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Organisational stress

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ORGANISATIONAL STRESS

STRESS AND JOB SATISFACTION

Work is commonly treated as the main determinant of quality of life, and for many authors the satisfaction from job is the condition of general well-being and satisfaction (C o n n e l l, 2004; C i e ś l a k, K l o n o w i c z, 2004; Ś w i ę t o c h o w s k i, 2005). To prove this, high level of discontent and stress in unemployed persons is often mentioned. Indeed, the state of unemployment is the most painfully felt factor reducing the quality of life. However, this does not mean that possession of job is equivalent to high life quality. Work itself is the most highly esteemed value for 20–25% of hired workers. For the others, this part is played by interpersonal relations (as friendship) and the possibility of satisfying – while being employed but not while realising occupational tasks – the important material and psychological needs: affiliation, acknowledgement, and safety. The work itself is the basic value only for people on independent and comparatively responsible stages of hierarchy and people realising creative work (O b - h o l z e r, 1994).

Thanks to their jobs, people can realize themselves in a full and effective way, under condition that it does not cause distress for them, upsetting their functioning on physical and psychological levels. Such a situation would make it impossible to achieve happiness and well-being in different important areas of life – in family and personal life. Therefore, the problem of stress at work and stress of work is a matter of principal meaning. The knowledge on sources of stress and resulting threats presents a basic, although not sufficient, condition of using work for achieving values that are important for every worker. Long-lasting and/or strong stress is one of the basic factors reducing quality of human life (P a l m e r, 1995).

A considerable quantity of everyday stressors has its source in work and corresponding conditions. These are the so called occupational stressors. Contrary to a widespread opinion, the most dangerous stressors are not the physical (like noise, burden of work, harmful conditions of work environment), chemical, biological, or chronobiological ones. The factors mentioned above certainly cause fatigue and exhaustion but they may be easily reduced by rest and rational regeneration of strengths. In numerous research it was noticed that noise becomes a source of stress not as a physical stimulus, but with regard to its psychological meaning, e.g. the degree of disturbance of current activity, influence on results of tasks, and possibility of controlling the intensity of noise, and so on (D. Hiroto, after P e r v i n 1993). The real stressors act by their psychological dimension becoming a source of negative and destructive emotions and psychic states. The real occupational stressors are unfavourable work circumstances which reduce the quality of work and life in more general, existential meaning. First of all, they include interpersonal and social problems, making up the so called organisational stress.

According to a British research, workers' complaints about organisational stress have grown up in the recent years by about 90%. Probably, this is partly the effect of higher and higher awareness of the problem among workers. In Great Britain, the first trial concerning a worker who experienced stress-made damage of health took place in 1997, and since that time the number of trials has increased up to 450 to the end of 2003 (M i l l e r, 2004). The growth of the problem more and more often induces business companies to pay attention to the problem of workers' psychic health and to develop the anti–stress policy and, if necessary, to introduce methods of coping with stress as an element of social tasks as well. In the quoted research, over 20% of businessmen admitted that organisational stress is the largest managing problem, which makes obtaining satisfactory results very difficult. Professor C. Cooper, the leading European expert in the area of practical coping with stress said: "effective fighting with stress may be equivalent to difference between success and failure in business. Can we afford to ignore this threat?" – C. Cooper asks rhetorically (S m i t h, 1998).

ORGANISATION AS A SUBJECT WHICH EXPERIENCES STRESS

There is a question if distress, a phenomenon traditionally considered in individual context, may be referred to complex structures such as a team or an organisation. To put it differently: can organisation experience distress? Is it possible to show such an analogy between an individual and an organisation that the phenomenon of distress may characterize both of them?

What does it mean that organisation experiences stress? In the recent years, we can observe the more and more visible tendency to conceptualize organisational stress from the systemic point of view. So we will try to find answers to these questions in systemic conception of the structure of surrounding reality.

System theory assumes that there are many levels of systems' organisation. On the biological level we may talk about systems of cells and tissues. Their functioning is based on the exchange of biochemical energy between subsystems. More highly organized biological systems are characterized with the occurrence of phenomena which are called psychic ones. In the most perfect form they exist in man. A simple form of exchange of biological energy is insufficient here. The functioning of human beings is based on exchange of information. It may have the form of simple and unambiguous physical stimuli (temperature, light or acoustic stimuli), but in humans the informative content of the stimuli is of specific significance.

Man is a both biological and psychic system. Groups are systems as well. Their existence is possible thanks to biological processes, but the essentials for functioning is the exchange of information between their members. On the group level, the biological aspect is replaced by the social one, which is the result of the information exchange mentioned above. This is illustrated in the Fig. 1.

We usually limit the notion of stress to level B. Therefore we say about both physiological and psychological stress. Nevertheless, according to H. Selye stress exists on level A. It is observed in organisms of simplier structure than the human organism (S e l y e, 1963). So we must also assume that stress concerns social structures, like group, family, and organisations.

exchange of biological energy

cell, tissue   A

man's organism
human being   B

Group (family,
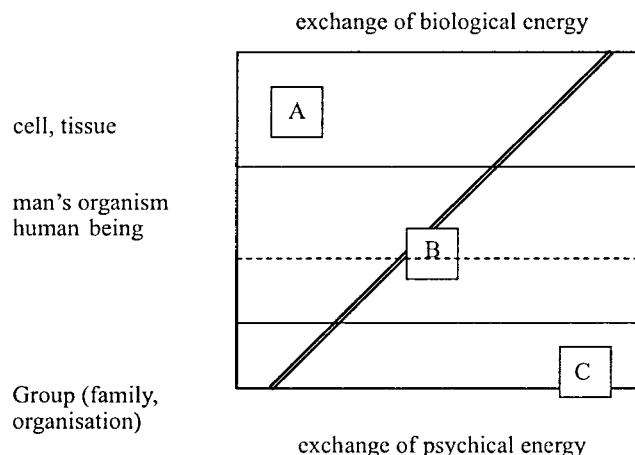organisation)   C

exchange of psychical energy

Fig. 1. The model of systems' organisation

Traditionelly we define the organisational stress as the stress in in-dividuals who are components of a whole organisation: the company, enterprise, association, or any group (T e r e l a k, 2001). But every or-ganisation has a systemic structure. Basic feature of every system is its wholeness and integrity and it consists of simple elements – sub-systems. We can see the following subsystems in every workers' or-ganisation:

1) individuals, who belong to a team, as well as their proprieties – the workers' individual goals (i.e. to satisfy the personal needs, to feed the family, to make success, and the like), their psychophysical competences (abilities and temperament),

2) characteristics of personnel as an organized team – the consciousness of distinction and identity, structure, cohesion, climate, dynamics of team strengths,

3) features of the whole organisation, which this team is an element of – group goal, place in organisational structure and hierarchy, connections with other teams; manager of the team is the formal representative of the organisation (Ś w i ę t o c h o w s k i, 2003).

The team elements mentioned above – the manager, the team as a whole, and every individual – participate in the process of mutual influence and reciprocal interaction. They are also subjects of continuous changes due to the dynamics of requirements of organisational surroundings (the trade, social and political surroundings). Mutual relations inside the team, individual influences and manager's decisions create specific team features, such as its cohesion, norms, and attractiveness. So from systemic point of view a high level of distress seen in any parts of organisation is equivalent to organisational stress. We can define it as the state of excessive emotional tension in subsystems of a whole organisation (the company, enterprise, any group, and so on). One may see it in a lowered threshold of roughness, aggressiveness and fear, which is observable in every day life of an organisation (i.e. in mutual interactions, cooperation, and decisions). At the same time the lack of subjective feeling of stress in some individuals does not mean the lack of organisational stress (K e e g a n, 2004).

The key meaning for investigation of any organisation as a system experiencing stress is connected with its tasks, which may be divided into two groups: primary and secondary tasks. The primary ones are: production, distribution, and the like, which result from the goals of the organisation. A secondary task is a way of organizing structures and processes, which is essential for people executing primary tasks. This duty fundamentally rests on employers. They have to make it possible for their staff to deal with primary tasks properly. In a stressful organisation there is no suitability

between tasks of both the kinds. Such organisation can be, for example, the hierarchy of authorities, dependencies and mutual expectancies and complaints (S m i t h, 1998). Therefore, organisations have to find some ways of coping with unexpected difficulties, like bureaucratic rules causing tension in whole systems. The raised level of tension between elements of an organisation is defined as organisational stress.

SYMPTOMS AND CONSEQUENCES OF ORGANISATIONAL STRESS

It has been clearly said that organisational distress does not fill the whole distress of men in organisations. The second form of stress is an individual one, experienced by a particular worker. So the model of occupational stress should describe both these aspects. This conclusion is applied in the Palmer and Cooper's model presented below (C. Cooper et al., after S m i t h, 1998).

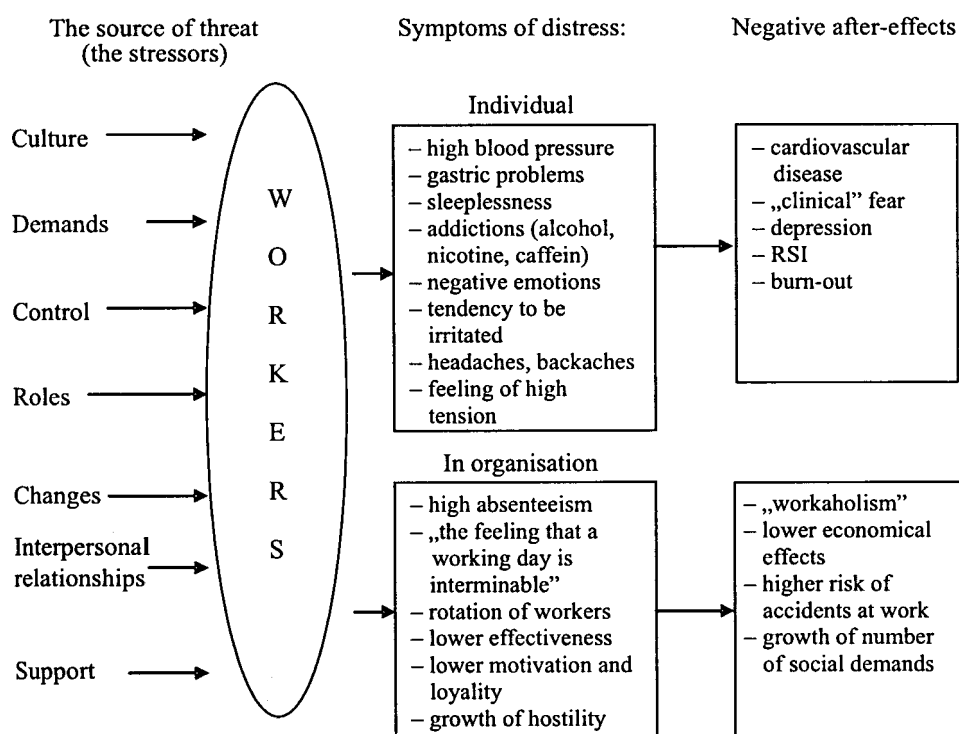| The source of threat (the stressors)		Symptoms of distress:	Negative after-effects
		Individual	
Culture	W O R K E R S	− high blood pressure − gastric problems − sleeplessness − addictions (alcohol, nicotine, caffein) − negative emotions − tendency to be irritated − headaches, backaches − feeling of high tension	− cardiovascular disease − „clinical" fear − depression − RSI − burn-out
Demands			
Control			
Roles			
		In organisation	
Changes		− high absenteeism − „the feeling that a working day is interminable" − rotation of workers − lower effectiveness − lower motivation and loyality − growth of hostility	− „workaholism" − lower economical effects − higher risk of accidents at work − growth of number of social demands
Interpersonal relationships			
Support			

Fig. 2. Stress after-effects

The importance of such factors as conflicts and inequivalence of group roles, lack of the feeling of effectiveness and control, conservatism and reluctance to make any changes, interpersonal conflicts, and lack of support, were subjects of many researches in psychology of stress. In this paper I would like to analyse the disfunctional organisational culture as a cause of distress. This factor seems to be superior to the others mentioned above. In common consciousness it associates with the idea of "organisational stress".

Organisational culture is a comparatively new notion, and similarly to organisational stress, it is not easy to define. This concept consists of many elements which exist in mutual relations among workers of the same level of hierarchy, relations between managers and lower staff, and at last in formal and informal principles of controlling and managing the organisation. Particularly disfunctional are:

1) the lack of unambiguous and open communication, domination of formal reports and abbreviations (the language full of modern technical nomenclature, quickly expressed announcements, e-mails, short messages sent by telephone, business notes and the like),

2) the arbitrary motivational system as well as unclear procedure of awarding and promoting, which can make up envies of group members,

3) excessive requirements and tasks exceeding the capabilities of staff members, which make the relations strongly competitive,

4) the demands of larger and larger flexibility and universality – the two factors mentioned here together make the threat for satisfying one of the man's basic need – the need of safety,

5) the continuous hurry, leading to reduction of social and emotional interpersonal contacts,

6) the domination of negative motivation based on punishment being superior to the positive motivational methods,

7) denying the initiative and creativity of individuals,

8) aversive prejudices resulting from strong negative emotions against certain persons or groups as well as dominative prejudices, rising from the conviction about own superiority,

9) aggression, particularly indefensive, so called "malicious" aggression (H i r i g o y e n, 2003; P a l m e r, 1995).

The disfunctional organisational culture manifests in many different ways. An example may be the unhelpful and hostile divergence between different groups, the workers' teams or the squads of the organisation (division of "one's own" and "strange"). It is sometimes intentionally sustained by both managers and people on different levels of organisation. Divergence leads to disturbances in communication and produces mutual tendency to blame others. The result is ineffective and stressful work. One should distinguish

normal everyday challenge which motivates us to work effectively and job distress, which is the result of excessive pressures and requirements causing the inability to manage and resulting stress-made diseases.

Wherever members of an organisation demonstrate negative attitudes to their organisation, they probably feel insufficient motivation to work well. At the same time they can regard their work as not much valuable and little useful. They can also feel that it is no use trying to satisfy organisational goals and endeavours. If such conditions overweigh, this will cause distress also on the individual level.

Organisational stress can lead to many negative after-effects among which the following are often noted:

1) great rotation of staff,

2) decrease in productiveness and less achievements,

3) workers' low motivation and enthusiasm,

4) increase in absenteeism,

5) increase in the number of psychosomatic diseases (i.e. coronary heart disease, ulcerous disease, and the like),

6) increase in workers' conflicts due to stressful work conditions,

7) interpersonal problems (like disorders in human relationships, mobbing, and others),

8) individual burn-out, addictions (to alcohol, drugs),

9) increase in number of accidents – both in job and as a result of it,

10) lowered personal efficiency at work (P a l m e r, 1995; S t a p l e y, 1995).

Some of the consequences of organisational stress mentioned above are its symptoms at the same time. Certainly, we can say about lowered productiveness and increase in the level of staff exhaustion, too.

THE DYNAMICS OF ORGANISATIONAL STRESS

In the existence of any system, also organisation, some phases may be distinguished. They characterize such specificity of inner exchange processes and regularity of them that it is possible to treat them as separate stages of its functioning. It turns out that the course of organisational stress has also its special dynamics. Two researchers, T. Boydell and M. Leary, on the basis of their thoroughout observations, systematized the characteristic features of organisations taking into account the typical causes and con-sequences of stress reaction at every stage. They proposed the six-staged model of it. They paid attention to the predominant source of organisational stress at every stage (L e a r y, B o y d e l l, 2001). The model is presented

below in somewhat modified version, enriched by one more stage, the seventh one.

1. Pioneer stage (forming). This is the stage of creating new organisation. A single madman or a group of madmen see the need of creating a new organisation and an opportunity to do it. The structure is informal and elastic so far. Creators test their first ideas, settle indispensable formalities, link their first business contacts and relations. Possible distress in this phase results from undertaking risk and from difficulty of "blazing trails". However, their enthusiasm helps them to cope with that stress comparatively easily and without harmful consequences. Possible tensions appear usually on organisation – environment border.

2. Mature pioneer stage (storming). Here follows the stage of crisis of the pioneer atmosphere. The informality of structure begins to make work difficult and this causes serious problems. There appears a strong need for order and rationality. First internal difficulties may be seen, mainly due to roles and responsibilities conflicts, imperfect communication rules, chaotic processess of decision making, accumulation of tasks as well as the lack of clear managerial structures. There may appear autocratic tendencies (in some people) and ordinary workers may be exploited like slaves.

3. Rational stage (norming). Structures and norms stabilise and strengthen. The tensions in this phase have, first of all, interpersonal and emotional character. Rules and principles regulating the life of organisation may be contradictory to some individual needs and emotions. But group affairs are dominant and individuals withdraw. This sometimes becomes the cause of stress experienced by some workers.

4. The stability stage (performing). Organisation begins to function fluently and stably. The roles, tasks, positions are clearly divided and duties attributed to appropriate persons. This is the phase when everybody knows their place. Specialisations differentiate and formal contracts and rules protect each worker. In this phase stress may be a result of competition in hierarchy. It may also be an effect of workers' irrational behaviour, disturbance of rules, and transgressing the received roles. The stressing consciousness of insufficient competences and fear of improper realising of tasks when requirements grow may, also appear.

5. Bureaucratic stage. Exaggerated striving for order and rationality in organisation leads to stiffness of structures. In the initial phase this stage is hardly recognisable because it reminds the rational stage. At first glance everythig seems to be all right. But imperceptibly formalised structure freezes and clear definiteness of duties on certain positions becomes an enchanted and impassable circle. The tendency to keep the existing *status quo* at any price appears. There begins looking after procedures instead of respecting

the rules. Because of such stiff procedures employees feel their alienation more and more clearly. It is getting harder and harder to arise with tasks. Workers feel their separation more and more strongly. Conflicts between elements of the structure become harder and harder. The contacts become totally formalised. Probably this stage is crucial for the results of coping with organisational distress.

6. The stage of shock therapy. This stage follows the moment when everyone realises the bureaucratic functioning of organisation. It is the time when changes are necessary. In the process of reorganisation, some more conservative persons experience strong distress connected with the feeling of threat. Learning new rules after the process of change is also very stressful. The undertook initiatives sometimes fail or sometimes they serve well only for small group. The lack of clarity of new goals and rules may result in great distress and tensions in the whole organisation.

7. The stage of integration. This is the stage of dynamic equilibrium between individual needs, organisational needs, and requirements of business environment. Formal leaders do not use their strengths any more – the idea of democratic leadership replaces the idea of personal strength. Possible distress is a result of either irrationality of attitudes or confrontation with irrationality of environment.

One can easily see that at the rational stage and at the stage of integration distress is mostly an individual problem of employees, but at the other ones – it has mostly systemic backgrounds. Therefore, any activity leading to reduce the harmful effects of occupational stress should take into account the stage of development of the organisation. This is the very important factor in diagnosing and training staff in coping with organisational distress.

COPING WITH ORGANISATIONAL STRESS

An organisational approach to the problem of occupational stress lies in creation of safe environment which will make control over stress most effective and realisation of current tasks possible. Individual proprieties like creativity and autonomy of workers are very important, but they should be included into the whole organisational system. An emotionally strong organisation can perform primary tasks better and individual creativity places every worker on the position of both useful element of organisation and an independent and self-sufficient individual. At the same time it is not useful to reduce the stress completely because of its mobilizing effect.

In the area of occupational stress there is a visible basic distinction between the individual and organisational approaches.

Individualistic approach lies in the person's therapy and in changing their behaviour according to the requirements of environment. One takes responsibility for his/her own emotions as well. However, individual therapy and stress training often helps some people but it not always help to improve the functioning of organisation.

Organisational approach means adapting organisational culture, structures and rules of functioning in order to protect workers from confronting with stressful situations. It goes considerably deeper than it is postulated in the traditional "list of defects to reparation" in dealing with occupational stress (such as changing the style of management, changing the structure of organisation, etc.). The effective organisational approach does not neglect individuals, but considers them in the context of the system. One of its theses is that we are responsible not only for ourselves but for the others as well. So it is necessary to use the strategy of coping which respects both organisational and individual needs and properties. Such a strategy should contain different forms of activity directed both to person and organisation.

T a b l e 1

Stress management strategy

Goals	Thode responsible
Causal "treatment"	Occupational health specialists
Detection of threats	Both experts of occupational health and managers
Increasing awareness in the staff	Managing team, psychological trainers
Teaching professional and general skills (i.e. creative problem solving, proper communication and the like	Trainers, occupational health professionals
Improving organisational culture	Senior management team

S o u r c e: S t a p l e y, 1995.

The strategy should be both precautionary and corrective. It must stand for an integral packet and basically may be performed by the staff, equipped with knowledge and suitable skills. But sometimes it is worth using experts from the outside, mainly with the aim of giving professional advice and counselling.

There exist, however, some controversies related to the effectivenesses of such programmes. Their opponents show superiority of the individualistic approach. They argue that people taking care of workers' psychic health at organisations should be experienced clinicians, who will be able to recognise

properly the real problem in the workers who need help at the moment. After that they shoud treat only the diagnosed patients, leaving the rest alone to perform their tasks quietly.

In response to that the followers of the organisational approach underline the possible polarization of businesses and individual interests if the individual counselling is being realised. Such counselling may sometimes make the workers feel as *victims* of organisational *negligence* or *abuse*. It may result in undesirable influence on the workers' morality and decrease of their loyalty. An individual counsellor or therapist may be seen as an unwanted rival of the organisation. Thus, the process of individual therapy may cause problems rather than solve them.

To conclude, professionals with specific set of experiences, counsellors who may be named ''behavioural consultants'', are necessary. They must be able to:

– recognise emotional state of the individual, diagnose the level and origins of existing stress and recognise its cognitive and behavioral resources,

– teach methods of achieving an equilibrium between work and personal life,

– teach and train a range of interpersonal competences,

– understand the objective organisational situation and possibilities – that is: the culture of organisation, social and protective policy, team potential, organisational roles and goals,

– recognise properly the workers who really require professional help (psychological or psychiatric), for example in cases of addictions,

– organize support in organisation.

Such professionals should be broadly educated in psychology, methods of counselling and human resources management.

A illustration of the idea of organisational stress management may be the case of the well-known electronic concern, Hewlett–Packard (H–P). In 1994 about 39% of H–P workers described themselves as very stressed. In the same year, the concern undertook organisational steps to reduce this feeling in staff, using the organisational approach. They applied group methods for the whole staff, like creativity training, common discussions of organisational problems and indyvidual difficulties, relaxation and more, mentioned above. Finally, the percentage of ''very stressed'' workers fell to 21 in 1996. At the same time, the employees were asked directly: ''Does the concern do anything to reduce workers' stress?'' Over 70% answered ''No'' (S m i t h, 1998). The anti-stress system proved to be effective, in spite of the workers' unconsciousness of it.

Another big concern, Motorola, has a complex Employers' Assistant Programme (EAP), which is consistent with the individual approach. But the firm went even further and created a rule of team discussions concerning

safety and human relations at work. Every three months workers were asked if they were appreciated and if their needs of dignity and respect were realized. At first glance such periodical and obligatory monitoring of workers' moods looks formal and bureaucratic but it helps to recognise current threats and in consequence it is profitable (Smith, 1998).

British Health and Safety Executive (HSE) published the data suggesting that occupational stress costs in UK over 3.7 billion pounds, based on the prices in 1995/1996. In addition there is the cost of 6.5 million pounds of lost working days every year (Palmer et al., 2001). For that reason UK government requires enterprises to introduce the Stress Management Programme based upon the organisational approach.

CONCLUSION

Working in an unhealthy, stressful environment causes certain costs both in individuals and organisations. Therefore, creation of a healthy work environment must be a purpose of leaders and managers. Effective care for workers' health, coping with individual and organisational distress may give significant benefits for both of them. Anti–stress counselling should not be based on differentiating between individual and organisation. Organisational behavioural counsellors should work according to the systemic view of organisation and its elements.

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STRES ORGANIZACYJNY

Tematem prezentowanego artykułu jest stres charakteryzujący organizacje, szczególnie organizacje typu biznesowego. Autor uzasadnia tezę, zjawisko stresu może dotyczyć nie tylko jednostki, ale także innych struktur, m. in. tak złożonych, jak organizacje. Za teoretyczny punkt wyjścia przyjmuje przy tym koncepcję systemową. W artykule wymienione zostały najważniejsze przyczyny, a także następstwa organizacyjnego stresu. W artykule zostały również scharakteryzowane i porównane dwie dominujące strategie w zakresie radzenie sobie z omawianą formą stresu: strategia indywidualistyczna i organizacyjna.

Słowa kluczowe: stres organizacyjny, systemowa struktura organizacji, strategia indywidualistyczna vs strategia organizacyjna.