Strategies for Making Men use Gender Glasses

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Keywords: Gender Equity, Gender Glasses, Employer Branding, Attractive Work

Introduction

This paper is based upon empirical research carried out in collaboration with an engineering enterprise, situated in semi rural area in the middle of Sweden, and a gender project within the Triple Steelix innovation system. The company and the research project share the belief that a workplace will regarded as more attractive by current and potential employees when there is a deeper understanding of gender issues within the organization.

The strategy is based one a combination of the researchers personal reflections from his position as a middle-aged man with theoretical experience as a researcher in the field of gender studies. His driving force was a conviction that a more gender equal work life will contribute to a more sustainable development for individuals, enterprises, and local communities. In accordance, method and theory are combined in a interactive research approach in this project.

Triple Steelix, owned by Jernkotoret\(^1\), is an innovation system and organization

\(^1\) The Swedish Steel Producer’s Association
aiming to - “with steel as a the base – promote increased development and growth in the region of Bergslagen”. Within this mission Triple Steelix runs the project “Gender-Perspective for Attractive Work”, financed by The Swedish Governmental Agency for Innovation Systems (VINNOVA).

**Background**

In December 1979 the Swedish Government adopted the Equal Opportunities Act, the first law regulating gender issues in work life, which came in to force in 1980.

1 § This law has the objective to promote equal rights for women and men in terms of work, employment and other working conditions, and potentiality at work (equality in the workplace).

The act aims to improve women’s conditions, particularly in workplaces. From the start, the idea was that employers should work systematically and proactively to develop plans for increased equality. A written “equal opportunity plan” was required for employers with ten or more employees, was introduced in 1992. Effective from 2010, only workplaces with more than 25 employees need to have an equal opportunity plan.

According to the “National Strategy for Sustainable Development” (2001/02: 172), work for greater equality in society has a high priority, and equal power and influence for women and men, equal rights and opportunities regarding economic and other living conditions are central in public gender policies. The document also stresses that the overall strategy for achieving gender equality and sustainable development is to mainstream gender in all political issues and activities. Also, regional policy makers emphasize the value of proactive efforts to increase equality in the workplace as it is an important factor in sustainable regional development.
The VINNOVA Report “Then what happened?” (VINNOVA 2004), describes a number of national initiatives undertaken since 1950 to increase greater equality. The programs have aimed to change attitudes, but several of them have also been action-oriented, primarily concerning women’s actions.

Over the years, not only national efforts, but also regional, local, and thematic ones, have been made to promote equality. Nowadays it is often a requirement to describe how the publicly funded projects take gender into consideration in all activities. EU-funded projects must describe, as horizontal issues, the impact the project has on the environment, cultural diversity, inclusion, and equality. A requirement which in many cases have been solved by vague promises such like “strive for a balance ...”, but many projects, primarily funded by the ESF², have had a stated goal of greater equality and inclusion.

Sweden is often considered as a country which has succeeded to reach gender equality in work life and family life. Still, the Swedish labor market is highly sex segregated both vertically (organizational position) and horizontally (kind of job). We can also find gender marked work tasks without rational explanation. Thanks to technical equipment very few jobs or tasks require specific physical characteristics or a particular sex. Still, this type of gender segregation remains. Its explanations can be found in deeply rooted traditions as well as in the daily construction of gender.

Being gender equal is widely seen as positive and as an achievement that many businesses want to highlight. However, a close and thorough examination often shows a gap between discourse and practice. Organizations might fulfill the requirements the way they have interpreted them, thus achieving a hygiene level for social acceptance. However, we believe that the proactive integration of gender

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² European Social Fund
mainstreaming has a deeper meaning, and requires an ongoing process which is constantly reviewed. Also, the incitements should go beyond the pursuit of social acceptance: With increased knowledge and understanding the gender equality issue is not, as often perceived, a burden, but an additional parameter to sharpen business development opportunities.

Great changes have taken place both in society and individuals minds regarding the awareness of gender equality since the concept was introduced in the 1960s. Yet, even though both the concepts and the discussion have been updated in the last 50 years, there is far more to wish. Amundsdotter finds that despite the fact that a lot of efforts have been made, Sweden has still not achieved gender equality. There are still a lot of differences between women and men regarding resources, influence, salaries, and career possibilities (Amundsdotter, 2009, p.239, SOU 1998:6).

Different approaches have been tried with various successes to create a more equal and less segregated work. Proposals for more operational efforts for increased gender equality are frequently met with resistance and comments that threaten to take the edge off the drive. Not seldom in recruitment discussions statements similar to “We'd love to employ women, but they do not have the right skills” are heard, without defining the concept of skills.

**Objective**

The objective with this paper is to describe how a male facilitator, in a participatory research approach, uses a combination of reflections based on personal experiences from life as a man, analogies and humor in order to challenge inbuilt opinions to form new conceptions, and to inspire use of gender glasses in an engineering enterprise.
Theory

Action Research

Action and interactive research depend upon knowledge production based on the interaction with practitioners and their contributions. In the mutual exchange between researcher and practitioner the produced knowledge should be of practical relevance and of high scientific standard. Lewin\(^3\) saw researchers’ influence as something productive in the knowledge production process. Interactive research stresses the “joint learning” during a project. Action research takes the process a step forward and is supposed to have a component of action: to support a normative change in some direction. Aagaard and Svensson (2008) stress that action research is not seen as a collection of principles, with distinct theories and methods. Within the scope of action research there are a number of different theories and methods used depending on the context and a more pragmatic perspective through which knowledge and change are created in collaborative action with practitioners. Therefore the researcher cannot assume the traditional position, objectively observing what is happening, s/he can no longer be “a fly on the wall”. Instead, in the capacity of action researcher one has to be aware of how ones presence influences the research. Thus, action and interactive research have a higher degree of participation than traditional feminist and gender research (Gunnarsson 2007).

In her thesis “How can norms about gender be ‘developed’, be made visible and altered?” (2009) Amundsdotter describes that the field of action and interactive research is not constituted as a single distinct theory or method: it is an approach to research and to the role as a researcher. Action research is based on democratic values in which participation is essential. Through dialogue between researchers and practitioners a shared learning will be established. Within the field of action research the researchers and practitioners are aiming to alter the course of events

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\(^3\) Kurt Zadek Lewin, often recognized as the "founder of social psychology"
and create new knowledge from that change.

**Doing Gender**
In social sciences gender refers to the socially constructed roles that a society considers appropriate for men and women. Gender is an active interaction between individuals and has to be seen as a process or relationship. When West and Zimmerman published their article “Doing Gender” (1987) they put the finger on a theme which had occurred in different variations in feminist theory on sex/gender for at least forty years. Doing Gender can be “seen as an ongoing activity and interactive actions that is made between women and men, between men and between women” (2007b, pp. 12). In consequence, a “doing gender” perspective has the consequence that the focus shifts from an individual to an interactive level, and, in the context of this project, wearing “Gender Glasses” means observing workplaces and situations with the sociological definition of gender in mind.

This paper gives some examples from an interaction where the purpose was to put the gender glasses on in order to create insight and knowledge, which hopefully could contribute to positive changes and increased awareness of the importance of gender equality.

**Employer Branding**
Employer Branding, described by Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) as “a targeted, long-term strategy to manage the awareness and perceptions of employees, potential employees, and related stakeholders with regards to a particular firm”, or a process of building “an identifiable and unique employer identity”. Thus, the employer brand puts forth an image showing the organization as a good place to work (Sullivan, 2004).

**Analogy**
Analogy can be used as an eye opener, explaining complex matters, or as a managing strategy common in varying sectors. Analogies to the past, to other firms or industries, and to other competitive settings, like sports or war, come up frequently in strategy discussions (Gavetti, Levinthal, Rivkin, 2005). Coro and
Taylor (2007) promotes the use of analogy when a complex technology is explained as a strategy to get prospects to comprehend a unique offer. In this project, analogies have been used frequently in the interaction with the company, in order to explain why they should integrate gender issues in their company program for change.

**Resistance**

Jeff Hearn states that men benefits from living in a patriarchal society and that it is difficult to identify men’s general interest in gender equality (Hearn 2001). In accordance, men’s practices and attitudes are often an obstacle to women’s equality. On the other hand, Kimmel states, in the article “Why Men Should Support Gender Equity”, that men will gain benefits from a more equal society. He argues that “we need these men to demand parental leave, we need policies that encourage and support it, and we need to change the culture of our organizations to support men taking parental leave – because ONLY when men share housework and child care, can we have the kinds of lives we say we want to have, and ONLY when men share house work and childcare will women be able to balance work and family, be able to have it all. This, it seems to me, is the promise of gender mainstreaming” (2009). He states that feminism is important because it promotes an examination of, not only men, but also of their interactions and the institutions in which men act, an examination which will make men understand these interactions and institutions as organized by power.

**Method**

In order to engage and motivate the employees for the planned interaction a questionnaire about characteristics for an attractive work was presented to the whole staff of the enterprise. It was optional to answer the questionnaire. From the questionnaire it was possible to get a picture of how the employees think about attractive work and how they evaluate their current job. This was a first step in the process, the second was reflective feedback meetings, workshops. When answering
a survey regarding the opinions about one’s work, the individual’s curiosity and thirst for feedback is awoken. The results from the questionnaire were presented in workshops.

The analogical method was used both in the discussion with the manager and during the workshops. For example, the process facilitator asked the attendant if anyone had an answer to why the insurance premium is more expensive for a young male compared to a female of the same age. Usually, often after a joke, someone explained it was due to the higher risk that the young male would get involved in an accident. The analogy will then be connected to the question “who will most often use new technical investments for example an advanced numerical controlled machine”. Most often this analogy provoked a short discussion and gave the workshop participants an opportunity to reflect upon how males often are taken for granted as operators when new technology is introduced.

In order to identify the employees’ opinions on the qualities that contribute to an attractive work, and how they perceive their current job, the interaction began with a questionnaire developed by the research team Theme Work at Dalarna University. The questions are based on a model (Åteg et al., 2004) which describes the qualities of an attractive job. The questionnaire was developed with a "gender neutral" approach and does not address gender dimension. Yet, since the questionnaire proved to be a good starter for discussions of the work situation the project team decided to use it, but with additional questions regarding sex and age.

Another method used in the process was applying anecdotes based on personal life experiences. As a method the facilitator used his own personal experiences from life as a husband, father, and professional in different types of businesses. He explained how he had always considered himself to be a caring father and an understanding husband, but also how he could remember argumentations about parental leave and domestic work versus work in the garden. These were
experiences from a life as gender blind without reflecting upon the masculine norms that set the everyday conditions for most people.

**Interactive Process**

Dellner Couplers AB is an expanding engineering company, which manufactures, sells, and maintains couplers to trains for a global market. The headquarter with corporate management, development department, and production of certain goods is located in a semi rural area 250 km north east of Stockholm. Production facilities are also located in Poland, USA, and China; sales and service organizations are found in several other countries. The annual total turnover for the entire enterprise is close to 100 million USD, and the total amount of employees worldwide is 500 people.

At the plant in Sweden 180 persons are working, 75 % men and 25 % women, and the average age is 40 years. Of the employed women two-thirds are office workers with administrative duties and one third works with production. Of the business management one is a woman and six are men. There are a total of 25 staff in middle management, 21 men and 4 women. The proportion of women in managing position is 19%.

In order to retain, motivate, and recruit staff for future expansion the company expressed a wish to build their employer brand (Backhaus, K., Tikoo, S. 2004) by developing a more equal and attractive work irrespective of gender. Employer Brand was the point of departure of the collaboration between the company and researchers.

Two process leaders have been collaborating with the company’s staff during the autumn of 2009. These are Hanna Westberg (female), associated professor with a long experience from gender research and fieldwork in collaboration with engineering enterprises, and Hans Lundkvist (male), a PhD student who is inexperience’s as a scientific researcher, but has extensive experience from business and project development. Based upon her long experience from feminist
action research the role of Westberg has been to support and guide Lundkvist in his role as a facilitator and PhD student. Lundkvist has had the main responsibility, established the contact and led the workshops. The work done in workshop was actively supported by Westberg.

The collaboration started with an open discussion between the project and the company’s HR manager. The interaction process-plan was jointly developed with regards to both parties’ interests and goals. The plan describing the process was documented as a “Logical Framework” (Chain of Reasoning) describing causality between inputs and outcomes.

The principles for a logical chain can be described with the topics: Effects, Results, Activity and Resources. A group of stakeholders can discuss and describe each step that has to be taken in order to reach the goals. “If we do this the result will be...”, or “In order to get this effect or result, we have to do...”. The structure is visualized as an image, which makes it easy to follow and communicate. The discussion and the scheme will involve everyone and help the group to reach consensus.

In order to describe planned steps of interaction and the management the analogy in the discussions and planning together with the management the process leader used analogies, product brand versus employer brand, as a methodology to describe the planned process and possible outcomes, a method Ullmark recommends for the dialogue between designer and client to create understanding about a planned target image (Hjelm et al, 2007, pp. 27). The visualized logical framework was also used to motivate collaboration and to describe the plan.

After consensus was reached with the HR manager regarding desired processes and methods the collaboration was approved by the company management. The implementation, the anchoring process, continued as the process leader described the project, process steps, aims, and desired results for a group of 20 supervisors at a leadership conference. This gave the supervisors an opportunity to discuss specific questions with the process leader.

Since anchoring is an important step, the HR manager informed the staff about the
planned interaction through the intranet, but also in person at a general assembly, as well as through a special bulletin board. The process started with a questionnaire that all employees were encouraged to answer.

In action research it is important to create arenas for interactions that allow the participants and researchers to share knowledge and experiences (Aagaard 2006, p. 79). Therefore, it was an advantage that 11 of 13 workshops took place outside the company, in a parish house which constituted a neutral area for all involved, and also traditionally a meeting place for thoughts and reflection.

During the fall 2009, 13 workshops with approximately a total of 130 participants participated, divided into groups of between 4 and 22. The composition of the groups was based on the company’s organizational structure. The time allocated for each workshop was three hours.

After the first three events the process team, as a result of the interactive spirit, decided to change the presentation to be more specific and challenging in the discussion of sex and gender construction.

The program, briefly described, was divided into three phases: an introduction phase, a gender perspective phase (construction of gender), and a phase where the results from the survey was presented, disused and action lists were made.

The first phase included a presentation of the two facilitators\(^4\), the project owner Triple Steelix / Jernkontoret and the financier VINNOVA. The participants were also given a brief description of objectives for the enterprise and the project, and what benefits each actor (company/researcher) expected to gain through the collaboration. The interactive approach was also explained, that researcher and participants would develop common knowledge jointly and in dialogue.

Furthermore, the participants were given a description of how the questionnaire had been developed, as well as the methods and tools used during the workshop. The initial phase covered approximately 20 minutes.

\(^4\) Associated professor Hanna Westberg and PhD student Hans Lundkvist
The next step in the workshop was to initiate reflective discussion on the social construction of gender. The goal of this process was to raise an awareness of how gender is created in our daily lives and how this may affect the perceived attractiveness of the workplace.

As discussions of sex and gender often result in feelings of guilt among men who represent the hegemonic masculinity, the facilitator emphasized that this was not the intention of the presentation. The aim was to highlight how gender is created unconsciously in our everyday lives. In order to de-dramatize the discussion, and to create an open, intimate and permissive climate, the facilitator used examples, experiences and reflections from his own life as a man, in combination with selected images of consumer products that exemplify the prevailing gender norm. Depending on the groups’ transparency the facilitator used provocations to start discussions.

The third phase, the presentation of the results from the questionnaire, was divided into three steps. In the first step an overhead picture was both shown on a screen and copies was distributed, describing a graph with the 15 most valued qualities for work to be perceived as attractive. The chart also showed values illustrating how the group appreciated their current job. After a brief explanation the attendants were divided in “beehives” to discuss and write down suggestions for activities aiming to maintain or achieve the prioritized qualities. The discussion was combined with a coffee break.

In the second step, the qualities that had the greatest discrepancy between desired and experienced were presented. The groups were again asked to discuss the result and write down suggestions on what measures they can take to reduce the gap. Phase three was completed by letting the groups discuss a short questionnaire

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5 Images from a study made by Karin Ehrnbergers work, described by Gislén and Harvard, "The intersection of gender and design" (Hjelm et al, 2007, pp. 20).
concerning whether there is a difference in view between men and women about some selected questions.

**Results**

The questionnaire was effective as catalyst, so that employees gathered for a discussion about the construction of gender. It worked as a “battering-ram”, in the same way as the concept of employer brand functioned as a door opener that made the management pay attention to the suggestions to include gender issues in the collaboration on developing more attractive work in the organization.

Whether or not it was because the information had disappeared on the way, lack of interest, or poor communication with nearest supervisors, many of the participants who came to the parish house did not know why they should be there or what the purpose of the workshop was. This created some confusion in a few cases, but it also revealed that such a problem could contribute to the socialization process between facilitators and participants.

A distinct scepticism was noticeable when the gender-related discussions begun. “*Is this some stupid feminist initiative*”, said a male participant spontaneously. Nevertheless, when the pictures were shown everybody focused on the images and the subject suddenly turned less uncomfortable: the reaction was positive, often with spontaneous comments. Also, the provocation and anecdotes the male facilitator gave from his life opened discussions with arguments, both agreeing and disagreeing. Sometimes the discussions got really witty and light-hearted.

An example of discussed topics was whether razors for male and females, in the same price range, have different qualities in the blades, Mach 3 versus Ladyshave, and if so, why? One man insisted that there was a difference and he knew this from his own experience, he used Ladyshave. On another occasion, one man presented an opposite view, also based on self-experience.
With the accomplished relaxed atmosphere, the participants opened up more, and gave both positive and negative examples from the workplace. Still, only on few occasions did these stories relate to gender issues or construction of gender: “... it seemed like the guys get cordless telephones, mobile phones and PowerBooks, no matter if they need it or not...”.

After one workshop, a man approached the researchers about his first summer job back in the 60s: the women had lower wages, despite the tasks being the same. A situation that he considered unfair.

Many participants expressed great appreciation for getting to know the results from the questionnaire and the fact that they got involved in the process, a participation they had not expected. It seems crucial that the company try to maintain this engagement carefully in forthcoming processes.

**Conclusion and discussion**

Since the researchers and most of the participants were unfamiliar with the parish house the choice of location for the workshops offered a neutral arena outside the daily workplace. This reduces possible power relations between the researchers and the participants and between the participants: In short, it produced a good workshop condition for interaction and development of mutual knowledge.

A conclusion from the workshops, at the engineering enterprise, was that discussing gender issues often activate emotions and sometimes even resistance. Still, the resistance was not so strong as first expected. It was interesting to notice that the spontaneous resistance came both from men and women. One explanation can be the long political tradition in Sweden of problematizing gender issues: it is possible that people in general feel exhausted or unconcerned to a certain extent. Remarks as “it is not a problem here/for me/us/... maybe other people or elsewhere...” demonstrate a spontaneous and initial denial, even though it is an issue that concerns everyone more or less.
The method of using analogies, anecdotes and the male facilitator’s personal experiences was productive and added a personal touch to the discussions. An open attitude, sharing personal thoughts, made the gender issue less dramatic and opened up for comments and reflections. It made it possible for the participants to relate to, and join in with examples and reflections from their own lives. This involvement and possibility for formulating the problem is important for a sustainable learning process, just as the personal reflections are. Humor can also be a useful tool that makes resistance turn into engagement and motivation.

The use of pictures from the design field, artifacts with forms and functions challenging daily opinions was another beneficial method, which offered a distance to the individuals’ private spheres. Everybody saw the same pictures, everyone shared a common ground, and no one was singled out or accused. The project illustrates that joint discussions and reflections in groups on neutral ground outside the normal environment can contribute to new and robust knowledge, as Gunnarsson also observes (2007a). The individuals carry with them to their daily work the knowledge produced in this fashion, a knowledge that hopefully will be a foundation for increased awareness of gender constructions which ultimately contributes to long-term change.

Some risks can be observed with the described strategy, e.g. if the contact between the facilitator and the participant is never established, or if the facilitator position him/herself as a “missionary redeeming the crowd” (Tranquist 2008). Depending on the initial distance between the practitioners and the researcher, the interaction rests on unstable pillars, which can easily fall over if the facilitator ignores or fails to perceive the atmosphere and adapt to the participants context. This can be avoided through questions regarding the participants interests, or by bringing up current events. If the introduction fails the chances of mutual respect and participatory discussions will decrease dramatically.
In the examples from the interactions we can clearly see that open opposition towards the workshop changed to interest, when humorous observations were utilized. These observations and examples are also chosen to fit the work-area where the participants are situated. In this way the steel structure of razors can be a way to overcome resistance among those who work in the steel industry. Humor and new patterns of thoughts, sometimes provocative, are also useful tools to turn resistance to motivation. The best example from a provocation leading to a constructive end was the discussion about steel quality in razorblades, something to remember.
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