institution notoriety and client satisfaction. Because the qualitative methodology applied in this study limits the predictive approach, it is necessary to confirm the finding regarding the public opinion by quantitative research (survey). Taking into account the exploratory approach of this study it is possible to iterate the necessity of development and consolidation of the Community Police department's public image.

The deficit of institution authority and power in relation with other public

organizations with similar responsibilities is the main threat for self and public image. In this case we can say that it is necessary to make strategic interventions in order to redesign the Community Police image on the citizens' mental map.

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