Stream 8: Quality of work in Nordic countries

Challenging management situations in managing occupational health and safety

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Good working conditions and successful occupational health and safety (OHS) management ensure the health and safety of employees, help to maintain their work ability and support the quality of working life and performance. In order to achieve these, the employer's OHS responsibilities and managers' role representing the employer should be emphasized in organizations. Different kinds of challenging situations (e.g., mental or physical overload, work-related illness and injuries, problems of work ability, conflicts, or malpractices) in the work community may impede the well-being and productivity of employees. Employers are responsible for proactive risk assessment and active solving of problems in the work community prescribed by OHS legislation. The objective of this paper is to discuss the challenging OHS management situations that managers encounter. The results are based on thematic interviews and inquiries with line managers in three Finnish public sector service organizations. According to the respondents, the most challenging OHS management situations are related to administration and resources, support for managerial work, giving of feedback, and conflicts due to dysfunctional work community. Both the managers' own competence and resources as well as organizational support have an impact on solving challenging situations successfully. In the future, organizational resources, procedures, and rules for supporting managers should be emphasized.

1 Introduction

Good working conditions and successful occupational health and safety (OHS) management ensure the physical and mental health and safety of employees (e.g. Frick 2003; Gallagher et al. 2001), help to maintain their working capacity and support the quality of working life and performance (Syvänen 2010). In order to achieve these, employer regulatory OHS responsibilities (D 89/391/EEC; L 23.08.2002/738) to continuously improve the working environment, and organizational support for managers should be emphasized (Conchie et al. 2013; Frick 2013). Moreover, managers' own competence, resources and role representing the employer should be emphasized in organizations (Hardison et. al 2014; Tappura & Hämäläinen 2012).

In Europe, the OHS Framework Directive (D 89/391/EEC), as well as further OHS directives, are the foundation of safety and health legislation. In Finland, the Framework Directive has been transposed into the Occupational Safety and Health Act (L 23.8.2002/738) and supplementary regulations. According to the Act (L 23.8.2002/738), employers shall take care of the safety and health of their employees while at work and improve the working environment and conditions accordingly Employers are also responsible for proactive risk assessment and reduction as well as promoting cooperation and active solving of problems in the work community. In recent decades, the organization, management, and nature of work have changed, resulting in emerging OHS risks, such as psychosocial risks (EU-OSHA 2007; Leka et al. 2011, Siegrist et al. 2004). Psychosocial risks threaten employees' health, but also significantly contribute to occupational injuries (Clarke & Cooper 2004). The psychosocial aspects of the work environment are also regulated through the Framework Directive (Bruhn & Frick, 2011), and regulations actually require employers to react to work-related psychosocial risks (Ertel et al. 2008). Ever since, the OHS regulations have put an increasing strain upon employers and the psychosocial working environment.

Recent findings suggest that OHS legislation is not very effective for the management of psychosocial risks (EU-OSHA 2010a; Leka et al. 2011; Natali et al. 2008). Managers often experience psychosocial issues as being difficult and feel their competence inadequate (Tappura &

Hämäläinen 2011; Syvänen 2010). The OHS procedures of an organization should support managers to enable them to focus on the psychosocial risks in their work, since their origin is often at the organizational level (Cox & Griffiths 2005; Idris et al. 2012). Psychosocial risks, such as work-related stress, workplace violence, harassment and bullying, are widely recognized as major challenges to OHS nowadays (EU-OSHA 2007; Eurofound 2010; Leka et al. 2011), and adverse psychosocial work environment may cause inappropriate behavior like bullying and harassment (Law et al. 2011). However, upper management often ignores its legal duty to manage risks and delegates the psychosocial work environment issues to frontline managers, without providing resources or other kind of support (Frick 2013).

Different kinds of challenging OHS situations (e.g., employees' mental or physical overload, work-related illness and injuries, problems of work ability, conflicts, or malpractices) in the work community may impede the well-being and productivity of employees (e.g. Eurofound 2010; Leka et al. 2011; Syvänen 2010). All this also entails enormous costs, which, however, may be decreased by successfully managing OHS risks (Clarke & Cooper 2004). Internationally, the total costs of occupational accidents and work-related diseases have been estimated at around 4% of gross national product (Safety in Numbers 2003). In Finland, the estimated value of work-related OHS costs is 40 billion euros per year (Työterveyslaitos 2013). Work-related stress accounts for a high proportion of sickness absences (Earnshaw & Cooper 2001; European Foundation 2007; Schabracq et al. 1996), and is involved in a large number of accidents at work (Sutherland & Cooper 1991). Developing OHS has a positive influence through, for example, decreased absenteeism and presenteeism, work-related early retirement, and occupational injuries, as well as increased working capacity (e.g. Berger et al. 2012; Clarke & Cooper 2004; DeRango et al. 2003; Hlobil et al. 2007; Sievänen et al. 2013; Yeow & Sen 2003).

A safe, positive, and supportive working environment is also crucial when striving for innovations in products, services, and work processes (e.g. Amabile 1997; George & Zhou 2007). All kinds of conflicts, acts of negligence, problems of work ability, and other kinds of challenging situations in the work community may impede the creativity and productivity of employees (e.g. Amabile et al. 2004; George & Zhou 2007; Syvänen 2010; Tikkamäki & Syvänen 2014). According to Nielsen et al. (2010) review, communication, and a collaborative climate are central elements when struggling to improve the psychosocial work environment.

The objective of this study is to present and discuss the challenging OHS management situations that managers encounter. The study is part of a Finnish multidisciplinary research program called Dialogic leadership promoting innovativeness (Dinno, www.dinno.fi) 2012-2014 funded by the Finnish Funding Agency for Innovation (Tekes). In this study, the focus is on managing OHS when striving for a safe, healthy, creative, and high-performance organization and working environment. Due to the nature of the participating organizations, the psychosocial aspects of OHS management are emphasized.

2 Materials and methods

The research data is based on thematic interviews and qualitative answers to inquiries with top, middle and front-line managers (n = 75) in three Finnish public sector service organizations (a governmental expert organization, a municipal social services and healthcare service unit, and a vocational education organization). Both experienced and novice managers were included. Due to the nature of the organizations, cost-saving pressure had a large impact on resources and work pressure as well.

The main research question is: What kinds of situations and matters related to OHS management do managers feel to be particularly challenging? Qualitative data is analyzed and classified thematically. The results are discussed, and further research needs are suggested. In this study, the focus is on the employer's OHS responsibilities and the managers' role representing employer. The managers' own burden and well-being are not discussed as such, although support for their managerial role helps them to better cope with their own tasks.

3 Results

Different kinds of OHS-related management situations are experienced as being challenging among the respondents, especially when occurring for the first time. According to the respondents, the most challenging management situations related to OHS management are:
-   *Administration of work*, e.g., inadequate resources due to high economic and efficiency pressures, constant changes in the work community, enforcement of organizational rules, operational planning, organizational confusion, and redundancies due to economic cutbacks.
-   *Support for managerial work*, e.g., evaluating, prioritizing and individually tailoring the workload of employees, assessing employees' mental and physical burdens, lack of opportunities for discussion with employees, and lack of organizational support and resources for taking care of employees' well-being.
-   *Feedback*, e.g., giving both positive and constructive feedback, lack of time for giving feedback, providing feedback on shortcomings, errors and inappropriate behavior.
-   *Social interaction*, e.g., supervisory work related to collaboration between employees, inadequate social and interaction skills, changing harmful interaction, and encouraging all employees to actively participate in collaboration and development meetings.
-   *Conflicts*, e.g., due to the co-operation process, changing job descriptions and responsibilities, work overload, inappropriate work behavior, unauthorized absences, non-commitment to work, disciplinary situations, and difficult interrelations in the work community.

Some of the previous issues had been dealt with in previous management training. However, challenging situation is often quite urgent. When such a situation occurs, managers typically look for ad hoc help from their superiors, colleagues, human resource experts, and occupational health and safety experts to manage the situation. The respondents required competence and expected organizational procedures to support them. They also expected emotional support and sharing of experience with their superior and colleagues in a confidential manner. However, in some cases support from their superior was inadequate or missing. This was a major challenge for the managers confronting this kind of situation. The managers did not mention financial support from the upper management, although more resources would have helped them in organizing the work in their area of responsibility.

The respondents pointed out the importance of actively solving problems and that the work community should be open and willing to confront difficult issues and find solutions. According to the managers, they should actively bring up conflicts and discuss them with the work community to clear the air and focus on work.

4 Discussion

This paper presents the most challenging OHS management situations based on managers' experiences in three Finnish public sector service organizations. The issues that are pointed out are important because they have a negative effect on OHS, learning, creativity, performance and quality of working life in organizations (e.g. Leka et al. 2011; Amabile 1997, Syvänen 2010; Tikkamäki & Syvänen 2014; Syvänen & Loppela 2013a, 2013b; Tikkamäki & Syvänen 2014). These issues are closely related to employers' regulatory oblications stemming from OHS legislation (D 89/391/EEC; L 23.08.2002/738). Moreover, their economic effect is enormous (Clarke & Cooper 2004), and they are increasingly associated with the operational efficiency and competitiveness of organizations (Boyd 2003; Köper et al. 2009).

Due to the current economic and efficiency pressure and lack of resources in public service sector both managers and employees often have a heavy workload, which is a major OHS problem as such (see also Frick 2013). However, the respondents did not call for more resources and economic support from upper management, presumably due to the tight economic situation. They mostly

focused on individual relations and emotional support to cope with challenging situations. According to the experiences of the managers, the most challenging OHS management situations are related to psychosocial risks in the work community. For example, employees' mental overload, instances of negligence, and taking individual characteristics and needs into account are highlighted. Moreover, personal problems of employees are found to be difficult to manage. Quite surprisingly, many supervisors considered giving any kind of feedback, even positive feedback, difficult. In such challenging OHS management situations, managers need support and tools for meeting their responsibilities. (see also Syvänen & Loppela 2013a, 2013b) It is the duty of employers to provide OHS procedures, such as risk assessment procedures and proactive measures concerning all kinds of OHS risks (D 89/391/EEC; L 23.08.2002/738) to support managers at all organizational levels. Other organizational procedures like the early-on support model also help managers in challenging situations. However, upper management often ignores its legal oblications and delegates work environment issues to frontline managers, without providing any resources or support (Frick 2013). Besides, the psychosocial risks are often related to imbalances between workloads and time frames, as well as problems concerning relations, leadership, and trust. These are mostly high-level issues, and front-line managers can do little for them. (Frick 2013)

Both the managers' own competence and resources and organizational support have an effect on successfully resolving challenging situations. Previous research (Conchie et al. 2013; Frick 2013; Hardison et al. 2014) also points out the importance of the managers' OHS resources, competence development, and organizational support in improving safety and health at work. To succeed in this, managers' resources and responsibilities, as well as organizational procedures related to cooperation, risk assessment, conflict management, fair treatment, and collective rules, should be emphasized in organizations.

Supervisory work can be significantly aided by organizational procedures and practices being available, harmonized, and designed to serve the needs of managers and the whole work community. Organizational practices must be developed further so that the availability of the support needed by managers can be ensured when needed. For example, active cooperation between managers and occupational health care experts helps managers with managing employees' psychosocial problems and supports them in their supervisory work. Upper management support, resourcing, guidance, and monitoring of OHS actions are crucial (Frick 2013).

In the construction sector, organizational support like upper management support, co-worker forums, and training (Conchie et al. 2013) are key factors when helping managers to cope and succeed in OHS management. Earlier studies in the construction sector and manufacturing industry also argue that there is a need to support managers' OHS role and competence in order to genuinely improve OHS (e.g., Simola 2005; Tappura & Hämäläinen 2011; Törner & Pousette 2009). The results of this study reveal similar findings in the public service sector. Thus, the results are somewhat generalized into managerial work, but not necessarily all industrial sectors.

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