

FLOW IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE: CONCILIATING CHALLENGES AND ABILITIES FROM A REALISTIC POINT OF VIEW

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Abstract:

This article aims at demonstrating that life quality at work and the ability to achieve the Flow, or Optimal Experience, is related, among other aspects, to the abilities of harmonizing the challenges of the task with individual skills; perceiving the aridest aspects of the organizational environment in a realistic way; and facing personal limitations in a constructive manner.

For this purpose, a survey was carried out with a sample of State civil servants, to whom the adhesion to a Voluntary Dismissal Program was offered. The data obtained was submitted to the Contents Analysis, as proposed by Bardin (1997). The Flow concept comes from the work of Mihay Csikszentmihalyi (1997, 1996, 1992, 1991).

The results showed that a group of people who did not adhere to the Voluntary Dismissal Program demonstrated a remarkable ability to avoid stress and obtain satisfaction at work, despite the bureaucratic and mechanistic structure of the organization where they work. On the other hand, a group who chose to join the Program made an inaccurate self-evaluation and ended up accepting challenges that were not compatible with their skills and talents, with disastrous consequences for their personal and professional lives. The results confirm Csikszentmihalyi's theoretical assumptions and suggest the necessity of reformulating the presuppositions of the Voluntary Dismissal Programs carried out in the State up to this moment.

Key-words: Flow, public service, voluntary dismissal program, work satisfaction.

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“What a man *can* be, he *must* be, true to his own nature” (MASLOW, 1954, p.46)¹

1. The Optimal Experience or Flow as the balance between challenges and abilities

The expression Flow was proposed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in the book **Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience**, translated in the Brazilian version as *Psicologia da Felicidade* (CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, 1991, 1992).

While developing his motivational theory, Csikszentmihalyi sought inspiration in the studies by Abraham Maslow, especially in the holistic-dynamic theory of motivations developed in the 1950's, known as “Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs” (MASLOW, 1954). Among various aspects, the works have in common the evidences that self-actualization is a human need individuals will always try to satisfy by the most diverse ways. However, what calls attention in the Optimal Experience theory is the fact that self-actualization can be achieved in activities that are seemingly unattractive, by ordinary people performing bureaucratic and repetitive tasks.

In order to understand how it is possible to attain accomplishment in little stimulating environments, it is important to know the basic concepts of Csikszentmihalyi's work. In the first place, what the author called “extraordinary state of mind” is the very *flowing experience* or *flow*². This state occurs when the individual, motivated and qualified for the activity, feels challenged by the task, concentrates efforts on its resolution to the point of losing notion of time and makes the best use of his/her skills. Although making great efforts, one does not feel exhausted or sacrificed, since one's efforts are aimed at his/her own goals, rather than at someone else's. There is a feeling of control over the situation and oneself and unconcern with the immediate results, since the activity is an end in itself. The satisfaction is a result of the process as a whole, allowing for a more lasting and enriching experience of pleasure. The knowledge of how to appreciate the process in itself is in the origin of the term employed by the author:

¹ Italics by the author.

² As stated by Howard Gardner in Porto Alegre, in July 1997, *flow* is a technical term. It should not be translated in other languages.

autotelic. From the Greek *auto* (by itself) and *telos* (purpose), hence the autotelic personality: the one that seeks satisfaction independently of circumstances and takes advantage of the process towards the achievement of targets, rather than only through the achievement of such targets.

The concept of flow differs from the concept of pleasure. Pleasure is fast extinguished, it is obtained in a passive way and does not generate personal growth. On the other side, the flow is lasting, demanding active investment on the part of the subject, who takes control of the situation, and generates personal growth by overcoming obstacles. The flow increases the being's complexity and transforms it in a definitive manner. Csikszentmihalyi (1992) emphasizes that flow experiences might have not been exactly pleasant at the time they occurred. A certain degree of suffering and anguish, effort and uncertainties almost always come associated with the processes leading to flow. The difference is that after the experiences took place they can be remembered as positive.

The author perceived that a dynamic balance between abilities and challenges is necessary so as the *optimal experience* can occur. Individuals that are highly qualified for a certain activity get bored as subject to non-challenging tasks and realize that their potentialities are being underutilized. On the other side, unprepared individuals that are led to perform tasks with a high complexity and high degree of challenge feel anguished and anxious, resulting in a stress condition. Thus, flow would be found in the gradual increase of the tasks' complexity, generating challenges that allow for the growth of abilities, challenges that are big enough to motivate the individual but simple enough not to generate a paralyzing anxiety or a negative stress. The satisfaction in seeing challenges overcome and the sense of accomplishment produced by the processes of learning and obtaining results would lead the individual to search for new challenges and opportunities of maximum fulfillment of their potentialities.

As noticed, the flow does not occur as the result of random chance. It results from a conscious effort in the purpose of achieving our own goals and from the development of our potentialities. Individuals that achieve the flow seek to activate their inner resources and do not passively wait for external rewarding. They possess clarity concerning the themes that interest them and the purposes that meet the interests of others. They manage to control their subjective reality so as to break free of unattainable external rewarding and find gratification in the present, possible, realistic activity, to which they utterly and actively dedicate themselves, with

commitment and responsibility. The autotelic personality is the one that creates flow conditions, even in the most adverse and uninteresting situations. (CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, 1992).

2. The public service as a bureaucratic environment

According to Costa and Mazzilli (2001), public service has been associated with bureaucracy in its most diverse dysfunctions (MERTON, 1978).

When he proposed the Bureaucracy Theory, Weber (1979, 1978) tried to define a hypothetically perfect conceptual model, in which the main features would be the **hierarchical pyramidal division**, the existence of explicit and impersonal **rational rules**; the **record** and documentation of communications; the **specialization** and training of waged clerks, with a career in the organization; the **previous definition** of the organization's **functioning**; the **rationality**; the **impersonality** in human relations; the **meritocracy**; the **separation between property and administration**; and the **predictability** of the functioning to all members.

Nowadays, however, the bureaucratic environment is thought as the opposite: difficulties with customer service, excessive formalism and impersonality, excessive adherence to rules and, especially, dissatisfaction and impossibility of self-actualization among their participants. Moreover, the predictability of functioning, one of the pillars of the Weberian bureaucracy, is impracticable in so far as the organization functions to and through human beings, who are not subject in essence to complete predictability. These are the so-called bureaucratic dysfunctions described by Merton (MERTON, 1978; MOTTA & PEREIRA, 1981): **internalization of rules and exaggerated adherence to regulations; excessive formalism and heaps of papers; resistance to changes; depersonalization of relationship; over-conformity to routines and procedures; display of authority signs; and difficulty with customer service generating endless conflicts with the public.**

Guerreiro Ramos (1996) analyzed the works by the bureaucratic system critics, among which stand out Merton, Crozier and Selznick.

Merton associates the untrained inability with what he calls "*goal displacement*", that is, transformation of means to ends and rigidity in the application of norms and procedures, even the anachronistic, leading the bureaucrat to loss of adaptation capacity, innovative vision and critical

sense. The one who loses is the bureaucratic organization's client, whose satisfaction remains in the background, giving way to the *status quo* maintenance.

Crozier classified the situation described above as “vicious circle”: the greater the rigidity of norms, the greater the difficulties with adaptation, and the greater the need to increase the control and regulation, generating again new difficulties with adaptation and conflicts with the public. To the author, bureaucracy would be a “*vicious circles*” complex, “a system of organization unable to make amends in function of its errors, and whose dysfunctions became one of the essential elements in its balance” (1981, p.283). According to Crozier, this rigidity is explained by the permanent struggle for power among managers and subordinated.

“Exactly because the subordinated are not passive, but rather active, in defense of their bargain power, is that they try to aggravate the vicious circles protecting them, in so far as they take advantage of them to improve their positions concerning the public and the organization. In such conditions, the bureaucratic environment is unable to gradually adapting to the transformations of the external environment” (CROZIER apud RAMOS, p.251).

Philip Selznick presents the concept of “*organizational paradox*” where strategies and policies of the organization are replaced by operational, immediate, partial and limited goals. Without understanding the general goals, the employees turn to the pursuing of small tasks that assume the strength of large goals, according to the employees' own interests. According to Crozier, Selznick shows the “vicious circle” concerning the bureaucratic specialization.

“The bureaucratic organization specializes and breaks up roles in order to make the expert more neutral and more independent, but this way it tends to create a spirit of castes and temptations of alliance with the interests crystallized around these roles; the dysfunction developed will be, naturally, fought through reinforcement of specialization” (CROZIER, 1981, p.264).

3. The bureaucracy promoting the “anti-flow”

It has been said in previous works (COSTA & MAZZILLI, 2002, 2001A, 2001b), that the bureaucratic mechanistic environment produces the civil servant’s suffering.

The survey conducted by the authors in a State public institution demonstrated the **political criteria to career ascension**, causing servants to believe that hard work and competence are not enough to achieving better remunerated and more complex positions; **the existence of “flatterers”**, as well as the vision that it is only possible to ascend in the career through “godfathering”; **the repetitive, monotonous and “stupid-making” work**, paradigmatic of bureaucratic services, where tasks are fragmented and repetitive, not allowing for the visualization of a “final result”. The abilities are not even used, let alone developed; **the fact that the work affects health, accelerates ageing, is dangerous and excessive, generating** a sense of uselessness and alienation. The sense of psychological death, of vision of work as something dangerous and lethal. In the case studied, the excessive work occurs due to the incomplete mechanization of the system and the dramatic reduction of the staff; and to **the lack of perspectives, recognition and opportunities to develop the intellectual and creative potentiality**, as well as the lack of recognition of the efforts made in the search for quality and good customer service. There is no possibility of enrichment of the position.

The servants interviewed that did not adhere to the Voluntary Dismissal Program demonstrated dissatisfaction and suffering in their labor activities in consequence of the factors reported above.

The bureaucratic environment was described by this group as an “anti-flow” environment, where self-actualization and growth in an involving and challenging task appear to be an impossible dream.

In the same work, Costa and Mazzilli (2001a, 2001b) described the features of the bureaucratic and mechanistic environment and their reflections upon the personal and professional development of its members. The rigid hierarchy, the centralization of decisions, the formalism, the deficient communication, the lack of feedback and opportunities of ascension by merit lead servants to a dependence on the institution, to accommodation and lack of initiative, to submission, to low self-esteem and weak recognition of their potentialities and limitations and to a illusory knowledge about themselves as professionals. In this environment, there are difficulties

with the development of the features required by the present work market, such as initiative, maturity, self-criticism, self-knowledge and career self-management. This set of features that are desirable in the current work market are stimulated in the organic structures, which emphasize basic competencies, career self-management, ascension by results, independence, autonomy and self-identity, team work, flexible roles and development of talents.

In her Master's dissertation, Maria Jandira Oliveira (1997) also studied pleasures and suffering involved in the professional activity of civil servants. Using a dejourian approach, Oliveira analyzed the motives leading a sample of servants to enter the public career and remain there, in spite of the difficulties.

Among **the reasons for admission** there are: job stability and benefits; family influence; and a means of "living". Among the **suffering factors** are the activity monotony; repetitive, non-creative, monotonous activities; seclusion feeling: inactivity, impossibility of change with the external and internal environment and the impossibility of generating growth; the fact of being watched and ruled by rigid norms; belonging to the administrative area: therefore obtaining no recognition and being disconnected from the work end; salary: accept as bad in exchange for a situation that is less demanding concerning admission and more stable; being disconnected from one's academic formation: being disconnected from the idealized and differentiated image of the higher-education professional; lack of ascension perspectives: one of the strongest motives of suffering, including the political aspects of rewards, lack of recompenses to those dedicated and lack of punishment to those non-dedicated. Lack of objective criteria to the achievement of lead positions and attainment of rewarded functions; discredited image of the public service, of the staff, currently seen as "the reason of State's failure"; self-image: face to the disorganization of the structure and the disqualified admissions; underutilization of potentialities: the admission system, as well as the training and the probation period indicate "lack of knowledge of the human capital available" and lack of human resources planning, in processes where the organization's goals are unclear and little disseminated. Among the **motives of pleasure** at work, the customer stands out: *"the motives of pleasure at work are generally aimed at the user's direct satisfaction"* (p. 61). It is the fulfillment of the social purpose of public service, seeing customers well-served, solving their problems or minimizing their suffering, feeling useful; work recognition: either by the customer or the colleagues, superior or subordinated, it is the recognition of their social usefulness.

Besides Maria Jandira Oliveira (1997), Patrícia Stumpf Paes Leme (2000) has also described the lack of perspectives of civil servants, subject to bureaucratic and routine work. Costa (2000) has also approached the resistances and defensive mechanisms derived from public bureaucratic structures. The defenses emerge face to the realization of lack of ascension opportunities by own merit; to the feeling of becoming “stupid” by the non-use of intellectual abilities; to the revolt against those that try “to do well by flattering”; to stress; to the feeling of early ageing and physical and mental illness; elements that correspond to Dejours’ (1988) descriptions of psychopathology at work and express the reality of the civil servants as a group.

As seen in these public administration pictures, the bureaucratic model’s dysfunctions are a source of dissatisfaction and suffering for the civil servant. On the other side, the motives of continuity in the function remain, namely, stability and benefits. These are secured not by the original bureaucratic model (established by selection, qualification and specialization) but by its dysfunctions (incapacity of the system to self-assessment and correction, in Crozier’s words).

If the association between the term “bureaucracy” and public companies appears to be undeniable, how can civil servants achieve the flow?

4. Autotelic individuals find sources of satisfaction even in the bureaucratic environment

In a survey conducted by the authors (COSTA & MAZZILLI, 2001a) in a public institution of the State of Rio Grande do Sul, 20 individuals were interviewed to whom the possibility of adhering to a Voluntary Dismissal Program (PDV) was offered. The institution did not establish criteria for such adhesion so that all members, indistinctly, could be part of the Program’s target public. As a means of supporting choosers, an enterprising course was made available. Hence, the principle assumed was that former servants would pursue the enterprise activity, taking advantage of the financial resources obtained with the PDV. The data collected with the interviews was analyzed by the contents analysis method. As for the non-choosers of the PDV, the analysis pointed out, among other factors, to the following motives for satisfaction with bureaucratic work, in a public institution with mechanistic features:

- satisfaction in dealing with the public: the satisfaction the servant does not find with bureaucratic work is rewarded by the customer and the adequate meeting of his/her needs.
- satisfaction in dealing with people: the affective relationship with colleagues, bosses and other contacts that are established in the servant's daily life compensate for the other dissatisfactions.

The testimonies of the five respondents following, who had the opportunity to leave the institution through a Voluntary Dismissal Program and did not, exemplify the capacity to find satisfaction even in bureaucratic environments and to see their abilities and limitations in a realistic manner.

Respondent 1:

Did not choose the Voluntary Dismissal Program due to awareness of not being prepared for another activity. He did not find anything to give him security and also considered the family. He was married, father of two, did not want to risk his stable professional situation. The colleagues invited: "let's do it!" But he thought: "I'm a servant, I can't do anything outside here, there is no learning, the decision needs security". He ended up staying. He considers himself a dreamer, an idealist by nature. "Before this government took over, I had no hope in the future of the institution. Fate did not want me to choose the PDV, what is an opportunity to show the other parties that a public company can work and at the same time do the community good. I'm glad I have a function that allows me to interfere in the institution's processes. I can prove that the ideology, in practice, can work. And for that I'm very happy, I feel accomplished, I like working with people, I like the Human Resources area, I wouldn't accept working here only for the position. This position demands from me a relationship with people. People are the most important part of any company, in my opinion. I work with the institution's greatest patrimony. There must be the ability to motivate people in this position, against a whole conjuncture. In my work, I need to deal with people. That's part of my profile. I love people. Each trip, each meeting, each new group is an accomplishment. It's been very nice to be with people and it has got lots of positive energy.

Respondent 2:

The respondent gives his reasons not to have adhered to the Voluntary Dismissal Program. “Look, the... the first thing, the very fact that my wife chose the PDV, you know? It would even have been very risky, I think, the two of us leaving at the time, you know? Besides, it did never enter my mind to leave”. Next, he tells the motives why he is satisfied with his activity: “Then, nowadays, one of the things I’m a specialist in there, I became it, I think I... also the only one at the workplace, you know, is ... expert in dollar. I... all the dollars we work with pass by me in there, you know? So it’s like this, this is something that sets me apart from the other professionals in there, you know? That’s something that gives me satisfaction. The fact that I...in spite of not being given recognition, neither financially nor by position, that, ahn...that brings satisfaction! Specially, you getting to recognize the bills I work with in there, dollar’s bills in the case, managing to close at the end of the day, I think that’s the greatest challenge in here”.

Respondent 3

The respondent comments his situation at work: “within the current socioeconomic conjuncture the country is, we ahn... servants ahn, of the institution, are not that bad”. Next, he adds some motives of satisfaction with the activity: “the relationship with the customer... the market area. Conquering the customer. Selling. Customer satisfaction. Contact”. And about the task’s challenges: “Ah! The challenge is constant. Courses... Targets to be achieved.... Anyway! Always we’re placed by the institution so as to achieving a given target”. Finally, he explains the motives for which he did not adhere to the Voluntary Dismissal Program: “Because to... ahn... one has to be prepared for everything. And I wasn’t prepared for the PDV”. And about colleagues that joined the Program and did not have satisfactory results: “There are several motives [for the professional and personal difficulties after the adhesion]. Emotion, emotion, desire to have one’s own business, following one’s own life, I don’t know, OK? Or they glimpsed values that could ... be multiplied in the future, what didn’t happen”.

Respondent 4:

The respondent speaks of his experience in the institution: “After the PDV, I remained in the same job, until now, in the training sector, as a personnel analyst, nothing changed. I did not choose the PDV because I’ve been in the company for 28 years; leaving now... I wouldn’t find the same work conditions anywhere else and, I like it here, I do like it. I didn’t even thought of joining the Plan, it never entered my mind after so much time in the institution. I was satisfied here then and I’m still satisfied. What stresses me is that sometimes I have to do my best, to be in several places at the same time; maybe there’s a meeting in some floor, I go there, take the equipment; almost at the same time there’s a meeting in another floor, it’s crazy, sometimes I think I won’t make it, but afterwards I think it over and I realize that I like it, with running and all, it’s a service I like. Sometimes I get here early in the morning, 7 a.m. and leave at night. I have little time to be home because it’s much work, but I like it... The salary is good too. ... then I chose to stay here, where I know my place, I know the work. I’ve been everywhere in here, I know the whole place. I’m staying here. People are nice... The job’s challenge is doing many things at the same time, keeping the spreadsheets up-to-date, not leaving anyone dissatisfied with work. I’m a guy who likes working, I try to do a good job, get along with people, satisfy them with my work, with no reason for complaint”.

Respondent 5

The interviewee comments her experience in relation to the Voluntary Dismissal Program. “I remember a colleague that made an impression upon me... that he left for lunch and came back saying that he had signed the PDV, he told us, himself a manager, and then I compared myself to him, I wouldn’t have had that courage, I had never that courage! Well, if you look around, I feel that here in the company there’s a certain security that it brings, at least when I was admitted. I take no risks. I could be in another situation, in a private company, but that keeps me here, because of the security and then I remember this colleague that left and he even went to the Northeast and called me afterwards telling me that he’s in a company there. Each one has its way, each one has its history: one manages, or not, to make one’s decisions. I worked, then, in the collection sector, internal service, at rear, we liked it a lot! How would I deal with, compete

with all these people out there. I was not that old then. But, add the competition issue, running after that, it would have cost me a lot. And, until then, I was good within the company too, you know? So, nothing pushed me to... now I'm leaving!" The respondent also reports the motives that led her to enter the institution: "I think I chose the company because... security too, I knew the place already, I saw how it was, it was nice, then I think it was the closest I got. I don't know what else could I have done". As for the possibility of working somewhere else, she says: "Actually, you make up excuses for things that I think are your features. Why don't I give classes? Because I'm shut! Because I'm afraid! But, then I make up other excuses to... to sort of running away!"

In relation to the group that chose the PDV, there were more motives for suffering than for pleasure at work. Among the motives for suffering, the following stand out:

- professional ascension by political criteria independently of merits and competencies;
- underutilization of potential;
- repetitive and monotonous work;
- scarce possibilities of learning and development

It has been observed that a significant number of choosers did not succeed in evaluating their abilities in relation to the challenges imposed by the work market or the enterprising activity. On the contrary, they denied themselves a realistic evaluation, pressed by the suffering derived from the bureaucratic work organization.

If on one side the institution disseminated the PDV as being an opportunity for professional accomplishment and development of the enterprising capacity of participants, on the other side individuals showed a non-critical acceptance of the idea that they could fast become enterprisers, after 20 or 30 years of public service.

This group, which did not know how to evaluate their abilities in relation to the emerging challenges, experienced deceptions and misfortunes in their post-PDV life. The reports following exemplify the events.

Respondent 1:

“We left a place, let’s say so, solid, you know? And it had ... salary, you know? Working or not, the salary was there, you know? You... you had stability, between parentheses, you know? You had a health plan, you had assistance ... assistance (...) even in terms of loans, of conveniences, you know? Financial inside the ... the company. You leave, you have nothing. And besides, we face a very violent political plan. And without ... is ... was waiting for that. Because then you go to start something, you think that, you know? You think it’s gonna work! (...) I wanted to go back to school. If I had gone back to school, who knows? I’d have other ... other way, you know? I wasn’t happy. And at the time then ... money appeals a lot. The money was very good at the time. You thought it was very good. You thought! That you’d get a lot of things and would be much time living on that! I know people that are doing very bad, that are much in need! There’re people that go downtown and don’t have money to come back home! People that had good positions...”

Respondent 2:

“...there’s been more difficulties than conveniences, even because of ... my not knowing the market, you know? My not having experience with private business, you know? Then the difficulties were endless and they remain until now. They’ve always been bigger than the conveniences. Even because it’s difficult for you to own a business in this country, it’s difficult. It’s difficult because there’re lots of people exploring you. It’s taxes, its ... ahn ... ahn ... police, it’s ... thieves, it’s ... it’s ...systems of control they establish any time and you have to contribute ... It’s ... it’s very difficult, you got it? Ahn ... let’s say that today, if I made a comparison between what I’d be receiving (...) I’d be receiving muuuuuuuuch more than I do here.

Respondent 3:

“... I was not happy with the situation (...) professionally, the ... the ... the ... way that (...) it was going then and the attitude they had in front of the employees. But I, something that influenced me a lot was that I really wanted to build this house. (...) ... I regret not having

prepared myself to be pass another civil servant exam soon afterwards (...). Even because everytime I talk to the employees in there I see that I really wouldn't have had cold blood to stay in there, to go on.

Respondent 4:

"It's been like, sort of sudden, you know? I didn't stop to think. Then... I regretted it afterwards, but then it was late. The day I signed, I regretted it. Then, I wanted to give up, but I had problems with my house. I had to leave the apartment where I lived before and ... then I arrived at my desk, I went there to give up, and when I came back to my desk I said: 'leave the paper signed and go ahead!' Then, I was only aware that I was going out (...) when I handed the identification badge back to them. Then I was aware, you know? That I was going out (...) 20 years, you know? Then you feel ... it's a loss, you know? A big one!"

Respondent 5:

"Dissatisfaction, in this case? That's the crisis, you know? The problem is the crisis. You used to have yours. Monthly you had. The investment made, or not made, it didn't... didn't give the expected result, you know? In this case, you can survive, that's all. (...) ...I had a good position, you know? And I had little time before retiring. Like 8 years. Eight years, 10 years to retire. Then... it wasn't a good idea, if you think about it. If I had waited some time, it would be like 4 years now, you know? To quit. Then it wasn't a good idea. It was in the sense of... gaining time of life, you know? Some colleagues are there now (...) there, it's... incredible! They aged a lot, you know? They aged like this, very much, you know? Then you, in the sense of gaining life, I did, you know? And peace of mind, this stuff, it's... it's... not feeling the daily stress, you got it? It's... I don't know, it's living more, so out here you get to live".

5. Reflecting about the reports in the light of the autotelic personality concept

The first five respondents chose to remain in the institution where they work, in spite of the bureaucratic environment, the lack of recognition and feedback on the institution's part and the few career opportunities. They never denied the existing difficulties but, differently from the colleagues that chose the Voluntary Dismissal Program as a means of escaping the suffering and anguish of the organizational environment (COSTA & MAZZILLI, 2001a, 2001b), these servants managed to find sources of satisfaction.

The reports confirm the findings of the studies described above: the greatest source of satisfaction, recognition and challenge is centered on the external customer service. It can be perceived that the servants that chose to remain in the institution are glad with human contact, like to be with people, are satisfied with belonging to a group, with being useful, with not being isolated.

While enduring the pressures of the bureaucratic environment and finding reasons to be pleased at work, they acknowledge the limitations that would prevent them from pursuing different opportunities in the work market. However, they do not feel anguish about their personal limitations, seeing them as part of their personalities, of their way of being, unique and undeniable. They do not compare themselves to others in a negative or resentful way. All they know is where they can feel better, even if such a place offers weak challenges and limited opportunities.

The positive points they get to find in the institution are not simply rationalizations as defensive mechanisms face to the position's anguishes, in the Freudian sense of the term (FREUD, 1978). On the contrary, these are realistic and mature considerations, by people who know the reality of the professional market, of the company they work in and, specially, by people who know themselves.

On the other side, the five respondents that chose to accept the Program demonstrated a disequilibrium between the challenge of returning to the work market or starting new businesses and their abilities as professionals and enterprisers. The study indicates, as one of the reasons for this disequilibrium, the strong desire to leave the institution, which is perceived by them as a source of psychic suffering. These five respondents, thus, escaped a suffering condition to enter another, now connected with unemployment, financial shortage, loss of security and status.

6. Conclusions

The flow theory emerges in the seemingly exhaustive scenario of the motivational theories as a proposition of balance between challenges and abilities, being able to yield the development of human potentialities independently of the environment where the individual is inserted. Its emphasis is on the capacity of the so-called autotelic individuals to find satisfaction even when others despair and end up making wrong and precipitated decisions. Individuals with such capacity were proved able to avoid extreme stressful situations and the development of depression and anxiety conditions, common in situations of lack of personal growth opportunities and professional recognition.

Csikszentmihalyi turned his attention to individuals that overcome bureaucratic and neuroticizing organizational structures (COSTA & ARAÚJO SANTOS, 2002), contrary to authors like Argyris (1957), Maslow (2000, 1954) and Herzberg (1959), who stress the importance of the management of the organization's physical and psychological environments in order to create a favorable atmosphere for work satisfaction. A proposition that could be questioned at first (how could it be possible to keep one's mental health as well as finding satisfaction in environments that are so little stimulating?) is mirrored in the reports presented above. It refers to civil servants that chose to remain in the institution they work in, in spite of the financial benefits offered by the Voluntary Dismissal Program, and in spite of many despair-driven colleagues having accepted the Program's adventure without a mature and balanced evaluation of the professional survival conditions outside the institution's walls.

The first group does not present "pollyanic" beings, but rather individuals with the mature ability of acknowledging their real limitations and appreciating their true qualities. To exaggerate in the appreciation of their limitations would reflect insecurity and low self-esteem. To overestimate their qualities would be lack of modesty. To evaluate them in a balanced way, however, appears to be a desirable component of an autotelic personality.

The second group, however, demonstrates the ruinous consequences of not evaluating one's own abilities in a realistic way in relation to the challenges imposed by the external environment. Unfortunately, in the case of these PDV choosers the economic, social and political moment was, by no means, appropriate for non-experienced people to start new businesses, let alone for a return to the formal work market, which was very demanding and competitive.

The findings of this paper suggest the restructuring of the Voluntary Dismissal Programs, as they have been applied in the State. A support basis for the evaluation of servants' abilities would be fundamental, as well as one of preparation for future challenges, according to the evaluated abilities. The institution would gain with the permanence of qualified and motivated individuals. To individuals, advantages would be evident: to avoid personal suffering and the destruction of patrimonies, dreams and careers.

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