

Dialogic leadership and participatory development: key factors of quality of working life and performance

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Abstract. Objective of this article is to find out what kinds of development forums and tools were created in the participatory and dialogic action research project, what were the contents and impacts of the development dialogues of the collaborative development in six service units providing services for the elderly. The most important contents of the dialogues were the phenomena of dialogue, creativity, and quality of working life, mutual expectations between managers and employees, different rules, rewards and encouragement, conflict solving principles, and values and basic tasks.

Keywords. Dialogic leadership, participatory action research, performance, quality of working life.

1. Introduction

This article is based on the Dialogic leadership promoting innovativeness research program's ("the Dinno program", funded by Tekes; www.dinno.fi) multidisciplinary theoretical framework of dialogic leadership and participatory development.

Performance and efficiency research based on the organizational and economic theories often identifies variables, which affect both productivity and quality of working life (e.g. Jiang et al., 2012; Lawler et al., 1980; Lawler, 1986, 2008; Leibenstein 1987; Lumijärvi, 2009; Syvänen, 2010). In these studies, dialogic leadership, collaboration and participation are important variables affecting both productivity and quality of working life on the individual and the collective levels. The same organizational factors are essential also in the transformational (Bass & Riggio, 2006), the servant (Greenleaf 2002), and the appreciative (Whitney et al. 2010) leadership style. Transformational leadership and learning call for dialogue.

Dialogue is an old concept with long roots in the history of a variety of disciplines such as philosophy and communications (Bakhtin, 1984; Buber, 2002; Habermas, 1979), therapy (Anderson, 1982), group creativity (Bohm, 1996), education (Palmer, 1998) and organising (Isaacs, 1999; Senge, 1990). Isaacs (1993) connects dialogue to organizational learning when describing it as a sustained collective inquiry into the process, assumptions and certainties that compose everyday practice. Open dialog aims at exposing the meaning constructions based on the thinking and actions of the other, thus creating shared understanding. The goal in dialogue is not to get the consensus or compromise but understanding the other as other, and increase the quality of human contact in order to promote organizational and individual transformation (Stewart et al. 2004). Dialogic leadership and dialogic decision making could be carried out by the main principles of dialogue: listening, respecting, voicing, and suspending (Isaacs 1999). These principles make possible generative dialogue, which is a fruitful ground for individual and collective

creativity, learning, well-being, and productivity. Generative dialogues require an open and confidential conversation culture, dialogic capabilities, a clear recognition and sharing of the organization's goals, and an awareness of the learning objectives and critical reflection (Ekman-Philips & Huzzard, 2007).

Dinno's research group has defined and conceptualised the special characteristics and the organizational factors of dialogic leadership that support and affect simultaneously to the organizational potentials of learning, motivation, creativity, quality of working life, and performance and further promote innovations, sustainable working life, and competitiveness (Syvänen et al., 2012, 2014; Syvänen & Loppela 2013a, 2013b; Tikkamäki & Syvänen 2014; see also Amabile, 1988, Amabile et al., 2004; George & Zhou, 2007; Isaacs 1999; Tiernay et al. 2011; Zhou & Shalley 2003). According to the literature analysis and the conceptualisation, next list shows the most important organizational, group and individual level factors that are the most central.

1. *Vertical relations*: a) goals, objectives and resources; b) leadership styles and leadership behaviour; c) the relationships, dialogic interaction between managers and employees; d) support and help from managers; e) feedback, reward, and performance evaluation systems;
2. *Working environment*: physical, social, and mental working environments (e.g. atmospheres, conditions, conflict solving systems and attitudes);
3. *Horizontal relations*: relationships and interactions with co-workers;
4. *Individual level*: a) planning the contents and complexity of tasks; b) the individual learning, creativity and productivity factors, e.g. individual work characteristics and features (e.g. competence and knowing, creative skills and abilities, control of work).

The objective of this article is to theoretically describe and discuss selected empirical results of the connections between dialogic leadership, participatory development (methods and tools), performance, and quality of working life. The development task in the subject organizations was to develop and support dialogic leadership and organizational learning. The research questions (further research tasks 1-3) are:

1. What kinds of participatory development arenas/forums/spaces and methods and tools were used/created in the studied participatory action research projects?
2. What were the main important contents of the development dialogues?
3. What kind of effectiveness was reached?

2. Methods and materials

Methodological nature of the study is participatory action research, research assisted development, and democratic dialogue (Gustavsen et al., 1996; Gustavsen, 2011; Gustavsen & Reason, 2006; Pruitt & Thomas, 2009; Syvänen, 2008, 2010; Syvänen & Loppela, 2013a, 2013b). Action research projects conducted in six social and health care organizations that provide services for the elderly (personnel, 1,121; managers, 51; clients, 1,357). The projects lasted two years (2012 - 2013) and there were two experienced working place developers and responsible Dinno program's researcher supporting and guiding the participatory development processes in each organization. Working place developers acted also as the personal mentors for the managers.

The research materials used were the qualitative process evaluation materials from the six participant service units, the organizational development group's memos, the self-evaluation and reflective materials from the seminars, and the Dinno program's thematic inquiries to the managers.

3. Results

The participatory development methods and tools that were developed and used in the action research project were as follows (research task 1, Table 1).

Table 1: Participatory development arenas, forums, “spaces” and methods.

Participatory development arenas, forums and “spaces”	Used development tools and data gathering methods (participatory and research assisted development)
Representative, multi-professional steering group	Research assisted development
Six representative organizational development groups in the participated service units	Dinno program’s digital Innovativeness questionnaire 2013/11 (200 variables from the Dinno’s theoretical framework, with a five-level Likert scaling)
Three external experts: two responsible workplace developers and the Dinno program’s researcher	Researcher’s thematic inquiries and interviews (themes from the Dinno’s theoretical framework)
Manager mentoring system: developers supported managers’ development work as their personal mentors	Workplace developer and researcher’s thematic development tasks (themes from the Dinno’s theoretical framework)
Thematic sessions and seminars for participating organizations	Development tools
Organizational and thematic development spaces, sessions, days, and meetings for managers, entire organizations and professional groups	e.g. imagination trips, role plays, socio dramas, tools for reflection and dialogue: process evaluation, picture cards, stories and poets, rewards, and letters and emails.
Meetings of the departments and teams	

The contents of the development dialogues impacting positively, according to theoretical framework, motivation, learning, creativity, innovativeness, performance, and quality of working life were as follows (research task 2):

- 1. Organizational competence and strategic skills (power, responsibilities, administration, economy, structures)**
 - Dialogues on: a) structures, b) power and responsibilities, c) the contents of tasks among managers and employees
- 2. Values, goals**
 - Dialogues on: a) the basic tasks, b) values, c) ideologies and principles
- 3. Leadership competence, skills, styles**
 - Dialogues on: a) leadership, b) managers’ and employees’ mutual expectations (contents of psychological contract), c) the principles, rules, and agreements covering management and leadership behaviour => *The leadership development plans*
- 4. Dialogic interaction**
 - Dialogues on: a) dialogue, b) collaboration and interaction, c) dialogic leadership, d) dialogic development, e) dialogic and participatory communication structures and information flow, f) meetings => *The principles and rules of collaboration and interaction*
- 5. Feedback, rewards, and incentives**
 - Dialogues on: a) the new ways to give and receive positive and constructive feedback, b) rewards and incentives
- 6. Individuality and diversity at work**

– Dialogues on: a) work behaviour, b) quality of working life, c) the mutual expectations among managers and employees => *The rules and principles of work behavior*

7. Working and operating environments

– Dialogues on: a) quality of working life (factors promoting or weakening it)
=> *The well-being plans*

8. Workplace atmosphere and social interaction

– Dialogues on: a) the principles and rules for 1) organizations and their groups, 2) for difficult situations and conflicts, 3) for mutual interaction problems
=> *conflict solving system, e.g. "The paths of interference"*

9. Transformation, learning, development

– Dialogues on: a) the development needs and objectives => *the development plans of working communities (departments, teams)*

The effectiveness and impact analysis of the development (research task 3) bases on the experiences of participated managers and employees from six service units. Outcomes and the impact assessment of the action research were carried out by managers and employees joint self-evaluation in the project's final seminar (2013/11). Managers evaluated also the action research's effectiveness and impacts in a digital survey, in which respondents were also asked what they themselves learned and which factors prevented and promoted participatory development. Effectiveness was asked by a question: How do you estimate the participatory and co-operative (= dialogic) development in your organization contributed to the asked following matters? The results are basing on the *experiences of the respondents (%) which answered a lot or pretty much*.

The dialogues on basic tasks (76%), rules, and values promoted client orientation and organizational effectiveness and quality of services. The participatory development method made it possible for various actors to participate, learn, reflect, develop, and use creativity. They had positive impacts to motivation (56 %). The participatory development method and tools increased employees' sense of shared responsibility and commitment, and positively affected their well-being as well as the relationships between managers and employees (68%), and communication and information flow (52%). Participatory development also improved work place's social relations and interaction and climate (72%). Genuine employee involvement and participation increased (*employee influence 84%, personnel initiative 52%*) as did employees' sense of responsibility and commitment. Dialogues on basic tasks and values, together with rule- and conflict-solving systems, reduced the short sick leaves (*"team spirit and mutual support and help have improved, and sick days are less common"*) and the costs of internal inefficiency and improved productivity. Participatory development structure and tools and the improvement of the participants' dialogical and development skills positively affected "everyday" innovations and renewal (72%), and the creativity (76%). All of these factors of leadership of creativity and innovativeness improved the quality of working life (80 %), as well as the economy and productivity (24 %), effectiveness, and quality of services (52%).

4. Conclusions

The analyzed action research project shows that combination of dialogic leadership, participatory development, and organizational learning are critical to capturing and utilizing the available potentials of organizational creativity, as well as increasing performance and wellbeing.

A sustainable working life, organizational learning, and performance require certain types of resources – enough time and forums, arenas and “spaces” supporting individual and organizational learning - and therefore call for flexible and cooperative organization and participatory development methods. One of the key tasks to leaders is to create more “spaces” and possibilities of reflectivity in everyday work. (Ekman-Philips & Huzzard, 2007; Hilden & Tikkamäki, 2013). Managers’ important tasks and responsibilities are getting organized change processes, coordinating and supporting learning processes, and safeguarding appreciative and equal opportunities for employees to participate and have and exercise influence.

The challenge for employers and managers is to create the structures and resources necessary for participatory development that takes into consideration the learning and development needs of employees and groups, as well as the values, strategic goals and economic resources of the organization.

Participatory development, dialogic leadership and organizational learning are critical “tools” for capturing and utilizing all the versatile potential of creativity and innovativeness as well as increasing the productivity and quality of working life. The benefits and the effectiveness of participatory and dialogic organization can also be measured in money.

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