

Danish Union of Journalists: Employee driven knowledge sharing

What does this case study demonstrate?

The Danish Union of Journalists is an example showing that knowledge sharing and employee participation can prevent organisational vulnerability. The union has developed learning and reflection practices that make good examples for other workplaces to follow.

Workplace innovation elements: Supporting employee initiative, sharing knowledge, employee involvement.

Context

Danish Union of Journalists (with 17.000 members and 75 employees) is divided into eight geographical districts and a secretariat with administrative units and a group of approximately 25 consultants. Their services consist of guidance, conducting courses and creation of collective agreements. The management structure in the union is flat, and it has always been this way as the organisation started out as a grass-roots movement. Managers, employees and representatives describe the communication between management and employees as very informal.

Cooperation between management and representatives of the works council functions well. The representatives' perspectives are valued: "We speak our minds when there is change. We can raise critical questions that management has forgotten to consider" (Representative).

The employees self-manage and the management group trust their ability to prioritise: "We generally trust the employees to manage their own work. Our job is basically making frameworks and taking care of the employees" (Manager).

Workplace innovation practices

According to the employees, workplace innovation (WPI) and learning practices are important because the organisation will be able to 'absorb' the employees' ideas on how to improve services. The point of sharing knowledge internally is to help the organisation handle challenges. They must be able to adapt quite quickly to the changes in legislation and the Danish labour market in general.

'Internal university': Sharing knowledge with colleagues

The internal university practice was introduced in 2008 by the employees. The point was to strengthen the ability to leverage knowledge internally. At internal university meetings, the employees make presentations of new legislation amendments or changed practices. The internal university is held approximately every other month. The meetings are very employee-driven, although management sometimes suggests some topics. The meetings normally last for half a day.

The introduction of the practice was motivated by two organisational needs:

- 1) Reducing work load for employees: "If I pass my knowledge to others, there will be fewer questions to me".
- 2) General interest. Internal university is an opportunity to discuss interesting cases with others and to disseminate knowledge.

The employees describe the practice as very dynamic and well-functioning. They value their influence, but it is also a practice that can 'die out' when other organisational challenges (such as mergers and the like) are immediate. They could wish for more management commitment.

'60% knowledge': Reducing vulnerability

60% knowledge is another practice related to opportunities for sharing knowledge. Traditionally there have been highly specialised employees in the different departments. It was often hard to 'make ends meet', if there was sickness, absence or planned vacations, and the employee was unavailable: "If I take a blow to the head one day, then all the knowledge disappears" (Employee). The employees in some departments began to train their colleagues to have approximately 60% of each other's knowledge. They created a system of making written guides, for example a description of what to say to union members suffering from work-related stress. The practice has been used during the last 3 years.

'Helicopter meetings': Debating the future

The 'Helicopter meetings' are topic-focused, such as employment policies and priorities in the collective agreements. The management group and relevant consultants participate and the meetings typically last for half a day. Additionally, an annual two-day meeting with all consultants and the management group is conducted. The aim is to discuss how the decisions of the political organs are to be implemented in the coming year. These meetings are extensions of the meeting culture in general and form occasions to 'rise above' the ordinary operational level. The meetings include small 'future workshops' where employees, management and politicians discuss how they can develop the organisation in the future. It has been a common practice for the last 10-12 years.

How did they do it?

The practices' development and implementation is described as an organic process with 'small explosions along the way': "The practices grow from present needs and are developed along the way" (Employee). The employees explain that in general, it is not far from thought to action when it comes to introducing and developing new practices. The crucial success factor is the employees' involvement in the process.

They stress the importance of systemising the practices, by setting dates for 'internal university' into all the calendars and such. Internal university is systematized by a coordinator (a secretary).

The employees believe that management commitment has to be consistent in order to make a successful implementation. Internal university has recently been paused because of a lack of commitment following restructuring challenges for the organisation. There was a focus from management from the start, but then the interest slowly disappeared. If management is less committed then general workload overrules knowledge sharing.

So who benefits?

Employees, managers and representatives agree that sharing of knowledge reduces organisational vulnerability. It is directly related to the ability to deliver the best possible advice to union members. Knowledge sharing increases the ability to work in a flexible way. Recently, the union member satisfaction survey shows that the satisfaction rates have increased. It is clear to the managers that motivated employees deliver good quality products and contribute to improvement of the products. Involvement (in the strategic development of the organisation) is also important to attract the very best employees.

Prognosis

The approach in internal university, where the employees decide form, frequency and themes is strength because it creates employee motivation. However, it is also a weakness because the daily operations can

take over when commitment to the practice is lacking. It could be a management priority to avoid this. Currently, internal university is on hold and the union is considering how to make use of this practice in the future.