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Prerequisites for a Swedish Trade Union to Administer a Working Environment Program
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Prerequisites for a Swedish Trade Union to Administer a Working Environment Program

A large Swedish trade union in the public sector decided to initiate a national working environment program. The objective was to reduce work related ill-health among public sector employees. Through training sessions, designed to provide the participants with knowledge and skills for initiating new workplace measures, the expected outcome of the program was a decrease in work related ill-health. Nearly 600 trade union members from eight public authorities, all employed at superior management levels, participated in the program activities. To attain scientific legitimacy, a university evaluation centre was assigned to evaluate the program. Joint efforts between practitioners, evaluators and researchers were organized in reference group meetings. A quasi-experimental evaluation approach, including a subobjective design, was applied so as to help determine the extent to which the program attained the expected outcomes. Given the evaluation results, this paper addresses the specific prerequisites for the trade union to administer and improve the original program. The role of the evaluator is revised in relation to the stakeholders’ diverse interests. A general discussion about the ability of a trade union to administer interventions for organizational improvements in the public sector is also provided.

Key words: Union-driven change interventions, program evaluation.

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Prerequisites for a Swedish Trade Union to Administer a Working Environment Program

In 2005, a large Swedish trade union in the public sector initiated a national working environment program. The program primarily aimed at reducing work related ill-health in the public sector. Through training sessions, designed to provide the participants with knowledge and skills for measures at the workplace, a positive outcome was assumed to be attained. 600 trade union members from eight public authorities, all employed at superior management levels, participated in the program activities. The program incorporated training sessions for trade union members at superior management levels at numerous workplaces in eight Swedish public authorities. The workplaces were sampled on the basis of their ill-health rate and their ambitions to participate in joint workplace improvement. As a specific condition for participating in the program, the superior management of the public authorities had to provide the participants positive prerequisites to perform new measures at the workplace. Also, it was considered advantageous that managers and employees from the same workplace participated in the planned activities. As a final point, similar workplaces from the same public authorities were encouraged to participate. The applied program design was assumed to gain interaction between the authorities.

Stakeholder Interests

Main actors of the program are trade union and program sponsors. The trade unions project application was directed to the program sponsors, emphasising the need to strengthen the trade union members’ readiness and capacity to manage stressful work environment conditions. Explicit ambitions to improve the situation for long term sick members by means of providing concrete methods for measures at the workplace were stressed as well. In brief, project idea aimed at:

- **Generating** knowledge on preventive and rehabilitative measures from a perspective of increased health in the public sector
- **Solving** essential problems and needs identified in internal surveys administered by the trade union
- **Applying** to other groups within the trade union and in sectors of society by complementing other working environment programs carried out in similar settings

In surveying the market for consultants and training organizations, new and innovative approaches to traditional working environment issues were accentuated. The program sponsors stressed that a training program should introduce the participants to specific methods necessary for promoting innovative workplace measures. All in all, three training consultants were contracted to carry out the training sessions. The program sponsors general interests cover training and research on health, well-being and rehabilitation with specific focus on white-collar workers, company owners and industrialists. The sponsors primarily provide grants for preventive measures aimed at maintaining company owner’s ability to work and reducing the society’s costs from ill-health. The current work environment program could also be seen as a way to achieve an ambition of Swedish public office to reduce the national absence figures due to ill-health.
The Evaluation Design

To attain scientific legitimacy, the program sponsor plus the trade union itself assigned this author’s evaluation centre for assessment of the program and its effects. Joint efforts between practitioners, evaluators and researchers were organized in reference group meetings chaired by the evaluators. The reference group meetings provided advisory guidelines to the evaluation staff. Regarding the field work, a quasi-experimental evaluation approach, including a subobjective design (Mohr, 1994) was applied to determine the extent to which the program had attained the projected outcome. Parallel to Kirkpatrick’s (1977) four level approach to evaluation of training effects, the current evaluation design included the criteria of reaction, learning, behaviour and results. Since the relationships among reaction measures and the other three criteria often are small (Goldstein, 1994; 2002), all criteria were considered crucial to include in the design. The relation between central evaluation questions and Kirkpatrick’s four levels of criteria are summarized below:

- Relevance of the working environment program for attaining reduced work related ill-health (the logic and internal consistency of the program theory)
- The participants learning from training sessions and from interaction with other public authorities
- Measures that the participants initiated at work (as a result from training session)
- Effects from initiated measures

The evaluation design also included a method triangulation approach (e.g. Denzin, 1989; Patton, 1987) covering complementary methods for impact analysis. The triangulation of methods served as a means for obtaining confirmation of the findings. Convergence of different perspectives, i.e. the points at which the perspectives converged, was seen as an indicator of real life conditions. Then program theory was reconstructed involving reviews of the basic assumptions of the programs. Summaries of the public authorities’ current status of ill-health were analyzed. After that, a web survey was administered to all program participants and structured interviews with participants were completed. Finally, some workplaces participated in case studies (Yin, 1994) for further analysis of program effects.

Reconstruction of the Program Theory

The reconstruction of the program theory centred on an examination of basic assumption underlying the program and indentified effects. Whether the program activities will attain the outcome of interest is still an empirical question which will be answered in subsequent phases of the evaluation. However, the logic and internal consistency of the program activities and its embedded training sessions were reviewed. Other evaluators (Lipsey & Pollard, 1989; Posavac & Carey, 1997) emphasize the advantages in outlining expected results from program activities. Key features of the current program theory are summarized in Figure 1:

![Figure 1. Reconstructed program theory.](chart.png)
As illustrated in Figure 1, the training sessions along with supportive measures was assumed to provide the participants with sufficient prerequisites (i.e. motivation, capacity and opportunities) to improve their current working situation. Subsequently, the participants’ acquired knowledge and skills was assumed to contribute in strengthening the public authorities’ internal routines. Jointly with succeeding-final supportive measures, the procedures were assumed to contribute to decreased ill-health.

Evaluation Results
A major undertaking of all evaluations is to convert program objectives into measurable outcomes (Lipsey & Cordray, 2000). By describing the logic that connects program activities to subobjectives, the reconstruction process helped identifying and specifying expected outcomes. As basic criteria for impact analysis in this case, all program actions should become a natural part of the sought activity. To acquire sustainable results, all program activities should also be organizationally integrated. That, in turn, required that the participants become empowered to participative in the program activities.

Positive results from the program theory reconstruction show that the form of implementation generated a strong impetus for the participants to become empowered and participative in the program activities. On the negative side, the wide-ranging contents of the training sessions pay minor attention to the public authorities’ specific needs and demands. As a consequence; the training session’s lack of specific activity association will likely weaken the programs likelihood to sustain. Parallel to Lawrence and Lorsch’s (1967) classical idea of integration, it is essential that substantial activity aspects (i.e. working environment, production, economy and quality) are treated with due accuracy. The contents of the training sessions indicate a “pure” work environment focus, implying that minor attention is given to integration. As a consequence, the results might set off increased responsibility for the representatives of the trade union to assist in the participants’ transfer (cf. Baldwin & Ford, 1988) of new knowledge and skills to the activity.

Actions Based on Evaluation Results
As indicated in the preceding section, the first report on evaluation results highlighted strengths and weaknesses embedded in the program. Through the formative evaluation design, the trade union and the financial sponsors were given the proper conditions (ideas, tools and resources) to adjust program activities. Considering the results, selected actions were taken. For instance, dialogues with the superior management authorities were completed, stressing the importance of providing the participants with sound conditions for new measures at the workplace. Essentially, the stakeholders learnt to ensure good evaluation practice, first and foremost by acknowledging the benefits of external independent evaluation. Also, holding preliminary consultations with the involved parties supported a relevant and realistic approach to the evaluation process. This is in concord with national good practice guidelines (cf. UKES, 2003). Later on, however, the readiness of the trade union to deal with the evaluation findings can be contested. The trade union approach using the training agents’ self-evaluations as a basis for further actions can be seen as a way to safeguard and balance for negative and unwanted evaluation results. As anyone would expect, the training agents’ self-evaluations will likely be biased and the validity of the results may be challenged.
Further Reflections and Concluding Remarks

Apart from the specific questions that the evaluation program addresses, the current design is an example of a trade union’s prerequisites for achieving organizational improvement in a public sector service-providing activity. According to Chen (1990) change interventions in organizational contexts usually do not work in a predictable manner, because the subject matter and problems of interest are seldom straightforward. One reason for this might be the low utilization of implementation and evaluation results, which in turn arises from change agents and evaluators often standing in a position of being dependent on the stakeholders (cf. internal evaluators). The dependence often risks colliding with the attitudes of the stakeholders, since a certain amount of political and administrative prestige often is invested in the program realization. Corresponding to that, there is a considerable threat that the outcomes of the evaluation become misrepresented. Given this scenario, benefits from contracting an external independent evaluator become evident. For instance, the prerequisites of the trade union to administer and improve the original program, based on the evaluation results, are facilitated by the fact that the results are presented by an outsider-evaluator.

Is cooperation and change then more difficult to bring about in trade union settings compared to traditional employer-driven interventions? It is reasonable to assume that the employers strive to enhance productivity and continually reduce costs. The role of trade unions is to protect job security and similar member interests. This fact makes interventions for organizational improvement an intricate affair. Given the great costs associated with absence due to ill-health, many Swedish trade unions consider project work and evaluation as being crucial to establishing improved work conditions. What factors drive the employers to support such change activities? A key issue for many companies should be to demonstrate what working environment conditions that need to be modified to attain improvements in aspects of economy, productivity and quality of services. Parallel to accomplished interventions, it is also crucial to evaluate what parts of the program that works and what parts that does not. If the trade union, through structured interventions and designed evaluations, can describe what project conditions that need to be attained before improved working conditions are obtained, the results of an intervention can form an incitement for the employers to prioritize similar programs. The prerequisites for cooperation can then be based on the employers’ self-interest rather than the employers’ benevolence. The stakeholders’ diverse interest generally implies a need for finding a middle ground via negotiation. Still, difficulties can occur when either the employer or the trade union is unable to convince its counterpart of the need for changing a given status quo. Even if initial cooperation does occur, the parties’ inability to integrate change with other strategic processes limits the process of relationship-building and problem-solving, as opposed to sustainable and meaningful cooperation.
References


