Managing by Appreciative Leadership to create efficient organizations and healthy co-workers

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Introduction

To be able to meet future demands all organizations have to reconceive: the co-workers and the leaders in the organizations have to allow everyone to constantly and simultaneously both lead and follow (Hock, 2006). To make this possible the work environment has to become more creative in order to support the co-workers in their work to meet future customer demands, (Bäckström et. al, 2011). ‘By emphasizing entrepreneurship, traditional organizations could probably better transform into tomorrow’s more creativity-based organizations’ (ibid p. 194). The leaders in societal entrepreneurship are visionary and engage and mobilize others, and this initiative of the social entrepreneurs can be referred to as the management of the future, (Moe, 2009). Eskildsen, Dahlgaard, and Nørgaard (1999) conclude that there is a need for a change-oriented environment for the co-workers if an organisation wants to achieve business excellence. The creative way of learning could probably be more suitable when organisations work on developing their business towards more experience-oriented and transformational-oriented products or services, an approach which Pine and Gilmour (1999) consider is a necessity to be competitive in the future. How leaders act and behave influences the attitudes and behaviour of the rest of the co-workers, (Schein, 2004). By using Appreciative Leadership the creative potential among the co-workers can be mobilized and turned into positive power (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2010).

According to Yukl (2006), there is an agreement between most behavioural scientists and practitioners that leadership is a real phenomenon which is important for the effectiveness of organizations. If leadership behaviours according to Quality Management are complemented by entrepreneurship and creativity and can generate more competitive organizations in the future, (Bäckström et. al 2011). An unstructured way of learning by asking questions can support the creativity in organizations, (ibid). Another more structured way of asking questions to support creativity and transformation within organizations is the act of formulating and asking appreciative questions, Ludema et al, (2000). This Appreciative Leadership behaviour has emerged from the Appreciative Inquiry approach that ‘suggests that human systems grow and construct their future realities in the direction of what they most persistently, actively and collectively ask questions about’, (ibid.). Appreciative Leadership sets learning and innovation in motion (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2010). Appreciative questions lead to powerful performance and are tools for learning and performance management (ibid).
This form of inquiry is focused on studies where the emphasis has been on studying, learning and changing to the better by using examining ‘a root-cause of success analysis’, rather than looking at the root causes of failure which up until recently has been the most commonly used approach within Quality Management. When focusing on problems instead of possibilities, organizations are prevented from using their full potential which leads to decreased organizational capacity (Whitney Trosten-Bloom, 2010). Leadership that served well in the past seems not to be efficient enough to address the challenges of the twenty-first century (ibid). Appreciative Leadership, which is about harnessing that positive power, addresses those challenges as a leadership approach, (ibid). To meet the challenge the leaders must be aware of and respond to trends defining the social milieus of organizations and communities (ibid).

The purpose is to examine how leaders can manage the philosophy and tool Appreciative Leadership and to examine what effect it can have.

Methodology

The research started with a literature review focussing on the area of Appreciative Leadership. A successful preschool that had been recognized for working with Strange-based Leadership and Appreciative Leadership was then studied with focus on how the leader manages Appreciative Leadership. A chapter in the book ’Den offentliga sektorns entreprenörer – en porträttbok’ (In English: The public sector entrepreneurs - A portrait book), Sundin (2004), was studied. The chapter describes the case of the manager in question. Workshops, interviews, observations and conversations were then held with her, both face-to-face and by telephone, in order to understand how she manages her leadership. Her co-workers participated in the workshops.

The co-workers at the preschool were asked to fill in a questionnaire on the measurement approach which measures health-related Quality Management (Lagrosen et.a. 2011; Bäckström 2009; Lagrosen and Bäckström 2005; Bäckström and Lagrosen, 2007). The measurement approach questionnaire was written earlier and had been tested and evaluated several times (ibid). The approach measures the extent to which the values ‘Leadership Commitment’ and ‘Participation of Everybody’ permeate the organization (Lagrosen et al. 2011; Bäckström 2009). The measurement approach questionnaire was handed out, filled in and collected in one sitting in summer 2009. Each dimension in the measurement approach was constructed by means of three different statements that represent the specific dimensions, (ibid). The respondents were asked to mark on a seven-point scale to what extent they agreed with the statements. This kind of graphical scale is known as an interval scale (Lekvall and Wahlbin, 1993). The scale ranged from “Disagree completely” to “Agree completely”. Another reason for using the measurement approach questionnaire was that it had been used earlier at 8 schools where 139 co-workers had filled it in. This made it possible to compare if the leadership used in the preschool had had any effect. 40 co-workers filled it in, which gives a response rate of 80% as there are 50 employers.

Appreciative Leadership

Appreciative Inquiry is an approach to organizational change which borrows practices from the context of organizational development as it is an invitation to a positive revolution in change, Withney et. al., (2010). The focus is on what is best for the
organization - in the past, present and the future within the Appreciative Inquiry activities, practices and processes (ibid). Bushe, (2007) emphasises the importance of generativity within Appreciative Inquiry, which he believes is both an input and an outcome. Cooperrider and Srivastva, (1987) also maintain that generativity is the core of Appreciative Inquiry. Many other approaches are deficit-based and focus on problems and how to overcome them, Withney et. al., (2010). Appreciative Inquiry is, in contrast to a deficit-based approach, a positive approach for change, (ibid). In Appreciative Inquiry the focus is on generativity instead of problem-solving, (Bushe, 2007). The problems should not be ignored but by focusing on strengths, this approach is more effective, particularly when a transformation of a situation, relationship, organization or a community is wanted, (Withney et. al., 2010). ‘Appreciative Inquiry enables leaders to create natural human organizations – knowledge-rich, strength-based, adaptable learning organizations’, Withney and Trosten-Bloom (2010) p. 19.

Appreciative Leaders are, according to Withney and Trosten-Bloom (2010):

1. Willing to engage with other members of their organization or community to create a better way of doing business or living.
2. Willing to learn and to change.
3. True believers in the power of the positive.
4. Leaders that care about people, often describing the work of their organization or business in terms of helping people learn, grow and develop.

The five core Strategies of Appreciative Leadership are: Inquiry, Illumination, Inclusion, Inspiration and Integrity. Appreciative Leadership is a greater leadership and about positive power (ibid.).

Appreciative Leadership is a philosophy, a way of behaving and a set of strategies that give rise to practices applicable across industries, sectors, and arenas of collaborative action. Appreciative leaders are affirmative by choice; they use positive approaches to create sustainable values, they also more often see the potential in human beings and occasions when other leaders do not, (Withney and Trosten-Bloom, 2010). When appreciative leaders see such a potential they take action and talk with others about it and engage with others, (ibid). In a study of schools Bushe, (2007) found that the best predictor of success in an Appreciative Inquiry project was the quality of school leadership.

**Health related Quality Management**

Bäckström (2009) found that organizations that have achieved healthy co-workers with low sickness absence through their conscious and well-structured work were also working according to Quality Management. Workplace practice include managers giving guidance and taking their time to coach the co-workers so that they dare to prioritize and take decisions by themselves; carrying out regular personal development talks with the co-workers, really listening and trying to find drivers for action, as well as giving everyone the opportunity to be aware of the customer and what their own contribution is: who they are creating value for (ibid). Furthermore, Wreder (2008) found, when studying successful organizations, that leadership in the form of ‘management commitment’ was a supporting value and a prerequisite for Quality Management practices such as employee involvement, delegation and coaching when working with co-worker health. In addition, this is in line with Lagrosen et. al., (2007) and Wreder et al., (2008) who maintain that Quality Management can improve the
health status of the co-workers by bringing in more humane and effective practices and at the same time improving the working conditions. To organize healthier and safer workplaces and achieve excellence in product and service quality the same kind of overarching management system is needed (Warrack and Sinha, 1999). The Quality Management values ‘Leadership Commitment’ and ‘Participation of Everybody’ have been shown to correlate with the co-workers’ perception of their health, (Lagrosen et al., 2010). The underlying dimension of the values ‘Leadership Commitment’ and ‘Participation of Everybody’ regarding the relation to co-worker health was examined by Lagrosen and Bäckström (2005) and Lagrosen et al. (2010). In that study, it was pointed out that integrity, presence and communication, empathy and continuity are underlying dimensions of ‘Leadership Commitment’. ‘Development’, ‘Being Informed’ and ‘Influence’ were found to be the underlying dimensions of the value ‘Participation of Everybody’. These dimensions were also found to be established methodologies, values and practices in successful organizations that have achieved good workplace health and efficiency, (Bäckström, 2009). With these underlying dimensions a measurement approach was developed, in order to help managers examine to what extent the values ‘Leadership Commitment’ and ‘Participation of Everybody’ permeate their organization (Lagrosen et al. 2011).

The case organization

The preschool under study is situated in the town of Norrköping in Sweden. It is actually two preschools (A and B) which are located 1.3 km from each other. At each preschool there are four departments which are each led by one division leader. There are 172 children between 1-5 years old in the two preschools. There are 50 co-workers employed, of whom 44 have permanent positions including eight division leaders and one manager for both preschools. The current manager started as manager at Preschool A in September 1999 and then also at Preschool B in January 2001. When she started at Preschool B 50% of the co-workers were on long-term sick leave. One year after the manager had started all co-workers were back at work except one who had retired.

According to Sundin (2004) the manager convinced the local authority to allow a new way of working with quality. From a analysis based on joy at work and quality she made a workplace analysis. The result was a work- and development plan for the preschool and a description of the improvement work called Life, Joy and Growing Power. This became a source of inspiration to other preschools’ quality work, (ibid.). 2003 the manager wrote a essay called; ‘The dream of the good’ which was a project to accomplish improvement and development within the preschool. This essay and the project was about creating better conditions for children and co-workers who work with children, (ibid.)

Leadership within the case organization

The leader describes herself as a positive, driving person, Sundin (2004). The leader believes that she can rapidly transform theory into visible action in her preschools. She looks for possibilities and applies them in her own way. She believes that she finds it easy to engage and arouse enthusiasm among her co-workers and make them work for the creation of a good workplace with good work structures. She also says that she never gives up, (ibid). In their improvement work and in everything they read, they ask
each other questions. How is it? How do we want it to be? How can we create that? Who does what and when will it be done and when do we follow up? (Sundin, 2004).

The co-workers describe their leader as a person who is always one step ahead, (Sundin, 2004). They describe her as a glad, positive and a driving person who is good at convincing people and at marketing her preschools. She has a great circle of contacts and does not hesitate to seek for funding outside the community. She has a matter-of-fact manner and is knowledgeable. The co-workers also say that their leader is an inspiration who works for progress and knowledge development keeping the children’s best as her first priority. They think she is a person that acts and never gives up. She gives her co-workers big challenges and creates job satisfaction, (ibid).

The manager manages a sustainable leadership and constantly aspires to have participation from everybody. She gives her co-workers appreciation in different forms and she believes in the act of seeing people’s 'strengths'. Every Friday the eight division leaders and the manager have executive meetings which have an agenda and for which all are prepared. They use learning conversations and give each other seriously committed feedback when they talk. After that, they ask each other more penetrating questions. They continuously conduct workplace meetings, meetings with parents and study tours together for the two preschools. The managers have written several applications to different foundations for money for development and education for the co-workers. On one occasion they received 6 million SEK for education. They have conducted several courses in instant yoga, Life conversation, health promoting activities and the “dream of the good” method. Study trips to other countries have also been carried out. The managers ask their co-workers to “dream of the good” and to write it down when they work with organizational development. Then they work together to realize and implement their dreams. She maintains that courage and wisdom are important ingredients in her leadership as well as never giving up.

**The results from the measuring approach**

The results from the measuring approach are presented in Table 1 together with the mean score from the eight schools in the other project mentioned above as a comparison. The mean score for the two preschools are all over 6 on a seven-point agreement scale which can be considered as high. It can also be observed that Preschool A has higher scores for all dimensions than Preschool B.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Empathy</th>
<th>Presence/Communication</th>
<th>Integrity</th>
<th>Continuity</th>
<th>Development</th>
<th>Influence</th>
<th>Being informed</th>
<th>Health</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preschool B</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>6.31</td>
<td>6.43</td>
<td>6.65</td>
<td>6.33</td>
<td>5.82</td>
<td>5.86</td>
<td>5.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>6.44</strong></td>
<td><strong>6.48</strong></td>
<td><strong>6.63</strong></td>
<td><strong>6.65</strong></td>
<td><strong>6.53</strong></td>
<td><strong>6.33</strong></td>
<td><strong>6.33</strong></td>
<td><strong>6.34</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean score</td>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>5.01</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>4.74</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>5.53</td>
</tr>
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</table>
The comparison with the eight schools confirms that the results from the measuring approach are high. It can also be noted that the co-workers in the preschools perceive that the health-related Quality Management values ‘Leadership Commitment’ and ‘Participation of Everybody’ permeate their organisation. They also think they have good health.

Conclusions

The leadership, the methodologies and behaviour the manager in the preschool is using are not unique or new. Similar leadership methodologies and behaviours have been found in other successful organizations examined (Bäckström, 2009, Harnesk et al., 2005). According to Oakland (2001), it is important that managers believe that co-workers want to achieve, accomplish and influence activity, and that they do not need to be coerced to perform well. The leadership can also be described as an Appractive Leadership since, for example, the four points of a Appreciative Leader, as described by Withney and Trosten-Bloom (2010), can be found in the way the manager conducts her leadership. The leadership style which can be described as an Appreciative Leadership and that the manager at the preschool uses, can be confirmed as leading to good effects on the working environment as all the measured dimensions have a high score. The effect of her sustained leadership can be seen in the higher score at Preschool A which she has managed for more than one year longer than Preschool B.

The creative and visionary leadership that the manager in the case organisation is using has similarities with the initiatives of the social entrepreneurs that Moe (2009) referred to as the management of the future. These managers have used the creative potential among the co-workers which they have mobilized and turned into power in the manner that Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, (2010) have described as Appreciative Leadership. This style of management could probably be used within social entrepreneurship with positive effect.

It would be interesting to carry out further research by interviewing the co-workers and asking them how they perceive the leadership and then comparing that with the description from the leader. Interviews with the eight division leaders would also be very interesting. To examine how and if they had been influenced by the manager and then to examine how they are performing their own leadership. It would also be interesting to examine other leaders who are practicing Appreciative Leadership and to find out how they practice their leadership and what it has resulted in.

References


