The Good Work – an obsolete vision?
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THE HISTORIC ROOTS

From consensus to conflict

The trade union movement has a long tradition of involvement in the technical and organisational development of working life (Johansson 1988), and at the 1971 LO congress they took an important step forward when they introduced work environment and democracy issues into the political agenda. In the report *Demokrati i företagen* (Democracy in Companies) (LO 1971) we can for the first time discern traces of “the good work” concept even if it was not yet formulated. Inspiration came from the socio-technical school and its attempts with autonomous groups in Norway (Thorsrud & Emery 1969).

In the beginning, industrial democracy was organised in cooperation with the Swedish Employer Association (SAF). This cooperation, however, did not work as smoothly as originally thought, a situation that led to the initiative being moved to SAF and its local member companies. The climate worsened as LO began demanding power over the means of production. LO introduced the proposal for the Employee Investment Funds, which would have led to all industrial production becoming employee control and owned.

Employers and the trade union movement took different routes and under the threat of the Employee Investment Funds, SAF developed its own vision under the name *Annorlunda fabriker* (Different kinds of factories) (Aguren & Edgren1979). SAF vision was more focused on technical solutions combined with interesting work roles based on the socio-technical approach. The question of power over the means of production made it impossible to continue cooperation. LO’s largest union, the Swedish Metal Workers’ Union, wanted to push the issue.

The Swedish Metal Workers’ Union takes the initiative . . .

The Swedish Metal Workers’ Union (Metall) formulated its famous concept of “the good work” at its 1985 congress. The report was entitled *Det goda arbetet* (The Good Work) (Metall 1985) and discussed work from many aspects, where the production-technical and work organisational issues were central. Based on this analysis, Metall formulated nine principles for how good work can be attained. These principles constitute “the good work”.

1. Job security.
2. A fair share of production earnings.
3. Co-determination in the company.
4. A work organisation for cooperation.
5. Professional know-how in all work.
6. Training – a part of work.
7. Working hours based on social demands.
8. Equality at the work place.
9. A working environment without risk to health and safety.

If one compares Metall’s “the good work” with the socio-technical approach, it becomes evident that Metall has expanded the perspective from the work place to conditions on the labour market. This can be interpreted as an effect of the existing tension between Metall and the employers. Metall was trying to strengthen its position on the labour market where government regulations are increasingly being challenged. Metall’s formulation of criteria for “the good work” were quickly adopted by the trade union movement as a whole and at the 1991 LO congress, a large congress report was presented under the title, *Det utvecklande arbetet* (The developing work) (LO 1991).

... at the same time as the industrial context changes.

At this time (late 1980s and 1990s) “the good work” meets a new industrial context that is often called Lean Production. Lean is not a new idea. In fact, it has been a guiding star throughout the growth of industrialisation. Adam Smith argued for thrift with manpower in his classic example of needle production (Smith 1776/1976). Frederick Winslow Taylor refined lean production in his article “The Principles of Scientific Management” (Taylor 1913/1972). Industrial production has since then continually been on diet, but its character has varied over time and this variation has been the key for how work has been organised.

During the late 1980s, a relatively drastic shift occurred primarily related to new problems confronted by industry (Helgeson & Johansson 1992) that become visible thru the globalized economy. These were primarily low accessibility in the production system and major quality problems in products. To this point, production technicians had tried to solve problems by investing more, although in too many of these cases the investments had not been profitable enough. Now other solutions were needed based on the more efficient use of existing production equipment and at the same time taking advantage of the potential found among skilled labour. Organisation and leadership thus became more important. The new solutions corresponded with trade union demands from the 1970s and early 1980s. The companies not only accepted demands for group work, but also took up the initiative to develop them. Competence development was also introduced as a new element in discussions about a new work organisation. The struggle for industrial democracy was not a real struggle at all, but rather a new type of consensus between companies and unions, a consensus that to some extent included the concept of “the good work”.

A new management discourse

These complicated patterns and to some extent even contradictory trends can also be seen in the rich flora of new management theories spreading across the world during the 1980s and 1990s. The original impulses often came from Japan, but their advocates was American researchers and consultants (Furusten 1996). Supported by a globalized economy this has been compared to a North American crusade to spread management ideas around the world. Below is a summary of the major management concepts (production and organisation models, methods and tools) of the last 15-20 years in an approximate chronological order, as they have appeared in Sweden.
Lean Production (Womack, Jones & Ross 1991) was the first major production concept in Sweden in the 1990s after the Japan euphoria of the 1980s. Its popularity has since risen and fallen, but today (2007) the concept has achieved a renaissance albeit a modified form. The focus is on effective resource management that is achieved with the help of fewer personnel, smaller spaces, shorter processing times, smaller stocks, and fewer suppliers. Continual improvements, (kaizen), and Just in time production are important part of Lean Production. This often means a flow-based layout where machines are either placed in line-like flow groups or in concrete assembly lines, which is becoming more common. Even so, the organisation structure is maintained nearly intact. Personnel are expected to be disciplined, flexible, responsible, multitalented, and be prepared to work overtime. In Sweden, employees are simply called “colleagues”.

The other major concept, Total Quality Management (TQM) (Feigenbaum 1961), is closely related to Lean Production. It has had a similar popularity timeline and is still around, but it is often an integrated module in other concepts. The basis for TQM is that all errors and deviations have basic causes that can be addressed and that preventive quality measures are profitable. The goal is “zero errors”. Working with TQM also means measuring and calculating errors and variations, documenting and standardising of routines and work methods, certification for a quality system, and, above all, focusing on quality and customer value. Six Sigma (McFadden 1993) and Total Productive Maintenance (Nakajima 1988) can be seen as relatives to TQM. Important aspects are participation and commitment in quality work both from management and personnel. The organisational form promoted by TQM is a group-based organisation where the supervising role of managers is toned down, teamwork is emphasised, and walls between sections are removed.

Another major trend in the 1990s was Time Based Management (TBM) (Stalk & Hout 1990). This is the concept that is based most on reducing through times. It has major aspects of classical capital rationalisation and is time and process oriented. ABB’s T50 project is perhaps the best-known Swedish organisation example. T stands for time and 50 for a 50 per cent reduction in time from order to delivery. The organisation forms that TBM promoted, particularly in Sweden, were objective oriented work teams with good opportunities for learning and competence development.

The concept Business Process Re-engineering (BPR) (Hammer & Champy 1993) came in the mid-1990s and all operations are seen as business processes, activities that create value for a customer. Re-engineering stands for a radical transformation of the entire company and a fundamental new approach. The Boundaryless Organisation (Ashkenas 1995) is a more comprehensive management concept with the central idea to make the company’s borders more porous. The company’s organisation is compared to a living organism where information, resources, ideas, and energy can easily pass through all membranes.

Ideas and thoughts about individual’s learning in work play a central role in all modern management concepts, especially in Learning Organisation (Senge 1990). A common definition of a learning organisation is that it is both an organisation that learns and an organisation that encourages learning among its members. Balanced
Scorecard (Kaplan & Norton 1993) is a tool for objective controlled production that strengthens control and overview and centralisation of relatively detailed information to the upper management. Balanced Scorecard can be seen as a method for managing a flat and integrated organisation. The Individualised Organisation (Ghoshal & Bartlett 1997) is the flattest and most integrated of the modern management concepts. The model is based on the entire company being large and global to take advantage of scale, but each part or unit is to be small and locally based. Corporate Religion (Kunde 1997) is about creating a corporate culture around the business idea and brand. The corporate culture should be so strong that its approaches becoming a religion for the employees. Knowledge Management is a concept that is linked with the learning organisation (Sanchez & Heene 1997). The concept has two purposes or perspectives. First of all, it is a strategy for converting passive knowledge into active that can be stored in databases. Secondly it is a strategy to convert individual knowledge into organisational knowledge.

We can conclude that some management models can in one respect be seen as reactions to each other. Lean Production and Total Quality Management (TQM) are clearly rationalisation and efficiency strategies. Time Based Management is also a capital rationalisation strategy but has a somewhat softer touch. The learning organisation, the boundaryless organisation, and the individualised organisation, however, are almost entirely within the corporate management field and the “social system”. Even current popular models like Lean Production and TQM, which have seen a renaissance, have developed in this direction. Nevertheless, to a great degree, they have the similar concrete content and in many cases very similar normative messages.

The Swedish version of the new management discourse is based on the Boston influences but also by the actual production context in the Swedish industry. Below we will try to capture the main features of the Swedish version of the new management concepts, something we call ‘the Swedish dialect’.

1. **Rational flows.** The major trend is that the physical layout of production is designed based on the product flow, either in liner-like product groups or in conventional assembly lines.

2. **Integrated product groups.** Even work organisations are based on processes and flows. It can be a comprehensive approach in production planning and “mentally” dissolving borders between functions, departments, and units such as corporate culture, business idea, and end customer. But it can also be production-wide systems for communication and knowledge transfer within flows or processes. A more advanced form is concrete mixing and integration of work assignments within respective flows or processes. It can also involve direct geographic and personnel integration between functions within the production organisation. “from order to delivery”. One aspect of this is job rotation The employees should have an overview and knowledge of a large section of the production. This provides greater flexibility in staffing.

3. **Flat organisations.** Another trend that is not as clear is that there are fewer management levels and a more decentralised decision-making. The more advanced forms involve delegating of work assignments and responsibility from middle management and supervisors downward in the organisation to production personnel and autonomous work teams. The production work is controlled by
production goals and action plans. Work supervisors function more as coaches than supervisors. Emphasis on teamwork, communication, and cooperation increase in importance. A common method is objective controlled or autonomous groups with coordinators. Participation, commitment, and creativity are considered important and have clearly highlighted the importance of the individual. The management of the organisation is also focused at the individual (not the collective). Individual salaries and development talks are common ingredients.

4. Learning in work. Knowledge transfer, competence development, and learning at work for production personnel are considered important. It is also a question about changes into a workplace culture that follows developments in the industry, such as new production techniques, new products, and new quality demands.

The international management literature paints a bright and optimistic picture assuming that companies actually implement the current management concept. There are great hopes that modern organisation forms with a high degree of learning and competence development will create work conditions that combat stress and work-related health issues. The concepts of sustainability and healthy organisations are often used in the debate. One can ask if we finally have found the form of “the good work”.

Unfortunately, we must conclude that the picture was not only positive from either the company’s organisations, or the employees’ perspective. Many studies from the 1990s show contradictory findings of the effects of work organisational development. There are successful examples with both good working environments and effective organisations and also positive financial numbers (Vink et.al. 2006). At the same time, a long series of negative tendencies are visible in working life – increased number of people on long-term sick leave and with work-related injuries, burned out personnel, stressed people, and overburdened people (Rasmussen, 1999; Thompson & Warhurst, 1998). Much of Taylorism remains in modern organisational forms and can continue to give the same types of work-related problems (Thompson & Warhurst, 1998).

A new social discourse

The new management discourse naturally has not developed independently from the social discourse. The management discourse’s public sector counterpart is New Public Management (NPM), which has its roots in Margaret Thatcher’s tough restructuring from the late 1970s and early 1980s. NPM involved the deregulation of the public sector and a transition to a more market-like control where a collection of control methods borrowed from industry was used. The effect is not just that the public sector copies the new market management concepts but also those that lead to the concept’s basic structure becoming so dominant that they are internalised in our consciousness. We meet lean thinking in everyday life in an unprecedented way. It’s present in day-care, schools, and health and medical care.

The strong focus on deregulation has also influenced the work environment efforts. Inspired by the quality work being done by industry, particularly standardisation efforts related to ISO9000, the system changed from ensuring the companies have a system for handling their work environment efforts rather than controlling the actual work environment (Johansson, Frick & Johansson 2004). Occupational health has
become a personal activity rather than something to be connected to work and production and to be dealt with during working hours by employers.

**Gender – a forgotten dimension**

When the trade union movement was formed in 1898, it was a movement for men by men (Hirdman 1998). In the 1960s, however, the concept “gender roles” arose and radicalised the entire debate. But when *The Good Work*, was published in 1985, it was only in general terms they described equality between men and women. A few years later, in *The Developing Work*, equality issues were included but primarily in the form of the need to value women’s work higher and nothing about changing fundamental structures on the labour market.

LO’s 1996 congress, however, saw a new trend. The congress agreed that both class and gender were sources of oppression and this influences how life and work are shaped (LO 2006). Today, ten years later, LO describes itself as a feministic organisation promoting ideas related to equality and gender that are based on gender theory. Equality is highlighted as one of the basic union issues, particularly when it comes to wages, work, and the working environment. And perhaps there is an opening for more radical changes such as quotas.

**WHERE IS “THE GOOD WORK” TODAY?**

*Lean Production dominate the scene*

A summary of developments allows us to conclude that traditionally industry has attempted to achieve efficiency increases in production through distinct division of labour and standardisation of work. Group work and delegated responsibility became concepts unions worked for and which later were achieved as employer rationalisation strategies. During the last decade, however, the assembly line experienced a renaissance in Swedish industry, often labelled “lean”. In conjunction with the assembly line trend came increased demands for taking advantage of the individual’s full resources as part of the production system. These partially contradictory tendencies certainly offer opportunities for both productivity and improvements in the working environment but also pitfalls. There is a need for a new focus in production, a focus on integrating work environment and organisational factors in production development. We will now relate to our discussions of “the good work” and attempt to highlight them against the background of the new industrial and rhetoric context.

1. *Work should be organised at the group level*. We can see a clear trend where the perspective instead is shifted from the group to the individual. The group/team is no longer the smallest planning level for employers. At the same time, the group and group work are central to most of the new management concepts, such as TBM, BPR, and the boundaryless flow organisation, but these stop with a rhetoric that cannot stand up to the drastic rationality of Lean Production.

2. *Work should contain a certain amount of autonomy and personal decision-making*. The picture is contradictory here as well. Nearly all concepts and particularly quality concepts clearly point to delegating responsibility and authority to the work group or individual so that they can make their own decisions about how work is to be planned and organised. At the same time, we see the Lean concept prepare the
ground for the return of the assembly line. The pace of the lines is often not as short as during the heyday of the assembly line, but they are considerably shorter than with group-organised work. Work assignments are standardised and autonomy and one’s own opportunity to make decisions are considerably reduced.

3. **Work should have a certain degree of breadth and variation.** Here we once again see a discrepancy between the rhetoric and the reality. Although most of the concepts speak of expanding work assignments and increasing horizontal and vertical integration, the Lean concept’s dominance and the assembly line’s return are worrisome. Breadth and variation are placed in opposition to standardised, repetitive work.

4. **Work should include development and continual learning.** The management rhetoric emphasises continual competence development, which can be achieved to a certain degree, but the standardised work assignments do not provide any significant opportunity for learning. ISO 9000 and other quality assurance systems are clear examples of this. Even more comprehensive concepts – such as TQM, Six Sigma, Balanced Scorecard and Knowledge Management – contain tools to first collect knowledge and skills from workers and then determine the best work routines. This type of standardisation creates a sense of replaceability and disqualification among workers (Wärvik & Thång, 2003).

5. **Workers should have a good and safe work environment.** The return of the assembly line also creates problems on this level. In general, the more “lean” the production becomes, the greater the risks for one-sided work movements and physical over exertions (Winkel & Neumann 2005).

6. **Work should be secure.** We note changes for the worse in terms of job security insurance while the number of temporary employees has increased. The increased internationalisation has resulted in employment security being less obvious than previously. Production can be moved to low-wage countries on short notice. The increased use of outsourcing companies results in employment security not being linked to the work place in the same way it once was.

7. **Work should organised for both men and women.** At this point we can note a positive change during the last decade. Equality and gender are now on the agenda for both the unions and the employers, but we can still see an obvious discrepancy between rhetoric and practice.

The problems are complex and have many causes. If we compare Metall and LO’s vision of “the good work” with the new management concepts, they converge to a great degree in rhetoric, but diverge in practice. The question is then whether “the good work” is merely an obsolete vision or if it can be recreated and adapted to the new industrial context we are dealing with in the twenty-first century. Our starting point is that this is something that can be done and that must be done, not once and for all but rather as a continual development process.

**THE NEW GOOD WORK.**

The “new good work” has to acknowledge that we live in a new industrial context that creates new prerequisites and new opportunities for development. These can be summarised as three changes to the industrial context. The first change in the industry is the strong focus on **lean production.** Lean production has become a concept that combines and integrates many of the other concepts, but the main purpose is to reduce costs where rational flows are an important component. The other change, which is in
part contrary to the Lean concept, is the efforts to involve the individual’s total competence as a resource in the company’s internal rationalisation work. In contrast to Lean, this involves increased autonomy and increased learning. The third is the globalization that makes the changes irrevocable.

The development towards Lean is neither possible nor desirable to stop. The global market requires a rational production, and we need to find forms of “the good work” that fit into the framework of Lean. A “threat” as well as a “hope” for “the good work”-concept is the individualisation of work. This is built into the new management concepts but is even stronger in the entire social discourse. The individual going before the collective is something that characterises most of society’s sectors. From “the good work” point of view this is a problem. A powerful collective is the guardian for “the good work” while at the same time “the good work” is ensuring that the individual’s learning, competence development, ability to innovate, and creativity become a part of the production system.

The picture we have painted above may seem too pessimistic from “the good work” perspective, but all is not lost. As we have previously noted, forms for “the good work” have to be found within the framework that a Lean-heavy working life and a “New Public Management” characterised society can offer. “The good work” survival is not primarily about finding new criteria for a good work but rather focusing on important demands that can have significant impact and going from general, sweeping formulations to concrete and effective measures. Considering these new conditions we will attempt to formulate some new criteria and reformulate old ones for “the good work”. Our hope is that it will be more focused and in a more direct way lead to concrete results.

1. **The smallest planning level should be the group.** All control is to occur toward the group as an operative unit and all employees are to have control over their own work cycle. This very concrete demand summarised several of the demands for a good work that Metall and LO have put forward. It guarantees a breadth in work while also providing meaningful autonomy. The demand can also be combined with a Lean approach. Even an assembly line can be organised around a group-based organisation even if it does not have the most optimal potential.

2. **Learning includes general/generic knowledge.** The demand for learning in work is supported by both employers and employees. To guarantee development in one’s professional role and inhibit becoming stuck in the demands of a special employer requires a certain degree of generalness in competence development.

3. **Integrated operator maintenance.** Broad work roles are a classic demand that can also be combined with the ideas behind the new production concepts. In addition to operator maintenance, many other work assignments can be integrated, but maintenance is often the most obvious.

4. **“Affirmative action” for underrepresented groups.** Gender equality and integration are on the agenda of both employers and trade unions but not much is happening. At the same time, it has been shown that problems can be solved if the will exists. A careful informal system of “affirmative action” can provide good results.

5. **Systematic work environment efforts.** A working environment without risks for health and safety should be a given at every workplace. Developing the work environment requires an organisation that continually examines which work environment risks exist and ensures they are addressed.
The degree to which these demands will be realised within a ten-year period is a question to follow in future research. By reconnecting with Metall’s strategy from 1985, it is possible to move positions forward, and the employers are probably not going to protest too much. The stage is now set.

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