Prerequisites for transformative learning at workplaces – a research intervention aiming at integrated autonomy

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Abstract
A research intervention supporting generative leadership made a contribution in the direction of transformative learning when disorienting dilemmas and cognitive conflicts had to be solved.

Introduction
The aim of the paper is to show why a research intervention may or may not lead to transformative learning; it is the prerequisites for transformative learning in working life that is at the fore. In contrast to other studies examining the transformative learning process (Snyder, 2008) this study is not situated within an educational school setting, and it is not exploring the transformation process or the number of participants who were transformed.

The paper is part of a research project, which is still ongoing. The focus of the research project is to illuminate how first line managers, responsible for the daily work activities, can be supported in the task of leading self managing employees and teams in an active way that enhances the individual and collective competence of the employees. The central question is how managers purposely can create possibilities for and influence interactions and relations aiming at integrated autonomy among their employees, this we have labelled generative leadership, following Surie and Hazy (Surie & Hazy, 2006). Integrated autonomy implies that employees have the ability to take on responsibility and make decisions concerning their own work tasks that are in line with the overall aim of the business.

The research intervention included a series of workshops where first line managers were participating, the aim was to strengthen their competence to support integrated autonomy among their employees. Leadership associated with good employee health, among other things also includes an ability to integrate team members to work well together (Nyberg, 2009):

Health promoting leadership was found to include to providing employees with the prerequisites to carry out their work in an independent manner (providing information, power, clarity), to encourage employees to partake in the development of the workplace, to provide support, to inspire employees, to show integrity (justice), and to integrate team members to work well together. (Ibid, p. 81)

In the workshops the managers among other things also got some insights and training in the art of communicating through dialogue (Isaacs, 1993, 1999). Research has found that it is possible to improve the work environment for employees by means of a manager program aiming at improvement of the managers’ psychological insight, which affects aspects of human communication at the workplace (Theorell, Emdad, & et.al., 2001). Research also
point out positive communication in work teams as promoting efficiency (Losada & Heaphy, 2004).

**Theoretical foundation**

The theoretical foundation of the paper is the transformative learning theory (TL), as it has been developed by Jack Mezirow (1991, 2000, 2009) and as it can be interpreted from a constructivist approach to adult learning (Bourgeois, 2002). Since the aim is to investigate why a research intervention may or may not cause transformative learning, we have chosen some core concepts, which we use when analysing the data: disorienting dilemma; cognitive conflict; motivation; and supportive context. Those concepts have been chosen for two reasons, they are profound in learning theory and they make sense in relation to the data itself. The TL theory points at ten steps of transformative learning, some of them are used here, but not all. The reason for this is that the interview data does not contain information on all ten steps.

A disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1991) is seen as the very starting point of a learning process. It is a profound difficulty, often caused by external demands that cannot be ignored, that has to be acted upon and thus is a force for change. The disorienting dilemma creates a state of disequilibrium concerning assumptions earlier taken for granted. In this way a cognitive conflict (Bourgeois, 2002) is awoken and feelings of insecurity follow, with self-examination in relation to the dilemma. The cognitive conflict concerns intra-personal and unpleasant feelings. To be able to deal with the dilemma and the conflict motivation is needed to engage in a learning process (ibid). When learning is experienced as threatening to an identity a person wants to hold on to, motivation will be low to engage in learning. When learning, on the contrary, is considered as deliberating from an identity a person do not want to hold on to, motivation will be high to engage in learning. Fear of change and wishes for change are thus driving intra-personal forces for how to deal with a cognitive conflict (ibid). A supportive context may enhance the possibilities to find ways to critically self-reflect on identity and to find motivation to deal with the cognitive conflict (ibid). A feeling of security in interpersonal relations can support a transitional space where the learner can “overcome her resistance to change” (ibid, p. 147), e.g. such as the workshops referred to here, or as the meetings with employees arranged by the managers at their workplaces.

When following this process of learning new ways of thinking are developed, as a change of the mindset. This change can have an assimilative character if the disorienting dilemma is not experienced as a cognitive conflict, in that case a broadening and deepening of existing ways of understanding is taking place: “The individual incorporates the new information she is confronted with” (ibid, p. 135). But when the cognitive conflict is at hand the change of the mindset has an accommodative character (ibid) of perspective transformation of the frame of reference, consisting of points of view and habits of mind (Mezirow, 2000). Accomodation of old frames of reference trigger new ways of acting, a change in behaviour can be seen. It is only when those new ways of acting are carried out that transformative learning can be asserted: “a reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective” (ibid, p. 22). Also, new ways of acting can be the result of cumulative transformative learning, described as “a progressive sequence of insights resulting in changes in points of view and leading to a transformation in habit of mind” (Mezirow, 2009).
The case and the method
Twenty managers from different lines of business and their employee groups took part in the research project. The employees’ experiences of interaction abilities in their work groups were assessed before and after an intervention where the managers participated in a learning network. The intervention consisted of eight workshops during one year, where the managers met with each other and the researchers once a month. Each workshop consisted of three parts, during three and a half hour. The first hour was devoted for joint reflection on a task that was undertaken since the last time; next some results were presented from the employee assessments, followed by relevant theory and illuminating practices, finally the managers created new tasks for themselves to undertake during the following month. Thus the managers stepwise developed knowledge based on their employees’ self-assessment results concerning their dialogue competence; their integrated autonomy; and the attractiveness of their work. They also got the results concerning communication in their group from an observation of a videotaped meeting, analyzed through a method inspired of the Meta Learning model (Losada & Heaphy, 2004).

This particular study has a qualitative approach; data consists of ten manager interviews along with field notes taken during the workshops by the researchers and reflection notes written by the participating managers, describing their experiences from trying out ways of using what they learned at each workshop. The analysis was done tracing utterances and descriptions of experiences of prerequisites for transformative learning to occur, both for the managers themselves and for their employees, using the core concepts described above as sensitizing concepts. According to Hammersley (1989) “…concepts in the social sciences play a very important role in ‘sensitizing’ us to important aspects of the social world (ibid, p. 159).

Findings and analysis
The findings are tentative at this moment in the research project. However, some conclusions may still be drawn. Below a table consisting of a compilation of the analysis of the data, and a short description of the analysis from each workplace, are presented.

The core concepts are used in the following way: Disorienting dilemma is a profound difficulty; Cognitive conflict is an experience of difficulties to deal with a disorienting dilemma; Motivation concerns the interest to take part in the research intervention, for managers to use the workshops to develop a generative leadership and for employees to develop integrated autonomy at their workplace; Supportive context in the workplace consists of positive communicative habits. The analysis resulted in an interpretation of whether new ways of thinking or acting had occurred, and of what kind of learning had taken place. Assimilative learning is not interpreted as transformative in character while cumulative learning is seen a stepwise transformative experience and accommodative learning as a sudden overwhelming transformative experience.

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2 The ten managers consisted of six women and four men, six of them within the public sector and four of them within the private sector. Ten more interviews remain to be analysed, they are not yet transcribed. The interviews were made some 4 to 6 months after the end of the workshop series.
Table 1. An overview of ten managers who took part in the research intervention and their employees, interpreting prerequisites for transformative learning.

Ass=Assimilative learning; Acc=Accomodative transformative learning; Cum=Cumulative transformative learning.

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Manager 1 and her group of employees had, at the time of the workshops, already faced and acted on an ongoing dilemma through reorganising themselves into self-responsible work teams and holding meetings every week where they openly discussed and supported each other to handle the dilemma. No cognitive conflict seemed to be felt by the manager or the employees at the time of the workshops or interview. The motivation to make use of the research intervention was low, to some degree the manager made use of the exercises in the workshops as a support to continue the process of implementing integrated autonomy among her employees. This we interpret as an assimilative learning process for all of them; the research intervention did not cause transformative learning.

Manager 2 and her employees were facing an ongoing dilemma that continually had to be handled by them. The manager herself did not experience any cognitive conflict since she had worked herself through that earlier, but her employees were in the middle of adjusting to the dilemma. Both the manager and her employees were highly motivated to use the content of the workshops as a support to continue the process of implementing integrated autonomy and they supported each other in this endeavour. Our interpretation is that the manager was
strengthened by the research intervention in her ambition to enhance integrated autonomy among her employees, which caused cumulative transformative learning for herself when it came to acting in new ways and accommodative learning for her employees since they were changing self-conceptions in their ways of thinking and doing.

Manager 3 did not herself experience any dilemma but she placed demands on her employees to strive for integrated autonomy, which especially the older ones experienced as extremely difficult. As a new manager to the group, she caused cognitive conflict among many of her employees. She was highly motivated to use the support offered by the research intervention, using all the exercises she learned to make her employees take responsibility at work in general and to actively participate in meetings with the character of rational discourse. Like in the case of manager 2, our interpretation is that manager 3 also experienced assimilative learning, in developing her conceptions of integrated autonomy, and cumulative transformative learning when it came to learn how to put demands on her employees, who in turn were forced into a process of accommodative transformative learning.

Manager 4 and his employees experienced extreme difficulties, having to reduce the staff. The manager was new in his position and he reorganised work, making demands on the employees to act with integrated autonomy. This was not experienced as a dilemma by the manager himself, but by most of his employees. Just as managers 2 and 3, this manager also experienced support by the research intervention and was highly motivated. Our interpretation is that he caused assimilative learning for himself and accommodative transformative learning among many of his employees; learning, thinking and acting in new ways, transforming their identity at work.

Manager 5 got sight of poor communicative habits and ways of interacting through the assessment data reported in the workshops. Thus her own, more or less vague, feelings that something was wrong were confirmed. This caused her to drive herself and her employees into a cognitive conflict, accepting the disorienting dilemma and self-examining ways of thinking and acting. The manager was highly motivated to use the research intervention to support herself in this undertaking, and she forced her employees as well as herself to develop new ways of thinking and acting in their interaction at the workplace. Together they planned a new course of action and learned to support each other in evolving new positive interaction habits in, what we interpret as, an accommodative transformative learning experience for them all; interaction habits have been changed at the workplace.

Manager 6 experienced a disorienting dilemma as he was newly appointed as first line manager, which was a new experience to him, before he had been a manager at a higher level. The employees, being used to authoritarian managers, were confronted by this new manager who demanded them to take responsibility and act with integrated autonomy. The manager was more or less forced to join the research intervention and had no motivation to use it in relation to his employees. There were no supportive context for change at the workplace and no change in thinking or acting seems to have occurred.

Manager 7 had no dilemma to handle, neither did her employees, and no cognitive conflict existed. Thus there was no need for change in how to think or act. All the same, the manager experienced the workshops as interesting and supportive for her to continue implementing integrated autonomy among her employees. This caused assimilative learning for the manager but did not affect her employees, according to our interpretation. No prerequisites for transformative learning where at hand for anyone.
Manager 8 and his employees experienced a severe disorienting dilemma consisting of cut-downs, and new lean concepts affecting their ways of working. The manager forced his employees to work in a more flexible way, which caused cognitive conflict among them. The manager was strongly motivated in this task and after some time his employees got motivated too, e.g. to develop new competence. To some degree the manager used the research intervention to implement new ways of working. Together with his employees, the manager developed a supportive context at the workplace. Thus the manager developed experiences in handling dilemmas. Our interpretation is that this was done in an assimilative way, confirming already existing ways of thinking and acting. However, most of the employees were forced into an accommodative learning process with the possibility to develop into transformative learning.

Manager 9 had no disorienting dilemma to handle at the time of the workshops. A crisis had recently passed, and even if the employees were not satisfied with the outcome, no trace of a cognitive conflict could be traced in the manager interview. All the same, the manager was motivated to work in the direction of integrated autonomy and made use of the research intervention, and her motivation spread to the employees. Hence our interpretation is that they all experienced an assimilative learning process, but no transformative learning seems to have been developed.

Manager 10 had been dealing with a dilemma of his own since two years, quite similar to the one of manager 6. He forced his employees to work in new, more effective ways, which was a dilemma to them. Both the manager and the employees experienced cognitive conflict. None of them was motivated to change ways of working, but they were forced to. The manager did not have a supportive context while some of his employees were supportive to each other. The manager used the research intervention to some extent, but did not have the time to engage himself very much. All the same, our interpretation is that both the manager and the employees have been experiencing accommodative transformative learning processes, not because of the research intervention but due to the demands put on them from the company.

Conclusion
So, why do a research intervention, aiming at strengthening the competence of first line managers to interact and to support integrated autonomy among their employees, lead or not lead, to transformative learning?
- Necessary conditions for accommodative transformative learning to occur were disorienting dilemmas that also caused cognitive conflict.
- Motivation to make use of the research intervention strengthened the possibilities for accommodative and cumulative transformative learning.
- A supportive context at the workplace strengthened the possibilities for transformative learning, but was not a necessary condition.
- Most managers seem to have experienced an assimilative learning process; they participated in the research intervention because it supported their ambitions as managers. In some cases a high ambition drove them into a cumulative transformative learning experience.
- Accomodative transformative learning was mostly experienced by the employees, according to our interpretation, being challenged by their managers to develop their capacity for integrated autonomy. When managers experienced accommodative transformative learning it was caused by strong personal experiences of cognitive conflict.
A research intervention may lead to transformative learning when the manager and employees have to deal with severe difficulties, and they manage to do so sharing responsibilities and having the strength to engage themselves in the development process at the workplace. External forces towards change or internal inter-relational difficulties, or high motivation to make a change were engines for transformative learning to occur at the workplaces. The stepwise support in the workshops in the direction of generative leadership supported the managers to act firmly and confident towards their employees, pushing them towards integrated autonomy. To manage interaction, theoretical as well as practical skills are needed: the skill to understand human behaviour; the skill to listen and support the employees in their every day work struggles; along with the skill to be a role model and to take a stand when it comes to ways of communicating and interacting that are healthy.

References
Theorell, T., Emdad, R., & et.al. (2001). Employee effects of an educational program for managers at an insurance company. Psychosomatic Medicine, 63, 724-733.