Can a systematic participative method for processing workplace survey data enhance organizational communication skills? Experiences from the GodA-project for healthy workplaces

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1. Introduction

Conditions in today’s working life make new approaches necessary in order to limit negative health effects of work and to enhance wellbeing and health at work. Despite rather progressive legislation, a century of labour inspections, and the efforts of thousands of occupational health personnel, still 24 % of the working population in Sweden report to have had work-related disorders during the last twelve months (Swedish Work Environment Authority and Statistics Sweden, 2014). Even if the “elimination approach” partly has succeeded in reducing detrimental factors at work, it is obvious that this is insufficient or inadequate for a working life where key issues for progress are motivation, cooperation and creativity (Aronsson, Gustafsson, & Hakanen, 2009). In order to achieve a sustainable working life, not the least to cope with issues related to the ageing population, it is likely that strategies and actions from different and new angles are needed.

The concept healthy workplace has been defined as an organization that maximizes the integration of worker goals for wellbeing and company objectives for profitability and productivity (Sauter, Lim, & Murphy, 1996). The PATH-model (Grawitch, Gottschalk, & Munz, 2006) shows a synthesis of earlier research in a number of different disciplines and frames how a healthy workplace with wellbeing for the individual along with organizational improvements can be achieved. The model suggests five general categories of healthy workplace practices: work-life balance, employee growth and development, health and safety, recognition, and employee involvement. In order for these workplace practices to have an influence on the employees and the organizational outcomes the effectiveness of communication within the organization is crucial as is the alignment of workplace practices with the organizational context. Effective organizational communication in this context means that the management communicates what the organisation offers the employees in order to enable good performance and wellbeing at work as well as that the employees state their needs in order to do a good job. The ongoing GodA-project (a Swedish acronym for good work environments and healthy workplaces) aims at investigating if workplace strategies in line with the PATH-model (Grawitch et al., 2006) lead to better health and wellbeing among the employees as well as organizational improvements. The present study is part of the GodA-project and aims at exploring to which extent the specific “GodA-method” for processing of workplace survey data influences organizational communication skills.

2. Method

The GodA study is a 2-year follow up study with a survey feedback design in three companies with both blue- and white collar workers. One of the companies serves as “intervention-company”, the other two as controls. The project started in 2012 with a pre-project by means of focus groups and individual interviews in order to find out how employees and managers in the three companies describe the concept of a healthy work environment, what contributes to their well-being at work, and how they perceive their own work environment. In 2013 a baseline questionnaire was sent out including items a) based on the results from the pre-study and a comprehensive literature review, and b) well-established questions on health and work environment. The results from the survey were reported back to the companies, which have been processing their results. In spring 2015 another survey wave will be administered. Parallel, data concerning the company’s key indicators and internal development are collected.

Baseline results in the GodA-study showed that the employees considered communication as the most important factor of all for well-being at work. However, the employees also reported that the communication within the companies was not at all at a desired level. Considering that the PATH-model emphasizes internal communication as critical in establishing a healthy workplace, the intervention was designed to enhance communication skills. A method, the “GodA-method”, to process the survey feedback was developed in
collaboration with the “intervention-company”. In short, the baseline results concerning health, and physical- and psychosocial factors at the workplace, as reported by respective working group, were split into nine themes. Each theme was designed small enough to be processed during the groups’ monthly staff meetings. At the meetings the employees discussed today’s theme, first without then together with their supervisor and decided one measurable action to be taken to improve their work environment. The initial discussion without the supervisor was a chosen strategy in order to empower the employees and in an implicit way train communication skills. The intervention has been followed by process evaluation forms and group interviews with employees and supervisors, respectively.

3. Results
Preliminary analyses of the self-evaluation and the interviews showed that the individual groups performed heterogeneous. In some groups the communication skills were well developed from the beginning where as in other groups this was not the case. The degree to which the various working groups actively took actions for improvements seemed to be associated with the closest supervisor’s understanding of the importance of the themes that were discussed and his/her capability to conduct the group meetings. However, it has been reported that some of the “silent participants” have progressively started to take a more active part of the discussions.

As the follow-up has yet to come we have at this moment no results from the survey demonstrating if the communication as a whole has improved or not. These results will be presented at the conference as well as a discussion concerning the feasibility of the GodA-method for improving communication skills.

Keywords: Communication, PATH-model, Work environment, Intervention, Healthy workplace

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References

