6

HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGERS IN THE FACE OF SUFFERING. AN ETHICAL QUESTION

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Abstract: Companies seem to be taking more and more interest in people. However, this greater concern has still not led to human resources managers adequately dealing with the problem of suffering within their organisations even when they are unanimous in acknowledging the existence of the phenomenon.

The purpose of this article is to study some of the aspects of the problem, connected with the ethical dimension of the issue, as an applied version of the Moral Philosophy to the professional work of the managers of people in the organizational framework.

The aim of the study shall be delimited and qualitative empirical research is done by conducting in-depth interviews with eight human resources managers –a figure which, as indicated, saturates the sample.

The results that emerge from the study, obtained with the qualitative information analysis program NVivo, are contrasted with the ethical perspective deriving from Kantian ethics and the formulation of the categorical imperative known as *The Humanity Formula*, which we axiomatically assume as the criteria of morality. We approach this issue as field work needed to help analyse the ethical consequences of this situation, as well as to try to contribute ways to handle suffering within companies.

Keywords: *People management, human resources, workplace malaise, suffering at work, human resources managers, people management models, ethical dimension.*

INTRODUCTION

Whenever humans participate in business, business is inevitably influenced by human characteristics. And perhaps one of the distinctive signs of humans is emotional experience combined with rationality. As a result, if no emotion is alien to professional activity, then suffering should not be so as well.

This work arose out of the experience of one of the authors who, while working in human resources, has seen many people suffer over many years. Moreover, the same co-author also acknowledges having suffered in his dual role as employee and manager. Therefore, this study aims to analyse the experience of suffering within companies, on the one hand, and suffering among human resources managers, on the other. The ultimate objective is eminently practical all while seeking to identify effective means of preventing, managing and/or eradicating suffering.

Both Psychology and Sociology have tried to find tools to help people alleviate their suffering in companies. However, it is in any case the aforementioned immesurability of the concept of suffering that leads us to opt for a wider umbrella than that of Psychology or that of Sociology to carry out its interpretation and study. That umbrella can be none other than that of Philosophy, a discipline that studies suffering very deeply in all its historical stages, and that is the basis of the ethical approach that we face in this respect, even though the aim sought with this work is to determine the ethical consequences of how human resources managers perceive suffering within their organisations and what do they do to detect it, prevent it, manage it and, as applicable, palliate it.

One might suggest as a hypothesis that companies' profitability could be increased if they could improve the wellbeing and motivation of their workers (Pinto de Almeida & Da Costa Leao, 2012). This statement naturally leads to ethical reflection, in line with the so commonly indicated connection between economy and ethics from a conceptual perspective, yet empirical in companies' day to day (Correa, 2017).

Considering people as *mere* resources is not only malpractice from an ethical standpoint, at least from the Kantian paradigm used in this study: it also leads to increased suffering at work and a correlative decrease in efficacy and profitability (Baudelot & Michael, 2011). Although, on the one hand, it is found that a good number of today's labour organisation systems put workers' psychological health at risk

(Han, 2014), at the same time there are those who sustain better results could be expected for all stakeholders, significantly including employees and workers, with the implementation of social responsibility policies attending to the ethical dimension of people management (Calvo Cabezas, 2013).

Much effort has been made to improve production processes. However, workers' mental lives continue to be basically ignored despite many proofs of the frequent conflict between personal plans and organisational structures. Some authors have described the situation of employees these days as existential drama which impacts their mental and physical states. To this end, Han Byung-Chul, via Foucault, does not hesitate to refer to this "disciplinary power" he sees in "settings and institutions of confinement" in the following terms: *"Family, school, prison, barracks, hospital and factories represent these disciplinary places of confinement. The subject of a disciplinary society changes from one setting of confinement to another. Therefore, he moves in a closed system. Inhabitants of these environments can be ordered in space and time."* (Han, 2014: 18).

Besides this, professional careers and the way work is understood today are quite different from the past. Nowadays, workers find themselves in a very flexible work environment within very dynamic and changing organisations. The immediate consequence is that, in such *liquid* environments, loyalty is not *permanent* and there is a constant readjustment in the workforce and the goals. The pressure suffered by workers, the immense quantity of heterogeneous orders received and such high expectations with regard to results, which are often unattainable, have resulted in what some call the *corrosion of the character* (Senett, 2000).

Added to this factor is the arrival of new technologies which are likely to create social tensions in which workers, immersed in the knowledge era, displace others, marginalize them and turn them into unemployed (Rifkin, 2014). Thus, stress, anguish, pressure and burnout tend to perpetuate within companies as epiphenomena of the suffering. However, the scientific literature has not addressed this issue with the desirable profusion. Thus, of the 1,814 articles published in the nine journals of greatest impact according to the JCR index in human resources and management areas, between 2011 and 2017, only fourteen deal with suffering or their observable symptoms: stress, anguish, depression or burnout.

2. THE CONCEPT OF SUFFERING

Most authors who have attempted to define suffering advocate its complementarity to the term "pain" (Montoya Juarez, Schimidt Río-Valle, & Prados Peña, 2006), although they generally accept the definition proposed in 1982 by Eric Cassell that it is "a severe state of stress associated with events that threaten a person's integrity" (Cassell, 1982: 639). He further states that suffering in people is conditioned by society and the culture at a given time and place. Although the concepts "pain" and "suffering" are not exactly identical and even though distinguished as appropriate, they are considered similar for the practical purposes of this research work.

In any case, we agree with Briner's affirmation in his work entitled "The Neglect and Importance of Emotion at Work" that emotions are non-specific affective states and, therefore, difficult to define. Suffering is one of these emotions and the definition and study thereof cannot be easily approached (Briner, 1999). This is not so much due to its subjectivity as it is to the non-specificity of its essence and, therefore, its definition.

So, after reviewing different known meanings, some other authors state that "*suffering is a state of pain that is more or less continuously experienced by the subject within a specific society and culture upon facing a threat perceived as capable of destroying its own physical or psychosocial integrity leading to feelings of vulnerability and lack of self-defence*" (Montoya Juarez, Schimidt Río-Valle, & Prados Peña, 2006:117).

Although to a lesser extent nowadays, it has been debated in the past whether suffering comes exclusively from physical harm, or whether psyche has something to do with it. Today, the established doctrine is that pain can be due to physical harm or psychological reasons which also produce suffering in people. Moreover, the approach to suffering today requires knowledge of both its physical and psychical components (Smith, 2017).

It is not only physical discomfort that provokes suffering and the threshold of subjectivity related to the concept of suffering, which means it may be revealed to a greater or lesser extent in similar circumstances, and should also be taken into account, and even more so in the business world (Ridner, 2004). To this end, there is a component in the concept of suffering that must be considered in justifying its subjectivity and that is the individual's sense of his/her own vulnerability. In other words, any

subject who feels vulnerable suffers to a greater or lesser extent (Black & Rubinstein, 2004).

Professionals experience times of pressure when the mere risk of losing their job, and simply the possibility of such circumstance, makes them feel extremely vulnerable due to the responsibilities assumed in today's society which condition us to a greater or lesser extent. Faced with this situation, some people defend themselves by externalising a position of personal toughness while others endure emotional suffering which society sees as a sign of said vulnerability. In any case, human beings perceive the work they must do for the rest of their professional lives as an arduous and costly task, a dead-end street in which they will always be accompanied by some form of suffering. This perception is clearly influenced by the ideological context and the structures of organisations in our times, something we are well aware of, yet which exceeds the scope of this research work as will be seen. We are therefore faced with a subjective concept that still challenges its researchers and that, when presented in a severe manner, involves the human being as a whole (Morse, 2015).

The individual, and most of the time anonymous situation of suffering does not occur in a closed and hermetic environment but rather within the group setting all human beings are forced to live in. Therefore, the greater or lesser degree of suffering is influenced by one's status in the group and it will be greater or lesser depending on the situation of power or subordination each one finds themselves in (Georges, 2002). As mentioned, there is a very broad non-specific component to suffering whereby the circumstances can influence whether the impact of an adverse situation is higher or lower for a person.

Byung-chul Han describes the current situation as follows: "*We live in a special historical phase in which freedom itself gives rise to pressures. The freedom of the possible even produces more pressures than the disciplinary imperative. The imperative has a limit but the possible has no limit. On the other hand, power has none. Therefore the pressure that starts from the possible is boundless. Consequently we find ourselves in a paradoxical situation. Freedom is really the counter-figure of coercion. This freedom that has to be the opposite of pressure now produces pressures. Diseases such as depression and burnout syndrome are the expression of a deep freedom crisis. They are a pathological sign that freedom today often changes suddenly into pressure*" (Han, 2014:7).

Collective discomfort cannot, however, be analysed without first taking into consideration each individual's suffering as the necessary sum for

studying today's organisational context. One's own harsh and unpleasant experience is the best proof of the existence of pain (Vevia Romero, 1999).

We refer to suffering as the part that is avoidable, that can be palliated or even eradicated before its appearance, as opposed to that part which is unapproachable and inevitable for us. Aristotle referred to the latter in *Metaphysics* assuming that order and beauty existed in the world just as disorder and ugliness (Aristóteles, 2014). The knowledge thereof and the causes of their appearance should bring us closer to the Erasmus concept of the human being as a being born for peace and harmony in the trust that, together with those around us, we can find the necessary rest (Erasmus, 2011).

Suffering was thus approached from the perspective of human resources managers within organisations.

3. FIELD WORK DESIGN

As already mentioned, the aim involves a highly subjective component which occurs in a daily setting from which it cannot be disconnected. This means we cannot control some of the variables either for ethical or practical reasons, which led us to using more hermeneutic, interpretive or, rather, qualitative information collection techniques.

3.1. METHODOLOGY

The methodology used is empirical and includes a first prospective data collection phase with a focus group, and a second phase dedicated to conducting in-depth interviews with human resources managers. Additionally, our methodological approach is based on the logical framework of epistemological hermeneutics (Burrel and Morgan, 1979).

We are also aware that the qualitative research method we follow cannot avoid including the perspective from which the researcher observes the reality being analysed and, therefore and at the same time, that will be a measure of the reflexivity approached (Beltrán, 2015). This conditioning factor creates an unavoidable hermeneutic circle limiting objectivity and filled with innovative and creative virtuality.

Our methodological approach prioritises sensitivity partially to the detriment to objectivity. It shall be furthermore noted that the term

"sensitivity" must be interpreted herein as meant by Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss, whereby it refers to the researcher's ability and skill in understanding the environment analysed from their privileged position and using their knowledge as an analysis tool (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

This being the case, we believe it is appropriate to approach the impact of the phenomenon of suffering within organisations by trying to identify some of the most relevant keys of its ethical dimension. We shall begin by better describing the concept.

3.2. FIELD APPROACH FOCUS GROUP

First of all and with an exploratory intention, the authors had the opportunity to participate in a focus group formed by twelve human resources managers from some of the most important national and multinational companies in Spain. The three-hour meeting, the only one planned, was part of a research project on wellbeing and humanity in today's companies and was carried out at the Comillas University in Madrid, on October 14, 2016. The subjecy may seem a rather distant one, or even opposing our work. However, it is no less certain that raising issues indirectly to a group and even in a hidden way can elicit franker answers. For this reason, the purpose of the focus group seemed adequate a priori.

Three meetings, each one two hours long, were held previously to prepare a focus group script as well as organise the sending of invitations to human resources managers from large enterprises. The range of companies whose managers received the invitation was determined by the previously available information on their best practices in the area to be considered. All of them were informed of the exploratory nature of the research. Once selected, the discussion was recorded and confidential, and none of the participants identified. The destination was strictly academic and had no commercial purpose whatsoever.

The session was carried out along with the previously established script and was completed in full. The conversation between the participants with regard to the questions asked was recorded and later transcribed. This transcription was sent to the participants so they could make any corrections deemed appropriate. The resulting document was the basis for this research process and over which the most important indications were taken as outlined below.

3.3. RESEARCH WORK. IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Although the experience described in the focus group would not be completely wasted, we did observe that the participating managers were not willing enough to approach the matter of suffering among people to a sufficient degree; possibly because the topic raised with the focus group was not directly suffering. Suffering is a topic that implies a certain level of relational intimacy and warmth that is quite demanding for a group, which is why we decided to find another method to obtain the information.

Thus, the decision was made to begin an in-depth interview process. In-depth interviewing is a very commonly used qualitative research method that consists of private, professional and structured conversations with previously selected people in order to conduct an analytical study of the answers obtained, all with a view to establishing a diagnosis as certain as possible in relation to a problem (Deterding & Waters, 2018). It seemed that this methodology would be appropriate for our work as we sought to collect information from human resources managers on the prevention, detection and, as applicable, management of suffering among employees.

To prepare the script for each interview, a questionnaire was used which had been previously prepared and sent to 50 people, management and business ethics experts, university doctors, professors and company directors. This is the usual procedure in these cases (Deterding & Waters, 2018). The questionnaire was prepared specifically for the occasion after conducting a brainstorming session based on the previous experience of the authors of this article. The resulting document was sent on September 29, 2016 to 50 experts selected among professors of ethics, human resources and management from different universities, as well as from various active and retired human resources executives and employees. Each question should be rated as excellent, normal, inappropriate and bad. At the end of the questionnaire, they were asked for concrete comments to any desired question.

The purpose of the questionnaire was to suggest a set of questions with the aim to select the best way to approach the interviews with human resources managers. Moreover, they were asked for and received comments and observations to this end. Twenty-two responses were received, of which we highlight the following comments: a. do not ask directly about suffering, openly asking about suffering would create a starting bias

that would influence the results; b. the questions should be few and sufficiently spaced so that the interviewee has as much time as necessary to express himself; c. excessively directed questions or personal questions should be omitted; d. the interviewee should not consider himself a victim; e. questions should be introduced about concrete aspects of their work and not so much about subjective ones.

In view of the information obtained from the focus group as well as the assessment of the questions and suggestions made by the fifty experts consulted, a general interview script was prepared irrespective of the outcome of each, and possibly obtaining information by following a different order than first established.

3.4. SAMPLE SELECTION

An attempt was made to secure a sample with a range of human resources managers that would be sufficiently representative. Thus, people of both sexes were chosen, of all ages, with varying years of service in their positions, who work at companies of all sizes and in diverse sectors as well as in various geographic areas. The interview process began by selecting the next interviewee considering some value of diversity, thus reaching the final sample number once no new content was found. This affirmation on the saturation point was verified by analysing the terms in the NVivo tool as explained further below.

Among all human resources managers, the selection was as follows:

1. Three females and five males.
2. People between 40 and 52 years old.
3. Companies size from 100 to 23,000 employees.
4. Belonging to the infrastructure, automotive, consultancy, healthcare, food, legal, industrial, and banking sectors.
5. With an experience between two and twenty-one years in the position.
6. Working in Madrid, Barcelona, and a city in Castilla y León.

Once the consent documents were signed by the people interviewed, the planned meetings, one for each of the selected people, were held between November 3, 2016 and June 23, 2017. All of them were conducted behind closed doors at the interviewees' offices or in open areas

yet with the sole presence of the interviewer and interviewee in the conversation. They were previously contacted by phone to explain the project and arrange the interview appointment. We tried to conduct the interviews as close together as possible to contrast any information very closely.

With the help of the script presented, the interviewees were asked to offer their opinions and data on the topics mentioned, the interview audio was fully recorded and field notes were taken. The idea was for the answers to include specific cases of experiences and not just opinions. The interviewer was one of the authors of this paper.

3.5. INFORMATION GATHERING AND SAMPLE RELIABILITY

Once the interviews were completed, the audio recordings were transcribed and a copy was sent to each of the people interviewed so they could acknowledge receipt thereof and, in any case, make any comments or modifications deemed appropriate.

The data obtained were analysed by iteration. Each interview was analysed several times to extract the main conclusion from each interviewee. The most common terms subject of our study were counted and grouped together by area of interest and then the shared conclusions by all those interviewed were drawn. Moreover, terminology trees were used to help interpret the most repeated affirmations, the most common thoughts and the most significant assertions.

Certain statements repeated by several of the interviewees were highlighted with quotation marks. and none of them was challenged.

We believed the saturation point would be reached by analysing the responses we received (Mejía Navarrete, 2000). Therefore, we verified that the responses tended to be repeated in the interviews conducted. The statements were similar among the men and women, among people who have been in the same position for more or less time, among those who reside in one location or another, among those who work for large and smaller companies and irrespective of the sector in which they work.

In order to ensure that the statements were sufficient for the empirical analysis developed, and that the number of interviews was sufficient, we included the information received from the interviews one by one as well as cumulatively in the qualitative information analysis system known as

Figure 1. Cloud of terms from the in-depth interview process.

NVivo. This tool showed a cloud of terms indicating the most commonly used by the human resources managers.

We further made sure that the discourse from all the people interviewed was homogeneous. We entered each interview in the NVivo document analysis system and counted the fifty most used terms by the interviewees in their conversations. We excluded non-keywords such as prepositions and conjunctions for the purposes of our analysis. We also eliminated words with less than three letters for easier counting.

We added all the interviews to the system as they were transcribed in a view to checking the discourse evolution. The first one conducted was entered first, then the second one, then the third one, and so on. The discourse from each new informant was compared with the prior one and/or previous ones to analyse the degree of similarity in discourse. Thus, after adding the second interview to the first we observed that 23 of the 50 most common terms used by both were the same and that, furthermore, they appeared in a very different order of priority. Of the ten most commonly used terms, only half of them coincide and in different order. This homogeneity in the discourse is not enough to consider the interviews comparable.

However, as more interviews were added to the process gradually and cumulatively as explained, it was difficult for the interviewer to perceive

any new significant content . This was corroborated upon adding the eighth interview to the seven previous ones. That is when we realised that 48 of the 50 most common terms used were the same and that, of the top ten, nine of them also coincided in order of appearance. We then believed the saturation point had been obtained and that the veracity of the interpretation of the results reflected enough guarantees.

4. DISCUSSION: HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGERS IN THE FACE OF SUFFERING

In order to interpret the statements of the people interviewed in relation to suffering, we shall use the most common terms and concerns as well as the conclusions that emerge from the discourse, read and interpreted by iteration as already mentioned.

Firstly, we extracted from the text all the phrases that had to do with people's suffering within organisations. We read the transcribed interviews several times and analysed the meaning behind the statements relating to the term subject of our study, other synonyms, possible causes and observable symptoms.

Thus, we can affirm the presence of the following terms in quantitative order of appearance:

They suffer: 11 times	Suffering: 11 times
He/she suffers: 7 times	Depression: 5 times
Suffer: 4 times	Anguish: 4 times
They endure: 3 times	Are Suffering: 2 times
Stress: 2 times	That suffer: 1 time
Pain: 1 time	Having a hard time: 1 time
They have a hard time: 1 time	Hardship: 1 time
Feel bad: 1 time	They get depressed: 1 time

In all, the term subject of our study or similar terms appeared 57 times throughout the interviews conducted.

Further research needed to be done to determine if the people interviewed used the semantic field supporting this thesis positively or negatively. In other words, whether they were stating the people suffer or, on the contrary, do not suffer, had to be analysed. Only in two of the

fifty-seven times the terms subject of interpretation were used negatively to refer to management and younger people who, in the eyes of those interviewed, do not suffer. In all the other cases:

The human resources managers state that some people suffer at work

We supported this affirmation by creating terminology trees with the two most common words used and did so again using the NVivo tool. Please note expressions such as "...without mentioning pay conditions, etc. I believe they do suffer", "...they suffer when the environment is not what they would hope" or "...it causes suffering in certain people". In any case it is ethically negligent to know of the existence of suffering and not wanting to address the problem.

There is suffering, but it is difficult to see

We wondered at this point whether human resources managers do anything to prevent, manage or try to palliate the suffering they acknowledge exists. They say they would do more if they knew who it was happening to, but they also say that what most often occurs is the people suffering silently not daring to admit what is happening to them.

Moreover, when not delving into potential cases of suffering, human resources managers are hiding behind the mandatory respect for privacy:

> *"In general, the perception we have is that psychological diseases never become known: they are kept silent. Detecting them is quite complicated; firstly, because the information provided by the existing medical systems does not specify the real reason for a leave because data protection laws do not allow that."*

One of the reasons those interviewed use to justify their employees' silence is fear of "what people will say" and that the situation is an embarrassing one. In general, people do not acknowledge they are seeing a psychologist.

On the other hand, the people interviewed recognise that someone who is suffering will perform worse and that will affect the company's profitability.
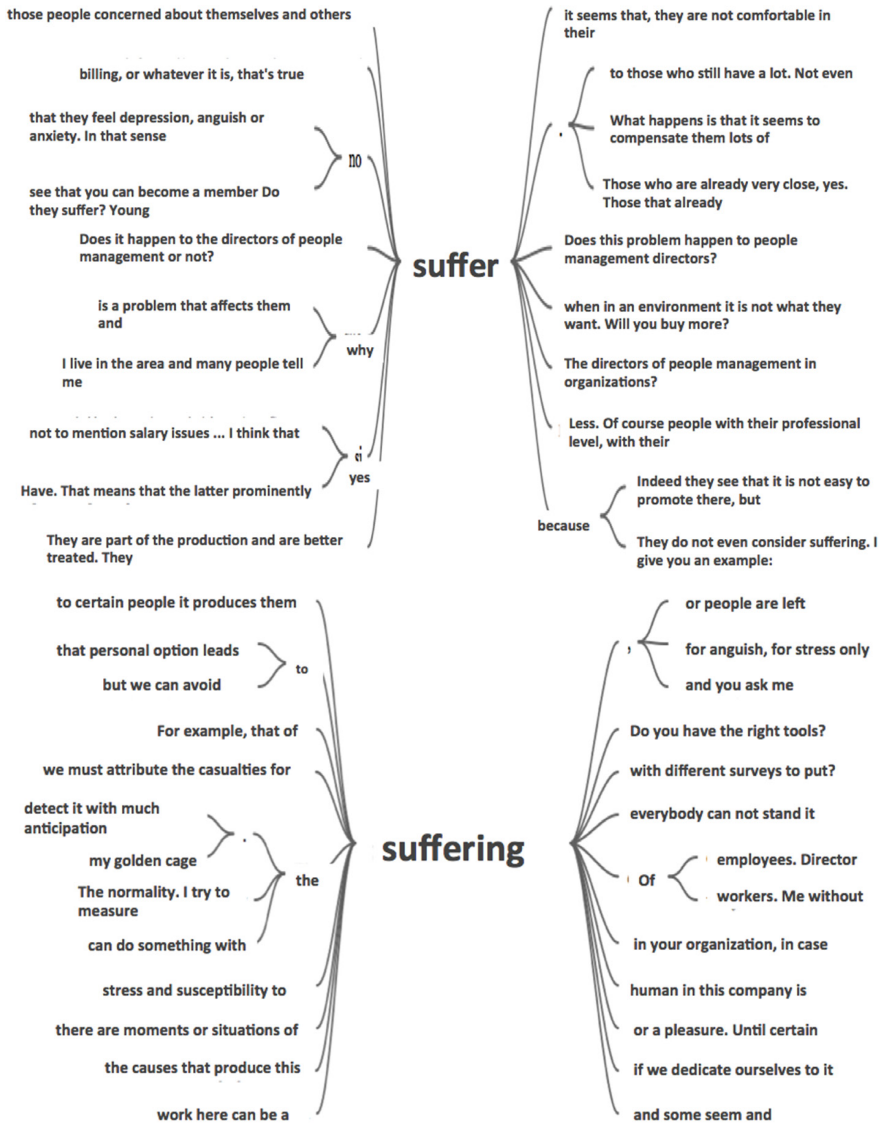
Figure 2. Terminology trees relating to suffering.

"It's much more profitable for people to be well and that doesn't cost more, but rather the opposite; having people who are going through a hard time costs you more money because it takes a lot

more effort for each process to move forward. If people are in your favour and they are all going in the same direction, it's all much easier and much more profitable".

According to what those interviewed told us, the most highly-trained people express more easily their situation in cases of hardship: *"The people who occasionally have a hard time because their work is very specialised and they have no other options are those who worry about their talent, their future, improving their family's wellbeing and their professional growth"* .The people who keep quiet are largely, in the opinion of those interviewed, people with no hope of improvement or further developing. This creates a vicious circle where the subject who suffers does not believe the future will get any better and this situation causes further suffering. People work better when they find a sense of what they do and / or when they are motivated by their superior.

The human resources managers interviewed are aware that their tasks should include giving hope to these employees. They believe they are the ones who must provide the necessary tools to bring meaning to their workers' professional development. They say so in the following way:

"They don't just come to us but we give them the necessary means to trust in Human Resources. There will always be people who don't believe in people and people who we cannot trust, but the situation is generally changing".

Another reason they believe people who suffer decide to hide their situation is, in some cases, the excessive desire to occupy a position that is unattainable to them. Some people keep quiet when they are going through a hard time because if they show their limitations that would interfere with their personal ambitions. We experience suffering in this world when we want certain things we cannot have, meaning the knowledge of our own limits and the elimination of the greatest possible number of passions leads us away from suffering.

"It's a very personal choice. What happens is everyone knows that if you don't reach certain standards, promotion is impossible.
I believe they do suffer because they can actually see it's not easy to be promoted as they wish, but it's compensated because they replace it with other factors such as fear or comfort, which are factors

that are compensated by a relatively hospitable and welcoming environment. It's really cold outside and people don't want to risk looking for something else".

There is no hope because the subject believes they cannot improve or because the environment is not susceptible of improvement. Cooperation must replace competition as the ethical rationale for any organization.

Another cause human resources managers believe produces suffering which is not accounted for is all the mundane and very common fighting among colleagues. They believe one of their missions is to try to prevent it in order to help their workers. Once again, human resources managers acknowledge they must assume responsibilities with regard to matters that may cause suffering or malaise. What they do not do is handle the latter in and of themselves but rather the causes provoking it. They do not look after the results of their activities as people in positions of responsibility but rather the possible causes without concern for the result. Human resources managers believe their work has been completed when they act to improve the lives of their workers, irrespective of the result.

> *"That's why they go; and they go due to reasons that are, sometimes, stupid and even they realise they were stupid after the fact, because of a small amount of money or simply because... many times it's not the organisation that makes them move on, but rather their boss, their direct supervisor, or a poor relationship with their colleagues; nothing else. Or their partner, or the attorney they deal with or because of the people right next to them".*

Suffering exists, it is difficult to see and it is also a problem

In any case, it is not easy to handle this problem, they state. They acknowledge a complex reality that is not easy for human beings. Companies nowadays are an impersonal setting and even more so the bigger they are. The goals are global and people are resources; important, but just resources:

> *"The problem is the lack of connection between an ill employee and the company. Nobody is concerned for that person. There are times when no middle manager even calls that person... A person*

can be on leave for a month for chemotherapy and never gets a call from the company".

In view of all that has been stated to this point, it can be concluded that human resources managers acknowledge the existence of suffering and have a general idea of the causes. The observation from a reiterated reading of their statements is that:

They perceive suffering in companies as a problem they do not approach.

Faced with the complex situation described, the human resources managers interviewed try to get us to understand that directly approaching the matter would pose a problem to their position. Just as was done with the semantic field around suffering, the same process was done with the expressions that refer to a problem. These expressions were used 45 times by the people interviewed. The result is as follows:

Problem: 17 times   Problems: 15 times
Complicated: 6 times   Conflict: 4 times
Difficulty: 2 times   Adverse: 1 time

What follows is an analysis of whether they use them positively or negatively. In other words, if the human resources managers affirm the existence of a problem or, on the contrary, say there is no problem. We found only one negative statement meaning it can be affirmed that they refer to the existence of a problem. Again, we compared this affirmation with the terminology tree and observed how they refer to the matter with statements like "…the person is not well, feels frustrated, and for me that's a problem", "…it affects them and they suffer, so it's a problem", or "I have a lot of problems with the subrogated group".

The human resources managers believe that if they talk too much about how hard it is for some people, what they create in an unnecessary increase of the importance given to their professional's hardships. This clearly demonstrates the reigning injustice with regard to suffering within organisations.

Perhaps this is the reason why human resources managers are optimistic about the matter as what they acknowledge does not always coin-
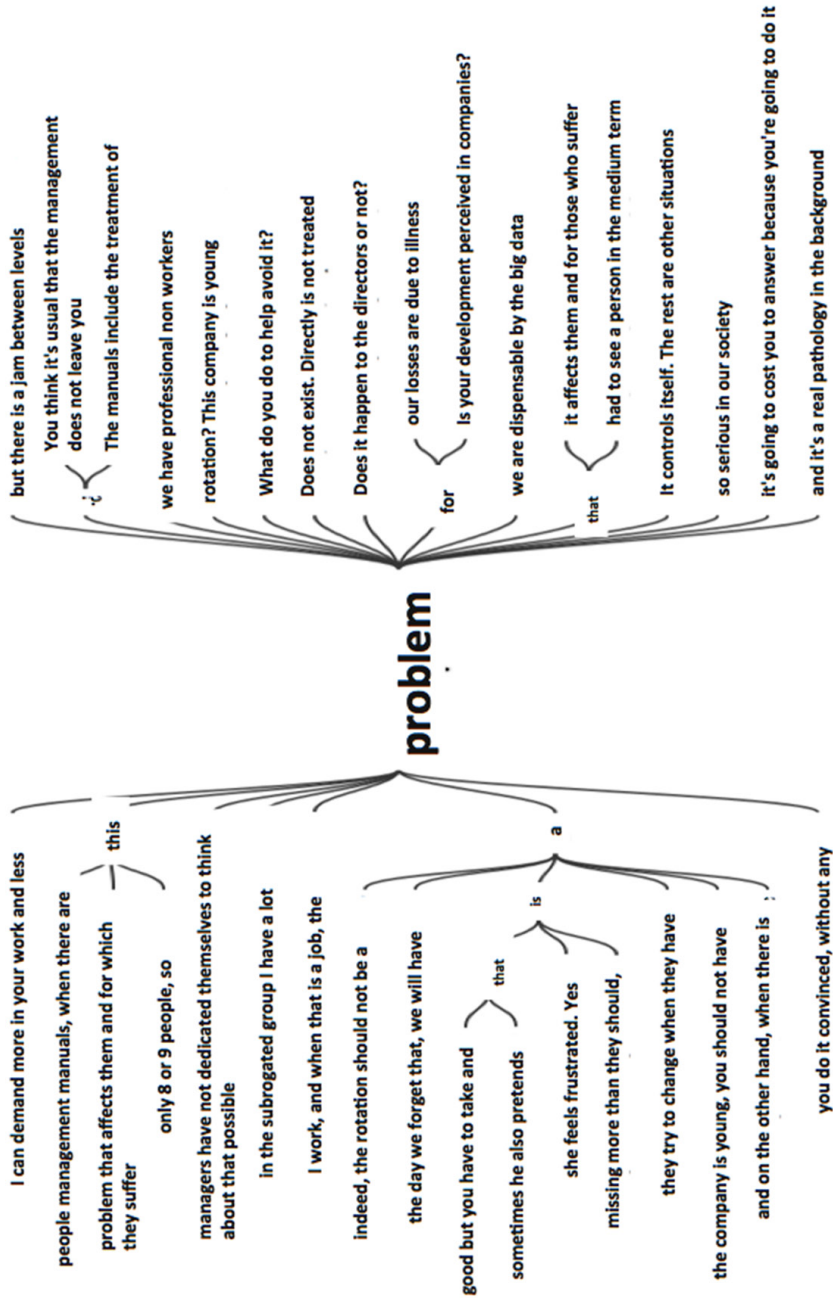
Figure 3. Terminology tree relating to the problem of managing of suffering.

cide with their personal feelings or those of the professionals around them. They develop campaigns that pose no risk to the position of people management but also do not confront suffering directly. It is a way to manage people where you walk the walk, but you do not look or want to look around. As the prospective focus group conducted was inherently public, we used that to verify whether the aforementioned affirmation is correct.

> *"We promoted a Runners Club with an emotional part that ties you to the others. There's a sports club and paddel tournaments which are well-received by our employees."*

However, privately, in a more in-depth interview setting, the affirmation is quite different:

> *"The immense majority of the people say Mondays are painful, not because it's Monday but because they have to go to work. When most of our day is dedicated to work and when going to work is a real effort and you have a hard time, it's a big problem."*

If the problem of suffering in people were confronted, the focus would be placed on the people who suffer and not so much on the projects that may seem healthier from the company's perspective. In view of the above, we could receive the impression that human resources managers should, therefore, not only deal with the issue out of compassion for those who suffer but also, and above all, they should do so for reasons of ethics and justice yet acting out of an effort of justice is an added problem to the work generally assigned.

It is about promoting a change in the way real problems are understood and, thus, handled. If suffering exists within companies, it will have to be dealt with sooner or later by human resources managers and they say they are aware of their major role to this end. Suffering in the world and, therefore, within companies is an undeniable fact that is present in all existence.

One important thing to keep in mind, say our informants, is that they are not handling the problem of suffering because it has never been done and because they would be the first and only ones to do so and that would be a problem for them as stated. We could interpret their words in that there is no habit of looking after this very important issue but, if it did

exist, they would consider it an essential part of their work because they can also infer the causes:

> "...*when there really is a problem and a real pathology, it's essentially corporate harassment in the sense that an organisation pressures the person in such way that they break down because they're not able to perform whether because of their colleagues or management*".

Even if we do not like it, it should be handled and we need tools to do so

Despite saying they do not handle suffering, today's people managers recognise that suffering is an avoidable problem and that, if handled, it would improve the situation within companies.

> "*People management requires tools and it depends on them whether global people management is able to individualise each specific case and their own problems based on the circumstances of each human being*".

This statement offers a clue as to what the people interviewed constantly think about. In fact, they say that if they had the necessary management tools, they may dare to approach the problem of suffering within their companies. They referred to this need no less than 36 times. Some further stated that they get the tools they request, but only one of them says they intend to use them for this purpose. Indeed, not to know one's employees is an ethical question itself. In this case, as mentioned, not all the affirmations are negative. Not all of them say they have no tools but rather they would have them if requested. However, as can be seen by the terminology tree following these words, expressions like "...more tools are needed", "...none of us have tools", or "...handling suffering if you have the tools" are most common.

In order to justify that they are willing to approach employee suffering, the people interviewed believe it cannot be based on mere situations but rather data should accompany the statements and support a commitment to approaching the problem of suffering within companies. That is why the human resources managers say they need more tools than currently available to them:
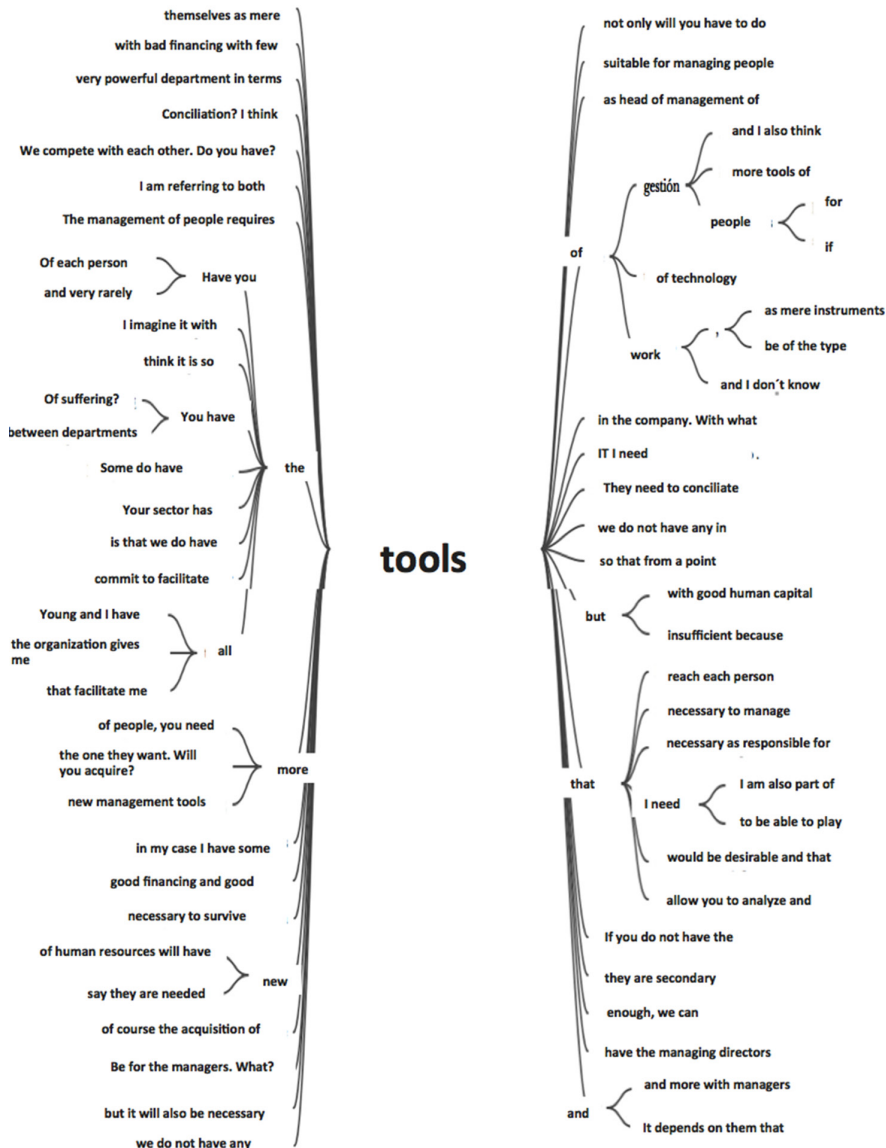
Figure 4. Terminology tree relating to management tools

"I don't believe any of us have tools in any sector. Tools that reach everyone and each case are not available. The mentalities of directors need to be changed so they try to adapt them to the needs".

When there is a widespread expression for the need for analysis tools, what the managers interviewed actually want to say is that, at this point in time, workers are not studied individually or as a group. Tools are needed to not just demonstrate a reality but rather transform what is occurring. We suggest modifying the concept of a worker from a mere resource to companies' real reason for being. Each human being and all of them together can and should be the subject of knowledge. Life should not hide the experiences of others' happiness or suffering but rather spaces must be created to share people's life experiences to learn what must be done and how we must act (Torralba & Rosàs Tosas, 2017).

Our analysis disclosed how seemingly people are viewed as the centre of concern and the focus of attention by the professionals taking part in the study.

> *"The company's philosophy very much focuses on each of the people who are a part of it as individuals. We work for and with each individual".*

All things considered, the participants who acknowledge, as seen, that they do not approach suffering, say however that people are the priority and that, if they had the necessary tools, they would place importance on the problem of suffering within organisations as deserved. It was along these lines that one of the participants stated:

> *"Things are done, but we believe more could be done and that it's mainly due to the lack of resources. But there is a mentality out there of wanting to make progress with this.*

They also question the existing reality and reveal through the conversation that there is a gap in people management. This field must view suffering as an essential part of its mission. For some reason, there are subtle pressures in companies that influence people to act surrounded by a professional mask. What is at stake is a powerful presence of fears that must be fought against (Laloux, 2018).

It is a challenge for everyone, even for senior management.

This criticism of the reality, which is more or less supported depending on the case, is aimed at the companies' highest management levels

again and again throughout the process of interpreting the interviews conducted. Therefore, we shall analyse again the number of times terms related to senior management appear, and interpret the meaning. References to the hierarchical superiors human resources managers must report to appeared 81 times, as follows:

Senior management: 25 times   The management: 22 times
Directors: 22 times   Management Committee: 9 times
Director: 3 times

The people interviewed do not believe their superiors would be sensitive to the implementation of policies directly aimed at diagnosing and palliating, as applicable, employee suffering. This is another argument they offer to prevent handling the matter in a decisive manner. The question at this point is whether this affirmation, which coincides among those interviewed, is an opinion or shared defensive rationalisation. In short, it is a state of opinion that may be considered a limitation of our methodological approach and yet it constitutes the real reason for being from a rational perspective.

However, they also say that if the importance of treating it to improve wellbeing and, as a result, the company's profitability were explained, they would encourage the proposal and offer the necessary support. Therefore, the idea is to reason with them as to the benefits of handling employee suffering. If suffering is a silent problem, buried by workers' will or by fear, a method could possibly be found to reveal it and then be able to analyse it based on real experience and as told by the workforce. The way they express this is as follows:

"*With respect to the question of whether there are dictatorial cultures, the answer is clearly yes even though it is not always recognised and some even do recognise it in that it is more effective for them to pressure workers because it's the only way to demonstrate there is a leader and a hierarchical organisation, which is something I don't view as being a leader. The leader does not order; he/she leads.*"

According to the people interviewed, senior management believe a person who does their job properly in the proper environment has no reason to suffer. Furthermore, they think that entertainment, a poor

climate that fosters poor work and the abandonment of one's duties could produce unsought yet guilty suffering in some people. In other words, if someone is having a hard time at the company, they may be encouraged if it is a "healthy" reason or a means to learn if the result of their poorly directed will.

> *"I think it's something I often feel is missing at my company; we're not a company where this is customary. If this company were mine, there are things I often wouldn't do in this way for reasons of profit-ability or because of an external image, but there are a lot of us and I suppose I'm not the only one with the right answers".*

In the eyes of the people interviewed and the members of the focus group, the members of companies' Management Committees are the ones who know all aspects of their organisation. According to these people who direct the organisations, all workers must rely on their own criteria. They accept very little criticism and this means they believe everyone else should just trust them. This thought is what leads the human resources managers to suggesting that the Management Committee would not ap-prove of working on suffering or any other matter they do not agree with and are not convinced of:

> *"We do not have the ability to impose sanctions if not approved from above. We cannot make any decisions like reducing working hours without approval from those who issue the orders... everything has to go through them".*

Nonetheless, the human resources managers acknowledge that a clearly established leadership is necessary for organisations to function. In their judgement, this leadership must pursue the common good. Yet they do not separate the common good, what's good for the majority and one's own good in that statement. If suffering were found among the majority, it would make sense they believe they should handle it; satisfy-ing the majority is what must be sought. People managers generally ac-knowledge a concern within their organisation for the common good and giving attention to those in need.

> *"The truth is the work atmosphere is very good; it's a place where you know the company, the organisation never fails anyone behind*

them; they fully trust in them and believe there is no other place where they could be better off than here".

Those interviewed say that if the existence of people suffering were well explained to management, they would meet the needs of their workforce. They believe attention is not currently paid to this matter as the circumstances described are not present.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSALS FOR PRACTICAL ACTION

At this point, we believe we have fulfilled the intended aim of establishing how human resources managers face the problem of malaise and suffering within companies. We have verified how they perceive it from a perspective of exercising responsibility for third parties as well as an analysis of the impact on themselves.

In view of it all, the following four conclusive theses may be postulated:

1. **The human resources managers interviewed state that there are people who suffer at work.**
2. **These managers believe suffering within companies is a problem they are not confronting.**
3. **They say that, although complicated, the problem should be adequately approached yet they do not have the tools to do so effectively.**
4. **Suffering within companies is a challenge for everyone in an organisation and, quite particularly, for senior management and the members of the Board of Directors.**

Therefore, it seems necessary to go beyond detecting suffering by intuition and establish methods of observation and listening to reveal suffering at work. In our opinion, the fact that Human Resources managers in companies and organizations are not addressing the problem of suffering in the organizational framework as it should be, constitutes a serious and effective gap in the technical quality of people management. We consider that, perhaps, if the problem were to be tackled in terms of its moral dimension, the development of policies and the design of instruments that resolutely address the issue could be understood as an ethical

requirement for the organization. With this, they would be in more fa-vourable conditions to face the problem. In addition, it would not be difficult, as we will point out later, to align the proposal with such robust moral philosophical perspectives as that of Sören Kierkegaard, and, above all, with the deontologism inherent in some of the versions of the Cate-gorical Imperative offered by Inmanuel Kant.

Following our research, we believe we are in a position to offer a two-fold contribution to the study and management of the problem that is both theoretical and practical. On the one hand, we have more fittingly illustrated the notion of organisational malaise and worker suffering. From a practical point of view, we believe we can offer a new perspective on management for those who manage people. To this end, we suggest implementing policies that directly, individually, anonymously and vol-untarily confront the problem of worker suffering. This is a feasible task and, even more so, a necessary mission that can be sustained on the fol-lowing proposals for practical action:

1. Among the immediate effects of pleasure or suffering, there are none that can modulate them as much as will in the sense of the impression or idea generated in us which attributes reason without apriorism to a new perception of our mind (Reale & Antisieri, 2010). In other words, we must want to confront the problem of suffering within organisations and open up our minds to a reality with growing effects and unpredictable consequences.

2. The systems for understanding people within organisations must be improved. More and better tools are necessary as are more staff and more and better time dedication to people's suffering. When there is a real knowledge of what is happening, the results are more significantly appreciated.

3. Systems must be implemented so people can make progress with their self-knowledge. Each employee must be able to understand his/her own value to the organisation and the growth possibilities involved.

4. Employees too often perform tasks not knowing their purpose or if they will be of some use. They lack any knowledge of the meaning of their work and this produces alienation and suffering. We suggest implementing more effective information systems that achieve the described aim.

5. Once suffering is considered as such within people management

systems, individualised mechanisms of analysis of the causes should be introduced along with areas for improvement for the person involved.

6. People management models must view human beings as at the centre of all activity. Nowadays, they are subject to profitability and costs. They are considered to simply be another element of growth. Workers are not resources for organisations. Instead, organisations should be understood as resources for personal development.

7. Institutional lines and clear standards must be created with a view to abolishing the internal wars between employees, departments and different hierarchical levels.

8. Organisations' training plans should include actions which, far from proposing the continuous and impossible ascent of all workers, helps reduce their ambition. A coherent analysis of reality is contrary to fostering temporary motivation that produces dissatisfaction when the intended aims are not fulfilled.

9. We suggest creating protocols of action to know what to do as a patient subject or indirect victim. They must be included in organisations' people management systems.

10. Suffering can and must be the subject of attention in people management models. The idea is not so much to sense that it exists or even take an important step forwards by acknowledging its existence. Beyond that, people management systems must confront it to try to make it disappear as far as possible. Measures are being taken nowadays with respect to some causes that produce it, harassment and work climates. Some of the symptoms like stress and anxiety are also being approached. However, the problem must and can be confronted when it occurs.

11. Decisively confronting phenomena known to exist yet which are not given the decision they are worth is necessary. Much is written on family and work balance, equality, sustainability and healthy workplaces. Any progress made is more due to good will than the existence of effective people management models.

12. Suffering today is influenced by the changing circumstances surrounding individuals. People management models must be capable of quickly adapting to the different causes that produce discomfort in today's world.

Suffering is not a simple matter but should make us reflect in order to understand together the processes that take place and that must be understood in order to transform the causes that cause suffering in people. It is also a challenge undoubtedly ethical, that can and should contribute to the improvement of the health of society, all with the intention of returning the vitality of people who are affected by situations of mental wear and tear that, as a consequence, cause suffering (Seligmann-Silva, 2014).

We shall conclude this work by referencing two masters of thought: Sören Kierkegaard (2013) and Inmanuel Kant (2006). For Kierkegaard, suffering is an inexplorable element of human destination that must be integrated and made compatible with precarious and unstable happiness. For Kant, considering the human being as not only a means but also an end-in-itself as a member of the kingdom of ends, as capable of self-determination and as a subject which, along with value, also has dignity, suffering deriving from organisational strategies and policies continues to be malpractice and an example of a lack of ethics. It shall be recalled that one of the formulations of the categorical imperative literally states: "*Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end...*" This formulation, which we axiomatically assume as criteria for morality in all people management, should be used as an ethical impulse to design organisational structures and policies through which personal suffering is minimised.

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