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## Relational styles for solving difficult situations in an employee team

*“Everyone here is different, everyone works differently and how can everything be arranged in order to make everything play? What relations to enter, not only to look for some communication techniques, but to be with these people and to be happy that you are working with them “*

Tomasz, manager, 38 years old,  
participant of the training project.

### 1. Introduction

The statement quoted at the beginning was taken from the work done by the participants of the training, which was conducted in one of the very large Polish corporations. The participants of the training had the task of „writing postcards” illustrating difficult situations at work and relationships that occur during these situations with team members. These reflections prompted us to try to describe whether there is a relatively stable style of relations in the team of employees. For the needs of the study, the term relational style was adopted, characteristic of a situation of varying difficulty. When defining the concept of a relational style, the key context of its occurrence should be taken into account. Obviously it will be a difficult situation, in which the relational style of team members is revealed. W.I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki (1976) introduced the concept of a situation into social sciences. „If people define situations as real, they become real

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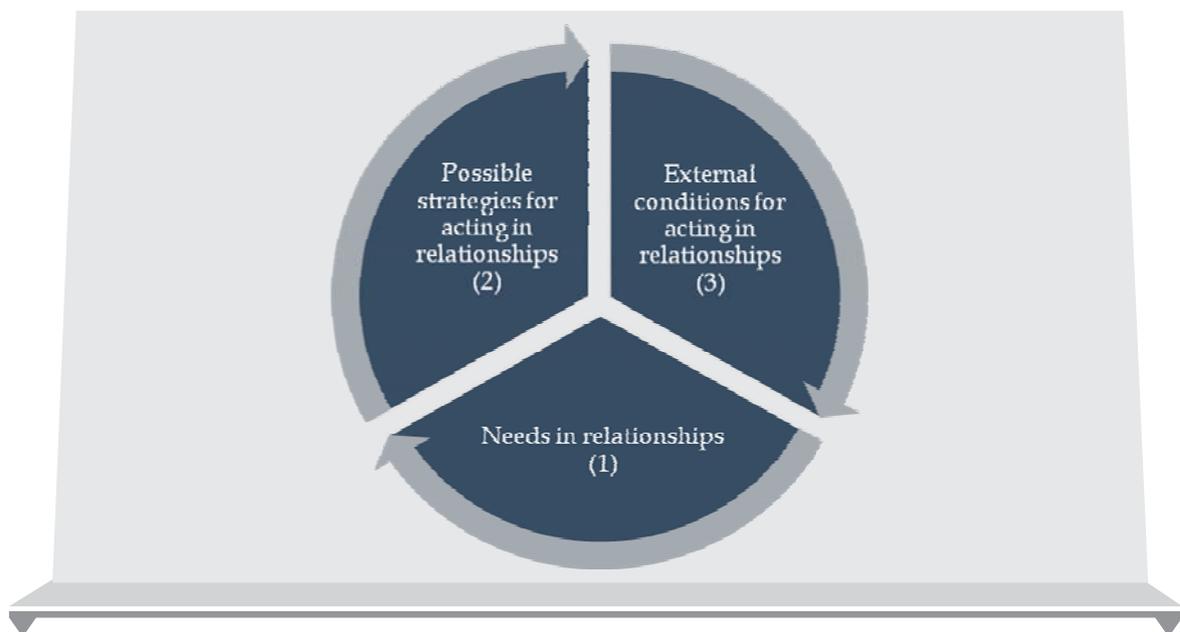
in their consequences" (Thomas, 1928, p. 572). The description of the reality observed from outside is from the point of view of the subject less important than the meaning which they themselves ascribe to it. According to the author „the situation is the outcome of people's reaction not only to the objective characteristics of a situation but mainly to its significance for their development and functioning" (Thomas, 1923, p.42). This subjectively interpreted system of conditions determines the current situation of the individual. The situation in the life of a person „includes ... the elements of the human environment with him, such as they are objectively and objectively reciprocal and such as are perceived by people participating in this situation" (Tomaszewski, 1979, p. 17, 22). This subjectively interpreted system of conditions determines the current situation of the individual. Difficult situations in the literature on the subject have gained many definitions (Tomaszewski, 1982; Kisielnicki, 2008; Simon, 2007; Ścigała, 2013; Tomaszewski, 1975, 1979). According to Tomaszewski, „When the internal balance of a normal situation is impeded in a way that the normal process of the main activity will be deranged and the probability of finishing the task on the normal level will be diminished, then such situation is referred to as difficult" (Tomaszewski, 1975, p. 32). In the works of Tyszkowa, the difficult situation occurs as „a set of tasks (aims), operation conditions and the abilities of the active subject where the balance between the elements has been encroached to the extent that a new coordination is necessary, which causes the regulatory system overload and negative emotions. As a consequence of remaining in the mentioned state, changes in behaviour of an individual transpire. For instance, reorganisation or disorganisation of the goal-oriented activities (Tyszkowa, 1972, p. 20). In the analysis of the specifics of a difficult situation, Łukaszewski outlines its two types considering the limitations of the conditions for performing a task or the deficit in the competences needed to perform it (Łukaszewski, 2015, p. 35).

Referring to the views of various authors, an attempt was made to describe the difficult situation in reference to the research perspective presented in this study.

## **2. The description of a difficult situation with regard to the research perspective**

In the study of relational styles occurring in difficult situations, three basic markers of these situations were adopted. The first relates to the needs in relationships. The second is related to possible strategies of acting in relationships.

The third concerns the operating conditions in which these relationships take place. It is possible to talk about a difficult situation when **the balance between them is violated**. The diagram below presents the view of a difficult situation in the aspect of conducted research. The assessment of the situation as difficult depends to a large extent on the diverse needs in the relations of all participants of the situation, this component was highlighted as the leading one in the diagram below. Another marker of a difficult situation is the assessment of possible strategies of action of the participants of the ongoing relationship (2nd segment). The degree of difficulty of the situation in the assessment of its participants is the result of the assessment of external conditions regulating the relations between the participants, which are expressed in the organizational culture (3rd segment).



**Figure 1. Markers of a difficult situation in an employee team**

Source: own study

The first determinant of a difficult situation in relation to the needs in relationships can be embedded in the continuum between relational closeness related to taking into account the needs of other people and relational distance when the needs of others are not taken into account in relationships. Another determinant is the need for a clear space for action, expressed in the limits of

the proceedings, both conscious and unconscious, which determines behaviours accepted in the team. Situations in which the limits of acceptable behaviours are clearly defined seem to be easier, more readable for participants. The dimension of relational closeness corresponds with empathy. Empathic people have greater ease of entering into close relationships and they quickly see the needs of others. The relational distance, however, is characterized by a greater concentration on one's needs without taking into account the needs of others. For the formation of relationships in a difficult situation, the possible strategies of action are important. The determinants cited in the table describe a different approach to solving a difficult situation, which may be focused on rivalry or on seeking a compromise and striving for cooperation in a team devoid of avoiding threads (Kilmann, Thomas, 1976). A difficult situation occurs in specific realities and in a specific organizational context. The last one is the resultant of values, social norms and the style of team management preferred by the organization, which determine the specificity of the organizational culture.

### **3. The concept of relational style in a difficult situation with regard to the research perspective**

In literature on the subject, there is no definition of a relational style in relation to a difficult situation. Most often it can be found in the pedagogical sciences in the context of forms of work with students. As the relational style, activities focused on the student are defined (Wojewoda, 2003). The aspect related to the significance of relationship at work is vividly seen in psychotherapeutic experience. „Relational dimension of psychotherapy is characterized by emotions and attitudes which are shared by the client and the counsellor, and also their mental bonds (Gelso, Hayes, 2004, p. 15). Among numerous concepts of psychological therapy, the phenomenon of relationship between the therapist and the client is still the subject of research carried out by the specialists in the particular field. In the literature related to the field of human resources management one can observe the distinction in the focus of managers on performing tasks or on keeping optimal relations within the team. This way, as stated by Reddin, the behaviour of a manager focused on working with people includes two opposite tendencies: from making close personal bonds with employees to keeping distance from them. These two approaches characterise the whole of relational style (Reddin, 1970). Diversification of relational styles among work teams is preconditioned by e.g. the specifics of the organisational culture. (Bratnicki 2003; Bratnicki, Dyduch 2002; Dyduch 2005).

Introducing the notion of a relational style, it should be emphasized that it is not only for defining the nature of communication between the subjects of interaction, but extends its definition area, going beyond the boundaries of technical, learned, shaped communication strategies, giving the opportunity to diagnose style components related to the needs of the participants of the relationship, strategies used to solve difficult situations and taking into account the situational contexts of these relationships. Taking into account the above assumptions, we propose the following description of the relational style: *A relational style can be defined as a relatively stable pattern of behaviour of all team relations' subjects, which is revealed in difficult situations caused by a violation of the balance between components of a difficult situation: relations needs, strategies of operation in relations and conditions defining activities in relations.*

In some way, this corresponds to the approach by J. Stankiewicz (1999), according to which the process of communication in the organization is conditioned both by the situation (organizational culture, structure and position of employees, diversification of the organization's image, its goals and their hierarchy) and psychological (motives of employees, self-orientation or others, attitudes and feelings towards other people and organizations; Stankiewicz, 1999). The pursuit of high-quality interpersonal relations between members of the organization (Stankiewicz, 1999, p. 37) is an important component of the relational style that allows to solve difficult situations taking into account the needs and goals of relation subjects in the employees' team. It is important to refer to a situational notion, which presents the behaviour of the individual as a behavioural pattern conditioning adaptation to specific situations (Mischel, 1986). It can therefore be predicted that these patterns of behaviour are extremely revealed in difficult situations, being an adaptive mechanism, which allows to interpret a relational style as a relatively permanent pattern of behaviour characteristic of difficult situations.

On the basis of the proposed definition of a relational style, based on own training experience, it is possible to propose a model of relational styles characteristic of solving difficult situations in employee teams (Figure 2). The concept of Blanchard's leadership (2012) became the inspiration for creating this model, which pointed to the style of the relationship extending from the directives to the supporting behaviours.

On the basis of observations of corporate reality, the relational style was presented using two descriptive dimensions. The first characterizes the need of emotional involvement in relationships in the team: from relational closeness with mutual consideration of the needs of subjects of relationships to the

mutual relational distance between subjects of these relationships. The second dimension reflects the conditions for the implementation of activities defined by the boundaries of acceptable and expected behaviours of the participants of the relationship: from clear and conscious boundaries by participants to the unclear, unconscious and often exceeded requirements in mutual relations. In the latter case, this may lead to the resignation of any boundaries or forceful imposition of relationships by the parties. In the situation of conscious boundaries, the central point becomes the subject participating in the relations. The model of relational styles occurring in difficult situations is illustrated in fig. 2.

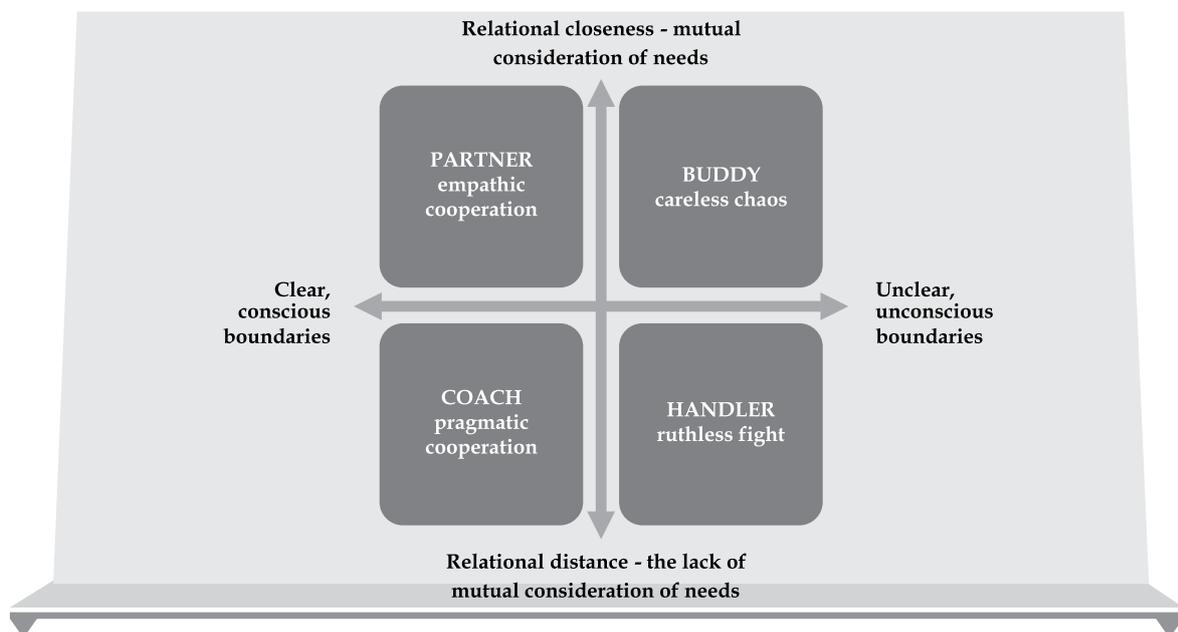


Figure 2. A model of relational styles to solve difficult situations

Source: own study

The **PARTNER** style is characterized by the focus on the other person, on their experiences, emotions and needs, while having the ability to set boundaries in mutual relations. In the partner style, with the clear limits of acceptable behaviour, the subject of the relationship becomes the reference point. Mutual consideration of needs becomes the basis for an equal and empathetic cooperation, characterized by mutual respect, partnership, mutual conduct (exerting mutual influence, without unilateral domination). The strategy of acting in this style can be defined as **empathic cooperation**, determined by the mutual acceptance of the limits of acceptable behaviour

and the tendency to relational closeness taking into account the needs of the other party.

The **COACH** style is characterized by a focus on the task and purpose of the action that the other person undertakes, while being able to set boundaries in this relationship. Setting clear boundaries of acceptable behaviours while maintaining a relational distance causes the situation to become the central point, not the subject of the relationship. The situation is considered in a pragmatic way, the needs of the participants of the relationship cease to be the purpose of mutual relations and can be interpreted instrumentally. The strategy of acting in this style can be described as **pragmatic cooperation**, determined by the acceptance of boundaries with a predominance of relational distance, which makes one of the parties take on the role of the leading person, in this case the trainer.

The **BUDDY** style is characterized by focusing on the other person, on their emotions and needs, while not being able to set clear boundaries of the relationship. Relational closeness combined with unclear boundaries of mutual relations may lead to a situation in which the boundary of subordination disappears, when all behaviour of subjects of relationships is permissible and allowed. The strategy of acting in this style can be called **careless chaos**, reflecting the continuous crossing of the limits of acceptable behaviour in the pursuit of establishing close relationships in the team.

The **HANDLER** style is characterized by focusing on the task and purpose of the action taken by the other person, at the same time lacking clear boundaries of acceptable behaviours. Relational distance means that each of the parties can take on the role of the person deciding about subordination in these relations, which exacerbates competitive behaviour, strengthens the risk of ruthless competition. The strategy of acting in this style can be referred to the case of **ruthless fight**, determined by the relational distance and the possibility of defining the limits of acceptable behaviours at its own discretion, without taking into account the needs of other participants of the relationship.

The presented model of relational styles in the team of employees was subject to empirical verification during the research conducted among the management staff.

#### 4. Research assumptions and study procedure

The research was of qualitative character (Miles, Huberman, 2000). Quantitative analysis was an illustration of the scale of relational phenomena

in the surveyed company. The aim of the research was the preliminary empirical verification of the proposed relational styles model for solving difficult situations in order to present the possibilities of utilisation of the research outcomes for the design of the strategy of improving practical skills that can be used for solving difficult relational situations that occur during teamwork. The research covered 261 middle and senior managers of one of large corporations in Poland. The research was carried out for two years during the training contract. The article presents the results of relational style research at the training stage, which allowed to diagnose the relational style of managers. Subsequently, after an 8-month training cycle, a complete diagnosis of the relational style was again carried out, the results of which will be presented in the next article.

The research was multi-faceted and multi-stage (Kostera, 2005; Konecki, 2000). The first stage consisted in defining difficult relational situations by training participants who are also a research group.

In agreement with W.I. Thomas, the situation perceived by a person is the effect of subjective interpretation of external conditions. A definition of a difficult situation was sought in the sense of the respondents, as well as determining which situations pose the greatest difficulty in solving them. The respondents had the task of creating the so-called postcards of situations in which they described the context of a difficult situation and, on its basis, made an attempt to define it. At that time, the relational style implemented by the respondents was also specified. Qualification of managers for a particular relational style was based on the following activities:

1. Participatory observation (in the training nomenclature - individual coaching) with the participation of competent judges whose task was to observe the managers in everyday relational situations and categorize their behaviours in relation to a particular relational style. The observation lasted three days during individual coaching, whose aim was to support the managers in the process of leading the team. Each coach (researcher) had an observation sheet where the descriptive assessment of managers' behaviour in difficult situations was made. The first observed paradigm concerned closeness versus distance in everyday relations with the employees, while the second involved the ability of setting boundaries and requirements during the difficult situations.
2. The study with 360-degree method, the results of which allowed to classify the subjects to a particular relational type. Each of the managers was assessed with 360-degree method by employees, superordinates, clients and stakeholders.

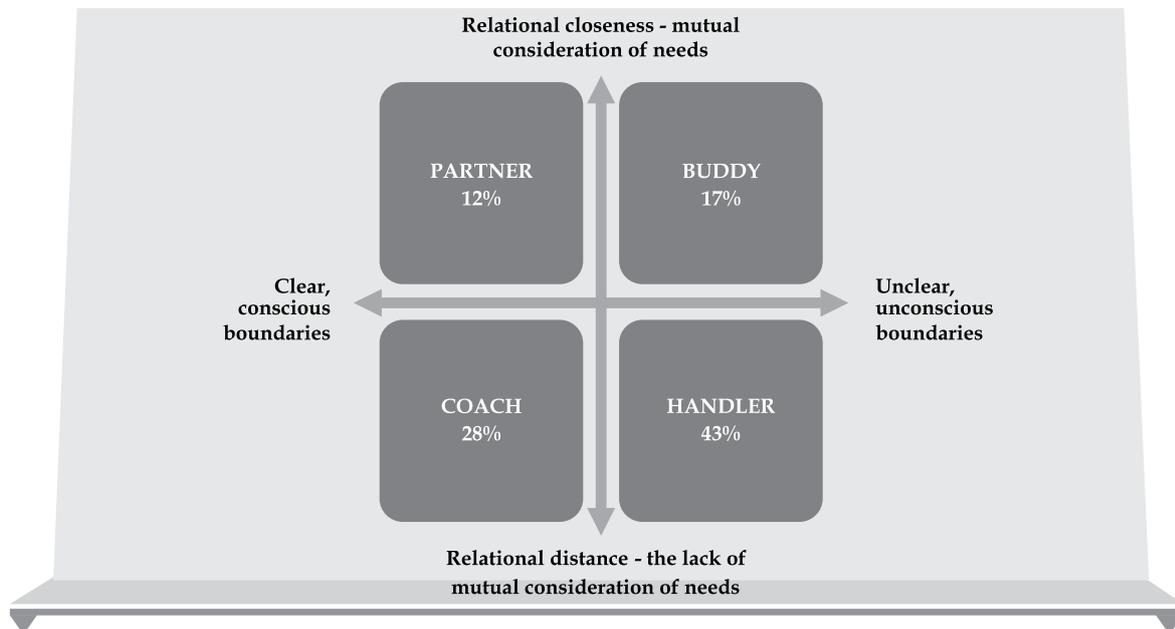
The research was performed by the HR workers of the companies taking part in the study.

3. The use of a survey on the preferred ways to solve a difficult relationship situation among the given 20 sample situations. Depending on the tasks which were done by the managers in their everyday work, a questionnaire was prepared where a variety of difficult situations observed in the space of the organisation were described. Among difficult situations were, for instance, verbal aggression, exerting pressure, employee grading, encouraging to act, solving problems, setting goals for the resisting employee etc. For each situation, a range of solutions were suggested. They were selected to match each of the chosen relational styles. Examples of reactions in the situations involving verbal aggression were such accounts as: "You do not allow for such a form of contact and you do not accept it" (characteristic of handler style). "You embrace the aggressive attack and concentrate on its reason, you try to initiate conversation about the situation and declare readiness to search for solutions to the situation that escalates emotions together" (characteristic of partner style). The subjects of the research tended to choose the most typical behaviour in the situations mentioned above. This allowed them to be qualified to the particular relational style.
4. Interviews conducted with each participant in the study to verify the relational style preferred by the manager. An interview with each of the participating managers was performed at the end of the study. The interview was in the form of a loose talk, during which, the researcher checked if the subject of the study preferred the relational style that had been determined by the three previously described stages. During the interview, three areas of functioning were addressed (closeness or distance in relations, the problem of boundaries and requirements in relations and also operation strategies in difficult situations).

## **5. Research results: Relational styles of managers in difficult situations**

Based on the conducted research using the above-mentioned research techniques, the distribution of relational styles in the group of subjects before the start of the training cycle was established (fig. 3).

The research results indicate that the desired partner style of empathetic team cooperation turned out to be difficult to implement, because 12% of managers can determine the boundaries of the relationship and take into account the needs of another person. Almost half of its management team in the surveyed



**Figure 3. Relational styles of surveyed managers**

Source: own study

corporation (43%) prefers the relational style, whose main motivational tool is the use of penalties and prizes. The situation at work in this relational style is not perceived by the manager as difficult, but as indicating the need for strong employee stimulation through the command system. The conducted interviews showed that the management based on the coaching style is a variation of the task-based style, focused on getting current effects and triggering the “here and now” activity. As a result, the surveyed managers noticed that the employees undertook intensive activities when they were observed by the managers. The buddy relational style characterized 17% of surveyed managers. It was a group of the most dissatisfied participants in the training process. Their frustration resulted from the fact that they were unable to set requirements, often gave up the limits of acceptable behaviour, which led to a decline in the effectiveness of managerial actions and, at the same time, an increase in the sense of inadequacy with the situation. This group included the largest number of people who were not satisfied with their relational style. They were the most motivated group to undertake work on changing the relational style during trainings proposed in the future. The respondents in 28% were qualified for the relational style, which can be described as coaching. They showed great patience in relationships,

they were able to repeat their actions on the team many times, correcting the behaviour of employees. The coaching procedure was revealed in the tendency to maintain a relational distance, which according to the respondents allowed to achieve the assumed effects of work.

## 6. Conclusions

The presented outcomes of the study of four relational styles for solving difficult situations display a low share of the desired partner style in the group of managers taking part in the study (12%).

It indicates the limitations in the skills for integration of the work groups and deficits in the scope of creating the atmosphere of mutual trust between managers and the employees. The atmosphere can be created on condition that there is the awareness and acceptance of the behaviour boundaries by all the subjects in the team relations. The results may indicate the necessity to undertake training activities in order to strengthen the skills of building relations in employee teams, especially in difficult situations, which are of a contextual nature, and their solution depends on taking into account the needs of relations' subjects and realizing boundaries in the team space. Relatively high share of the handler style (43%) among the studied managers seems to prove that the most frequent relations are based on the tasks, scarcely taking into account the needs of other subjects of relations, which in turn leads to setting boundaries and requirements without cognizance of their importance. It disorganises good team atmosphere and objectifies the relations. The results indicate the need to conduct prevention training to strengthen awareness of the impact on the behaviour of employees through the use of techniques related to the ability to determine the boundaries of acceptable behaviours of relationship subjects. The results of distribution of relational styles may be interpreted as the depiction of two main directions for prevention actions: developing partnership within the team simultaneously with the skill of accepting the behavioural boundaries as well as the reduction of the relational distance which induces the intensification of competitive behaviour among the team members. In conclusion, the attempt of empirical verification of relational style allows to diagnose the deficits in the skill of adjusting the use of a particular style to the specifics of a given difficult situation. The specification of the expectations of both parties involved in relationships, strengthen awareness of the importance of meeting the needs of employees and, consequently, improve the organizational culture of work teams.

## Summary

### **Relational styles for solving difficult situations in an employee team**

The article proposes the inclusion of relational styles of managers in difficult situations occurring in an employee team. Four types of relational styles have been distinguished: partner, handler, buddy and coach. The research covered 261 middle and senior managers of one of large corporations in Poland. The research was carried out for two years during the training contract. The article presents the results of relational style research at the training stage, which allowed to diagnose the relational style of the surveyed managers.

**Keywords:** *relational style, difficult situation, boundaries of behaviour, relational closeness, relational distance.*

## Streszczenie

### **Style relacyjne rozwiązywania sytuacji trudnych w zespole pracowniczym**

Artykuł zawiera propozycję ujęcia stylów relacyjnych kierowników w sytuacjach trudnych występujących w zespole pracowniczym. Wyodrębniono cztery rodzaje stylów relacyjnych: Partnerski, Treserski, Kumplowski i Trenerski. Badaniami objęto 261 kierowników średniego i wyższego szczebla jednej z dużych korporacji w Polsce. Badania prowadzono przez dwa lata w trakcie realizowanego kontraktu szkoleniowego. W artykule przedstawiono wyniki badań stylu relacyjnego na etapie przeszkoleniowym, który pozwolił zdiagnozować styl relacyjny badanych kierowników.

## Słowa

**kluczowe:** *styl relacyjny, sytuacja trudna, granice zachowań, bliskość relacyjna, dystans relacyjny.*

## JEL

**Classification:** M 120

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