DIALOGIC LEADERSHIP PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE WORKING LIFE AND INNOVATIVENESS

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Employee participation and workplace innovations have an important role in efforts to move towards a more sustainable working life and improved competitiveness of organisations. The innovativeness of organisations can be increased by extended participation, sharing of knowledge and the motivation of all employees. Our research programme aims to create an overall framework of dialogic leadership that enhances the promotion of innovativeness in Finnish workplaces. The programme is carried out by five collaborative research units responsible for five subprojects. The organisations studied come from private service and industry, municipalities, federation of municipalities, civil service and parishes.

Keywords: Sustainable working life, Innovativeness, Employee participation, Dialogic leadership

1   Introduction

Employee participation and workplace innovations have a key role in efforts to proceed towards a more sustainable working life, improved performance and competitiveness of organisations. Innovativeness can be increased by wider employee participation, sharing of knowledge and motivation (Amabile 1988; Leibenstein 1987). Dialogic leadership provides an opportunity to reconcile the needs of organisations and their employees. Its central principles are appreciative interaction, listening and equal participation of different groups of employees in the development of activities (Isaacs 1999). Dialogic leadership increases organisations' capacities for renewal and innovativeness, and simultaneously offers the necessary preconditions for employee wellbeing, skill development and the enhancement of work capability.

This paper presents the *Dialogic leadership promoting innovativeness* research programme (Dinno), which is based on theories of creativity, innovativeness, learning, motivation and leadership (e.g. Amabile 1988; Bass 1999; Deci & Ryan 2000; Isaacs 1999; Wenger 1999; Whitney et al. 2010). The programme creates a multidisciplinary theoretical framework of dialogic leadership to be utilized in promoting workplace innovations. In addition, it combines perspectives at the societal, organisational, workplace and individual levels. The theoretical framework can be used to identify the preconditions, obstacles and catalysts of organisational creativity and innovativeness.

The programme is funded by the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation (Tekes) and collaborative organisations. Tekes funds research on working life with significant novelty and applicable results, and brings together different scientific disciplines.

2   Objectives

The aim of this paper is to introduce the programme to the other Nordic working life researchers and to find potential partners for future cooperation. The paper presents the theoretical framework and themes of the programme, participating organisations and other collaborating partners as well as the scientific profiles of the researchers.

3   Emergence of the research programme

In early 2011, Tekes invited Finnish researchers to participate in workshops and to suggest research topics that should be included under the forthcoming research funding initiative. The initiative aimed to discover out ways in which work organisations could gain sustainable competitive advantage through employee participation and improved competence, creativity and innovativeness. In these workshops, six researchers (the authors) representing several disciplines ascertained a common focus as well as a number of mutually complementary research themes and interests. These ideas were further developed into a multidisciplinary research programme which fitted into the guidelines provided by Tekes for this activity. During the preparatory stage the research team conducted an extensive literature review (Syvänen et al. 2012) and arranged few workshops and meetings in order to carefully design the actual research plan. As a result, the initially rather heterogeneous research team representing different organisations was able to define a common research task, as well as a limited number of mutually complementary special themes for the research programme. In autumn 2011, the programme was granted funding for the years 2012-2014.

4   The key themes and research questions of the research programme

The programme is scientifically coordinated by the University of Tampere, School of Management. It is carried out by five collaborative research units as follows. It is also carried out in close collaboration with the participating subject organisations which represent private service and industry, professional units, municipalities and federations of municipalities, civil service, and parishes. The disciplinary backgrounds of the researchers vary from administrative and social sciences, education, occupational health and safety, organisational economics and psychology to engineering. The researchers have expertise regarding workplace-level action research and developmental activities.

The research data for the programme will be generated by using both quantitative and qualitative methods and methodologies, for example an innovativeness questionnaire, thematic seminars and workshops, thematic (individual and group) interviews, letters and diaries, participatory action research, case studies, reflective conversations, skills surveys and self-assessment of competence. The qualitative materials will be analysed by using, for instance, the methods of narrative content analysis. Alongside the research programme activities a number of more practically oriented workplace development

projects will be carried out with a special focus on dialogic leadership, participatory and creative development methods, performance and quality of working life. The process evaluation data gathered in these projects will be analysed by the researchers.

The main aim of the programme is to analyse *how dialogic leadership can be used to enhance the creativity and innovativeness of organisations*. The research activities are organized into five mutually complementary thematic areas and conducted by research units responsible for them as follows.

The University of Tampere, School of Management is the unit responsible for theme one: **Dialogic leadership, power, responsibility and development, especially in the situations of organisational restructuring and renewal.** The research task is to find out *how dialogic leadership, responsibility and power structures, and development work promote innovativeness.* The analysis focuses on the managing, organizing and coordinating principles, leadership styles and division of labour among superiors as well as on the sharing of responsibilities and duties between them. The preliminary theoretical framework of analysis consists of the following approaches: the X-efficiency theory (Frantz 1990; Leibenstein 1987; Syvänen 2010), dialogic leadership (Isaacs 1999), transformational leadership (e.g. Bass 1999; Burns 1978), appreciative leadership (Whitney et al. 2010) and theories of professional work organisations (Adler et al. 2008; Heckscher & Adler 2006).

The Center for Research on Information, Customer and Innovation Management (CIRCMI) at the University of Tampere is responsible for theme two: **Dialogic and innovative learning spaces, especially in technology-intensive work environments.** The aim is to find out w*hat are the ICT's possibilities, prerequisites and preconditions in promoting these kinds of dialogical learning processes, dialogic leadership and innovativeness?* Technology has changed the ways of working, communicating and knowing in different types of work units. Organisations are actively implementing new ICT-systems and environments because they are believed to increase the effectiveness of interaction and collaboration, workplace learning and work performance (Korpelainen 2011). This trend challenges traditional leadership and management as well as the learning and development processes. The theoretical framework of this study is based on the practice-based approach (Nicholini et al. 2003). The organisations are examined as communities of learning (Tikkamäki 2006) whose main modes of operation are participation (Wenger 1999), knowing (e.g. Blackler 1995), socially supporting (Korczynski 2003) and reflecting (e.g. Raelin 2001). Dialogue is seen as a crucial factor in promoting activity and leadership in communities of learning.

Tampere University of Technology, Centre for Safety Management and Engineering is responsible for theme three: **Dialogic competence and skills of managers in challenging situations.** The research task is to find out *what kind of competence and skills do the managers and supervisors need related to dialogic leadership to promote the creativity and innovativeness of the organisation*. The research focuses on the identification of competencies and skills that promote the expertise, creativity and motivation of the employees, and the creativity of the team. Attention is especially paid to challenging situations (e.g., conflicts, occupational accidents, work-related illness, harassment and malpractices), which may impede the creativity of particular work units.

The theme is based on the componential theory of creativity (Amabile 1988). The organisation's strategy, its resources, perceived work environment, and the minds of the employees who carry out the every-day work are seen as the main organisational factors that influence its creativity and innovativeness (Amabile et al. 1996). The componential theory stresses the significance of the leader's support for the creativeness of subordinates. This support impacts through direct help, the development of subordinates' expertise, and the enhancement of subordinates' intrinsic motivation (see Deci & Ryan 2000, self-determination theory). By developing the dialogic leadership skills of supervisors, the creativity and innovativeness of employees may be improved.

The Finnish Institute of Occupational Health is responsible for theme four: **Management of unconventional career choices in organisations.** The main task is to find out *how organisations have responded to individuals' suggestions to rearrange their responsibilities, to what extent the individuals have been able to reach the objectives of their career shifting plans and how their colleagues and superiors have experienced the effects of the new arrangements.* The research starts from the observation that individualization is a key cultural trend in contemporary societies (Bauman 2001; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Individuals no longer automatically strive towards higher and better paid positions. Many of them refuse promotions or want to downshift to lower-level positions due to, for example, health problems, work pressure, spare time activities, or returning back to original professional activities (Drake 2001; Salzman 1992; Schor 1998). Organisations may gain a lot by responding positively to their employees' unconventional career wishes (e.g. Kaye 2001; Lawler 2011). The research is based on the assumption that a dialogic approach in the handling of unconventional career wishes provides the best means to maximise the positive effects of downshifting within organisations. Positive outcomes can be expected, for example, from the points of view of individuals and their wellbeing, the wider community of employees and of the organisation itself. More flexible and responsive career management can become one part of an overall dynamisation of the activities.

The Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences is responsible for theme five: **Dialogic development methods as sources of creativity and innovativeness.** The research task is to examine two different methods of dialogical development of work community and work processes. One is based on the employees' self-evaluation and the other is based on users' opinions in the developing work. In the first research task, the multidisciplinary development model deals with improvement, quality and small innovations of work and work community. It is based on Loppela's (2004) study. This systematic method, which involves documentation, is a valuable tool in launching the development activity and making it a part of everyday routines. Both the employees and managers are involved in a common dialogue about the things that they choose together to discuss and develop. The preconditions and obstacles of dialogical development will be defined, and the benefits gained will be evaluated both by the employees and by the managers. The second research task focuses on user-centred design, which can be characterised as a co-operation between users and practitioners. It tests different dimensions of participation within working organisations. Especially, the focus is on user participation in the planning, operation and evaluation of services. It hypothesises that dialogue between users and practitioners supports organisational learning**.**

5   Discussion

This paper introduces the new Finnish dialogic leadership research programme, which will be carried out during the years 2012-2014. The theoretical framework is expected to bring notable value added to its realisation. It combines perspectives and concepts of different theories like dialogic leadership, creativity, learning and motivation. To be able to answer the common aim of the programme the applicability of the background theories will be assessed during the programme, and the preliminary theoretical framework will be further developed. The main challenge is to combine the background theories and the viewpoints of the five research themes. Thus, the dialogue within the multidisciplinary research group is vital for succeeding in the research task.

The framework provides good opportunities to understand the main phenomena - dialogic leadership promoting innovativeness - as well as the interrelationships between them from various scientific and theoretical points of view. In addition to innovativeness, the programme strives to promote the sustainability of working life through increased creativity, employee well-being, performance and competitiveness of the organisations. Researchers of working life in other Nordic countries who are interested in similar topics are invited to collaborate with the programme during the course of its realisation.

Acknowledgements

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