DIALOGIC DEVELOPMENT AND LEADERSHIP PROMOTING PRODUCTIVITY, QUALITY OF WORKING LIFE AND LEARNING

Sirpa Syvänen*

University of Tampere, School of Management

Finland

sirpasyvanen@uta.fi

Kaija Loppela

Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences

Finland

kaija.loppela@seamk.fi

Abstract

This paper presents one part of the Dialogic leadership promoting innovativeness research programme (www.dinno.fi) funded by the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation (Tekes). In this article the focus is on the following themes of the Dinno programme: 1) dialogic leadership and development, power, and responsibility (University of Tampere, School of Management) and 2) dialogic development methods (Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences, School of Health Care and Social Sciences). These themes are seen as the sources of performance, well-being, motivation, learning and innovativeness. The research questions are:

1. How do dialogic leadership and cooperative development promote quality of working life and productivity? What are the impacts?
2. How can dialogical development methods support well-being, motivation and organisational learning?

The scientific backgrounds of the researchers are administrative sciences, organisational economics, adult education, psychology and social and health sciences. Theoretical framework of the case studies lies in organisational economic X-efficiency theory and theories of well-being, work capacity, motivation and reflection in learning and developing.

Key Words: democratic dialogue, reflective thinking and learning, motivation, quality of working life, productivity, participatory action research.

Topic Groups: 1. Change management and organisational development, 2. Organisational behaviour, 3. Social sciences and business.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this article the represented case studies are based on the materials gathered in Finnish municipal organisations during the years 2004–2011 in various service sectors such as social and health services (services for the elderly, health centres), sports and recreation, youth services, meals and cleaning services (support services) and central administration. Methodological nature of these research projects is evaluation, development and participatory action research. In the organisations which have participated in these action research case studies, a wide range of structural reforms have been carried out (such as amalgamation, regional cooperation, a local government-owned enterprise, public enterprise, building a team-based organisation, and the purchaser-provider model). The changes focused strongly on vertical cooperation, management systems and structures as well as on the organizational politics, cooperating structures, and information flows.

2. THE THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Principles of dialogic development

According to Alasoini (2005), research has often neglected the ways in which new practices have come in to use. It is important to make sure that employees take part in the creation of new practices and, in this way, commit themselves to using them in future. The willingness and the ability to listen to others (Isaacs, 1999) are increasingly important features of leadership in modern work organisations. Creating security, openness, trust, engagement and motivation, collaboration has a significant impact upon creativity, learning and the emergence of innovations (Syvänen, 2003; Loppela, 2004).

The practice of dialogue is a central part of collaboration and of a constructive culture of communication. People in dialogue strive towards authentic interaction, active participation of all the members of a community, equality between the participants and equal attention is paid, as well as towards practical action and commitments (Ahonen & Pohjanheimo, 2000, 29–33). In dialogical processes, people reflect together on complex questions and problems that are difficult to define; in these processes it is important to listen deeply to the ideas of others and to question one's own views. People participating in dialogues can present different kinds of opinions and defend them. The aim is to find the best possible interpretation, which provides a basis as a ground for decision-making. As a learning strategy, dialogue helps people to find new ideas which they would not necessarily have been able to develop alone. Dialogue provides an opportunity to generate a new and richer understanding about the issues and problems at hand. Such a dialogue can emerge only in groups in which people are equal and trust each other (comp. Gustavsen, 1992; Habermas, 1987). Also, Schein (1988, 166–170) and Isaacs (1999) stressed the significance of authentic listening and empathy in collaborative learning. Reaching mutual understanding enables problem-solving at the same time as it helps a group to develop its members' interactive skills and cooperative relationships (Adler, 1992, 123–124).

2.2. Participatory action research and reflection

The common methodological frame of the case studies is communicative, participatory action research, in which the terms for dialogue formed the principles of democratic dialogue (Gustavsen, 1992). Collegial processes generating meanings, developing problem-solving systems and teaching the ideas of dialogue to the participants are able to improve through

participatory action research and its methods. In this action research, the cooperative development work happens in the cooperative development process (interventions). The main aim of action research is to change ways of acting and to solve problems. The main target is not to develop some new permanent practice but, rather, a practice that is better than the existing one. It is always temporary and lasts until a better way to act is invented. Thus, in action research, a positive result consists of a process that is organised in a new manner and that produces reflectively, a continuous evaluation of goals and activities as well as further development of the existing practices (Heikkinen & Jyrkämä, 1999, 44–45). Process evaluation in action research focuses upon these kinds of issues (Kuula, 1999). There are also features of evaluation research in these case studies. Patton (1996, 192–194) argued that there are many evaluation types in this tradition, for example: development evaluation, in which the evaluator is also involved in planning the development activities, and empowering evaluation, in which the target is to strengthen the autonomy of employees. Then, there may be very strong inside evaluation traditions, in which the participants are the focus of the evaluation. Process evaluation is also a very important way of assessment development.

Reflection means that, in these cases, persons, groups and organisations have the ability to evaluate and question their own thinking and acting. With reflective processes it is possible to evaluate the work, the structures of organisations, and their processes, using investigate and critical way. The challenge for organisations is to connect personal and collective processes in order to evaluate the aims of the acting/working. An another challenge facing organisations is how to maximise the participation of the members of working communities and the utilisation of persons and communities that are learning and developing processes. (Poikela, 1999, 217). The challenge is to integrate reflective thinking processes so they become a natural part of working processes and to legitimise them as a part of everyday working (Boud ym, 2006).

If there is no reflective thinking and learning in workplaces, it is easy to work routinely, without any critical analysis of why we do things as we do, and without questioning whether it is the right or the best way (see also Dewey, 1933; Mezirow, 1995). According to Crossan, Lane and White (1999, 525), organisational learning is a learning process involving an individual, a group and the organisation. From personal, often intuitive, experience, discussion and dialogue should be construed by symbols/metaphors, in the mind of each person and also in workgroups. After that, the knowledge can be generalised. Every level is very important when we want to learn together and create shared organisational knowledge.

2.3. Materials

During the participatory action research activities, various dialogic development and data collecting methods were used. In all development events the principles of democratic dialogue were followed (Gustavsen 1992; Loppela 2004; Kalliola et al. 2008; Syvänen 2008, 2010). The essential requirement was to make a development environment, which was open, confidential and inspiring. The development work was carried out on many different levels and involved various actors (for instance at the province level, between municipalities, between various sectors, professions and teams, and between managers and employees). At the collective and organisational level, the main methods were the questionnaire measuring the quality of working life and productivity, work conferences, multi-professional and representative development groups, the meeting of the working places as well the meetings of the units of organisations and professional groups, mapping of competences, productisation of services, and thematic training sessions.

3. CASE STUDIES

3.1. Case study 1: Research assisted and concept driven organizational economic development model

This study is a continuation of the dissertation research related to local government economicd (Syvänen 2003). Theoretical framework of the dissertation based on the organisational economic X-efficiency theory (further the XE theory, Leibentein 1987). In this research, it was found that a wide range of obstacles and problems negatively affected performance and well-being. Because of these factors were addressed, inefficiency decreased. The problems focused on included the following issues and factors:

Organisation level
- basic tasks: lack of goals; need for clear rules;
- disorganised service system, poorly targeted services;
- climate problems;

Vertical relations
- management and leadership;
- responsibilities and division of labor;
- use of power and subjugation;

Individual level
- lack of commitment and motivation;
- task-centred care and care routines;
- unprofessional work behaviour;
- stress and burnout of employees linked to physical and psychological insecurity;
- mental and physical burden of work;
- problems in self-determination;

The cost effects caused, because of
- division of services into two sectors;
- physical distance between different service units;
- service structures and service chains did not meet the needs of the clients; lack of intermediate services;
- shortage of rehabilitative and preventive services;
- poor co-ordination of working hours and work of different units;
- conflicting ideologies;
- social problems and deficits in conflict management;
- problems of placing and assigning staff;
- strategies of work control for employment;
- challenged individuals, and lack of help and support for them;
- poor financial skills and knowledge, excessive minimisation of costs.

The XE theory combines cooperation, quality of working life, internal efficiency and overall productivity (Leibenstein, 1978, 1987; Syvänen, 2010, 2008). These local, participatory government action research projects offered the opportunity to test and analyse the applicability of the XE theory in municipal organisations and its suitability as an interpretation framework when analysing productivity and the impact of quality of working life on it. The purpose of the case studies represented in this article was to find out the main

factors affecting both well-being and performance. They are also the factors of internal efficiency. The main results of the factors and the effects of productivity and quality of working life analysis, will be presented in the findings section of this article.

3.1.1. Development goals and theoretical framework of the action researches

The main development goals of the action research cases were to improve both overall productivity (e.g. economy, effectiveness, productivity and internal efficiency) and enhance the quality of working life. A theoretical frame of reference was used in managing the research-assisted and concept-driven (Gustavsen, 1996; Syvänen, 1999, 2008, 2010) development work. The phenomena on which cooperative and dialogic development was focused were conceptualised using the XE theory. Theoretical models and assumptions of the XE theory were used especially in broadly conceptualising and understanding the phenomena of productivity, quality of working life, and cooperation, and in formulating the link between them. Therefore, the main themes of the development dialogues emphasised the organisational, group and individual factors of overall productivity and quality of working life.

The XE theory underlines the vertical and horizontal relationships between actors and, at the individual level, the limited rationality of decisions (Simon, 1978), which affects the working effort, working behaviour and interaction of managers as well as employees. Vertical collaboration means interaction and guidance relationships between supervisors and employees, while horizontal relationships comprise group behaviour and cooperation between various workplace communities. In vertical cooperation and interaction, appreciation, feedback, support, autonomy, participation, influencing and information flow are the key factors in improving performance and well-being.

The workplace developers used the XE theory as an interpretation framework to create understanding and to conceptualise the individual, group and community phenomena that emerged at the workplaces. Theoretical frame of reference was also explained to the local actors so that they, too, would understand the cause-and-result relationships at play in overall productivity and quality of working life. The organisational economic framework helped workplace developers with focusing development dialogues on the organisations' social and human systems as significant productivity and welfare factors. The most essential the XE theory model used in these case studies was the service production process model or input-output analysis (Syvänen 1999, 2008, 2010). Please see Figure 1 here.

Figure 1: Location of internal efficiency in the service production process: sources and effects
(Syvänen, 2010).
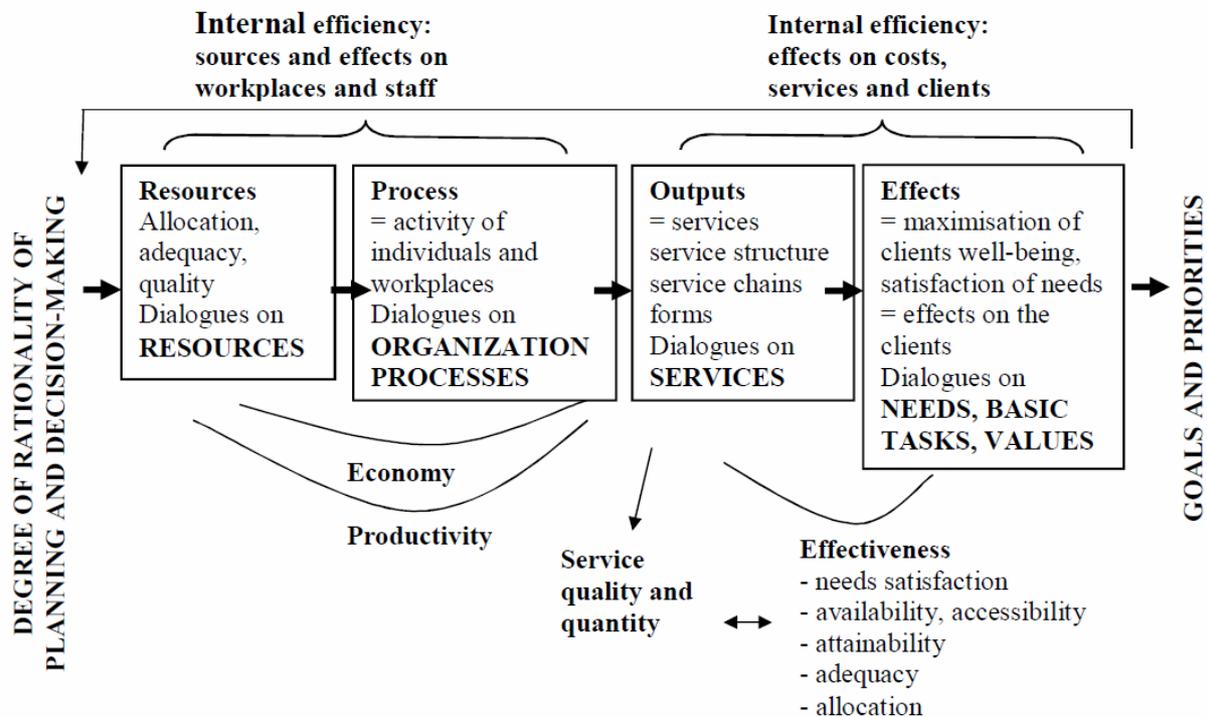
3.1.2. The dialogues on quality of working life, productivity and cooperation

The most important organisational variable of the XE theory is collaboration. It promotes both productivity and quality of working life. Collaboration comprises horizontal and vertical interactive relationships which make up the informal structure of the organisation. According to Leibenstein (1978, 1987), Isaacs (1999), Minzberg (1983) and Clegg (1990), cooperation can be seen as a game between the various parties. In the case study organisations, the rules of the horizontal and vertical games were agreed at the following levels: working places, teams, behaviour at work, behaviour while managing, and interaction. The agreements concerning the rules were quite easy, or very difficult to make, depending on how trusting, transparent and secure the atmosphere of the workplaces were.

At all the development locations, management and leadership were the key development themes. In practice, the questions were about authentic listening by the employees, meaningful participation, the development of a culture of constructive giving and receiving of feedback, as well as a solution-oriented approach towards conflict situations (Isaacs, 1999). According to the quality of working life and productivity questionnaire, the most important areas of need for improvements in leadership related to management styles and customs, and to the employer's responsibilities. In regard to management, the psychological expectations that were insufficiently met were trust, openness, appreciation, justice, fairness, flow of information, opportunities to influence and participate, positive and constructive feedback, and support.

The relationships between the organisation's actors are regulated, on the one hand, by the organisation's values, basic tasks, formal positions, roles, power and responsibility relationships, and the related instructions and models for action and, on the other, by its mutual psychological agreements (Argyris, 1960; Schein, 1988; Rousseau, 1995). The values

of work and the workplace were discussed at all sites, with participants either formulating new ones or updating the old ones. Discussions on values took place at all levels in every organisation, and also in intensive dialogues at the level of each individual. After the values were defined, each workplace defined its basic functions, which were made compatible with the definition of the basic function of services as set down in the strategy for such work. Making individuals think about values and basic functions ensured that they all had to, first, decide about their own values and the basic purpose of their work and then, reconcile these with other people's views. The main effects of these dialogues were that personnel have decided to concentrate on the most essential issues, and one of the case study organisations has begun to use values and basic functions while recruiting new personnel.

Two of the most important collaborative relationships in organisations – interaction between employees and supervisors and related mutual expectations – were also jointly discussed during the development work. Discussing mutual expectations through dialogue led, via open discussion, to an updating of psychological agreements. In all case studies, the mutual expectations of supervisors and employees were analysed in the workplace-level development groups or at the workplaces. Common expectations that managers believed should be mutually accepted were autonomy, division of labour, division of power and responsibilities, approval, justice, appreciation, support and feedback. Employees were also asked to identify the most important features of leadership. They were: to excite, engage in discussion, support and encourage, ensure openness of the information flow, manage rewards, motivate, encourage reliability and build trust. In the process evaluation and the final evaluation, it came out that these discussions made the interaction between employees and managers closer and it helped them become acquainted with each other.

Very important discussions focused on power and responsibilities as well as division of labour took place between managers and employees. There was also a strong need to make agreements and clarify division of labour between various professional groups. Quality of working life had been decreased because of disorganised division of labour. Psychological agreements and the constant process of updating them were addressed in discussions between the various actors, about the 'rules of play.' In the case study organisations discussions about rules were held both vertically and horizontally. Rules were formulated in dialogues between employees and supervisors, and agreement was reached about the principles of workplace behaviour at the level of teams and individuals.

In the development work, many unspoken negative features in organisational cultures that reduced quality of working life and productivity and detracted from the workplace atmosphere were identified. Many of these could well have grown into perpetual problems within a culture of non-intervention, excessive mutual loyalty, non-management and a variety of negative group pressures. By identifying these problems and putting them in the foreground, joint development talks led to serious individual thinking among both employees and supervisors about values and work ethic and, on that basis, to joint discussions on ways to solve the problems. Non-interference at workplaces creates perpetual problems that typically become personalised. Instead of focusing on incorrect workplace behaviour or rule breaking, problems are ascribed to 'difficult people.' Having once been created, a jointly agreed pathway of interference makes it clear to all members of the workplace community, in whatever role, just how they should act if they observe an infringement. This approach ensured the transformation of a culture of non-interference and excessive peer loyalty into a culture of active and early intervention. Many have reported that difficult persons do not want

to work anymore in those workplaces where there is a pathway to interference and rules are binding.

The increased possibilities for the employees to have a say and participate in the development of their own work and work processes led to many advantages: people felt more positive about managing their own work, well-being at work increased at the individual level and the atmosphere at the workplace developed positively. (See Table 1).

Table 1: Results of follow-up research 2012; self-evaluation of the long-term effects of cooperative development (Case Study 1, very good/quite good; effectiveness %)

Evaluated issues	**%**
Quality of working life	100
Productivity	58
Effectiveness	90
Influence and participation	100
Personnel initiative	50
Working conditions	85
Relationships and interaction between managers and employees	90
Flow of information	95
Interaction and climate of work community	100
Motivation	100
Basic functions	100

3.2. Case study 2: Development of the Work Community

3.2.1. Scientific background
Development of the work community based on the employees` self-evaluation and democratic dialogue - in Finnish Keskustellen työkuntoon (Loppela, 2004) - is a multi-disciplinary model of dialogic development targeting work, work places, as well as working capacity and well-being of managers and employees. The model was developed from a study that dealt with the development project carried out at South Ostrobothnia Cooperative Store (32 supermarkets) in the period 1999–2002. The purpose of the research was to create a development model maintaining employees' working capacity. The research task was to explore the factors that employees liked to choose and to develop maintaining their own working capacity and developing the work place. This development model produced several benefits. Positive effects and outcomes were produced, according to the self-assessment by the employees and the managers.

Theoretical framework of the development model combines the perspectives of education, psychology, health sciences and administrative science. Also, methodologically, it combines several research approaches and traditions such as communicative action research, evaluation research and a new approach to learning in working life. The most important theoretical framework lies in well-being and work capacity (Mäkitalo & Palonen, 1994), motivation (Lawler, 1982; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Herzberg, 1968), reflection in learning and tacit knowledge (Dewey, 1933; Mezirow, 1995; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). In this method both the employees and managers are involved in a common dialogue about the issues that they together choose to discuss and develop. In addition to development tasks, they name the more concrete targets, aims and methods. They also plan and decide on the evaluation methods for

the tasks and targets. Also, the preconditions and obstacles of dialogical development will be defined, and the benefits gained will be evaluated both by the employees and the managers. The model also includes evaluation of the effects of the meeting on the community. After the assessment it is possible and usual to set development aims and methods to improve the system of meetings.

The development model is based on democratic dialogue (Gustavsen, 1992; Isaacs, 1999); open discussion on different working conditions, and reflective thinking and learning (individual, group and organisational levels). Reflective thinking and learning mean that alternative approaches to work and action should be addressed, sometimes critically, (see also Dewey, 1933; Mezirow, 1995) from the perspectives of the employees, the companies and the clients. This will result in realistic development aims and ensure a connection to quality management and the companies' operational principles. The dialogue is not possible unless time is allocated for this purpose, and staff meetings are arranged. Tacit knowledge is important in producing common and shared knowledge (see Nonaka & Takeuchi; 1995; Järvinen et al., 2000). It is also essential that, besides top management, middle management and immediate supervisors are seriously committed to the process and that human resources management is appreciated.

Working capacity and well-being are seen as comprehensive, systematic and context-bound phenomena (see also Mäkitalo & Palonen, 1994). Working capacity, well-being and the efficacy of the workplace consist of the following sub-areas: working conditions and health factors; the work community and its social climate; and the employees' resources. They also involve factors which cannot and should not be defined in advance. The model deals with the quality of those interactions and simultaneous development as part of daily work. It is a question of using a systematic method, which involves exact documentation. There is the structured form, on which is written in every development meeting all the things that are picked up, decided and named in the group.

Motivation is a very important factor in innovative development of organisations and in maintenance of well-being and the ability to work. Persons are motivated when, in their work, they experience positive and rewarding external and, especially, internal factors (for example, Lawler, 1982; Deci & Ryan, 1985). The motivation of employees can best be supported by meeting their most fundamental needs, that is, those for competence, autonomy and belonging (Deci & Ryan, 1991, 2000). The management's task is to arrange the working conditions so that the employees have a possibility to develop and to achieve important objectives at the same time as they are directing their efforts towards the organisation's objectives. According to Herzberg (1968), the most important inherent motivators are those such as the work itself, its material outcomes, recognition, acceptance and feedback, responsibility, as well as growth and development.

The basic research development model represented above has been used in several organisations. Between 2004 and 2008 three large projects have been carried out in three sectors of municipal organisations. The findings of those projects are presented below.

3.2.2. Central findings of the case study 2
The results are based on the self-evaluation done by employees and managers at various stages of the projects and analysed by means of content analysis. The employees felt that the aims they set supported their working capacity, their well-being at work and the development

of their work community. This was achieved by means of concrete development undertakings, for example, by changes in working conditions and sharing responsibilities in a new way. For example, some positions of supervisors were removed, or new positions introduced, more effective ways were found to organise the familiarisation of new workers or the introduction of new tasks and equipment to all workers. Efforts were made to focus each one on the tasks of the work position (both workers and managers), develop more open communication and organise the meetings at the workplace in new ways. They commonly chose how to document everything, sharing the new information which was gathered, for example, from continuous education, and thinking/reflecting together about what was to be learned and how to utilise the new knowledge in the work.

The employees also appreciated their own development plans; as such, they felt that their opinions were heard and that they had some control over their own work. Open discussion and mutual agreements were also main factors. The systematic method, which involved documentation, was considered a valuable tool in launching the development activity and making it a part of everyday routines. These factors were considered to increase motivation and job satisfaction. The results also showed that community development positively affected the employees' personal working capacity, their well-being at work and their work motivation. According to the employees, their coping at work had increased, their work had become more meaningful, their job satisfaction and motivation had increased and work-related stress had decreased. All in all, it seems that the maintenance of working capacity and the development of a work community are interrelated in an interactive relationship. Both can be influenced as a part of everyday routines, provided that the activities are based on a systematic model of action.

In the managers´ opinions, it was very good to have the researcher and facilitator, who were objective outsiders to the organisation. They believe that it helped the openness and it trained workers to take into account a larger perspective than they normally would. It has been very important that the one focus has been in development of meetings in workplace. Also, the precise approach to decision-making and evaluation of targets and manners of development in every meeting were important. The systematic documentation has helped the development work significantly. The discussions between different groups of professionals have indeed increased understanding and appreciation of different workers, professionals and people. It has also extended the perspectives and taught everyone to see the larger whole, the big picture and the connections between different organizational factors. Every organisation (both employees and managers) agreed that they would continue to work with this system.

4. FINDINGS

According to both case studies, the main requirements for the successful development processes were the following issues:

1. **Management and leadership:**
   - Principles of participatory management;
   - Genuine commitment of the management;
   - Development discussions between managers and employees;

2. **The feature of the development dialogues:**
   - Good interaction and communication between different participants; employers,

employees, professional groups etc.;

5. Principles of the development dialogues:
- Democratic dialogue, reflective thinking and learning, listening, voicing, respecting, suspending;

3. Trust and commitment:
- Trust among all who are involved;
- Genuine commitment of the employers, managers, professionals and employees;

4. Structures, arenas, resources:
- Development of meeting practices;
- Development of cooperative structures (various workplace meetings; departments, teams, professions;
- Multi-professional groups, appropriate groups (size);
- Enough time for shared development activities;
- Working spaces for mental, social and physical development and learning;

5. Research assisted and concept driven development, participatory action research
- The objective researcher or workplace developer from outside of the organisation:
- Expertise and competence concerning theoretical and methodological frames of reference;
- Creating the arenas and structures for learning; expertise in cooperation, democratic dialogue and dialogic development methods and tools. This positive development could be seen also in the achievement metrics such as those related to personnel, efficiency and quality. People felt that the development work had increased competitiveness. According the self-evaluations in both case studies, the following positive changes and effects were seen:

+ An overall improvement in municipal activities;

+ Awareness of the costs;

+ Cooperative structures: influence, participation, flow of information, community;

+ Change climate, openness, trust, security, justice;

+ Organisational climate, atmosphere;

+ Competences, skills, renewal, learning;

+ Appreciation, motivation, feedback, support, helping others;

+ Commitment;

+ Interaction;

+ Reflection;

=> Quality of working life improved
=> Internal efficiency improved
=> Overall productivity = Effectiveness, quality of services, performance, productivity, economy improved

=> **Sustainable working life and competitiveness improved.**

5. DISCUSSION

The objective of these case studies was to employ democratic dialogue to get individuals to change their own practices in line with agreements and shared principles so as to promote the common values and goals of the whole organisation and not just those that supported one's own ideas or those of one's reference group or peers. Through group reflection, participants gained deeper understanding of their own behaviour and the behaviour of others and of the working methods and the mutual interaction in both horizontal and vertical directions.

Development projects helped organisations in clarifying the management structures, taking all the employees to the real resource of organisational development. These were the solutions leading to real strategic human resource management in those organisations. Increasing employee motivation also produced deeper commitment to the organisation. Together with open discussion and innovative development, these are the main elements to ensure better productivity of organisations and improve the whole quality of working life (see also Syvänen, 2010, 2008; Loppela, 2004)

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