

Collaboration between HR and line management – Enhancing learning in complex work

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Abstract. In the safety critical nuclear industry, the tension between the predictability of processes that ensures safety and flexible practices in managing unexpected situations poses a challenge for developing organizational capabilities. The regulatory, standardized side of nuclear production is well managed in the industry through professional training. The challenge is, however, to support learning that allows routine practices to evolve and develop into new ones when needed, forming new capabilities for the organization. In this paper, we analyse the collaboration between HR and line management for enhancing the learning of new practices in a complex work environment, and discuss how the predominant forms of collaboration rise to this challenge.

Keywords. Organizational learning, safety critical work, human resources, collaboration

1. Introduction

Organizational learning and the development of capabilities are central issues in safety critical organizations. They are particularly important in the nuclear industry, in which technological systems are complex and demands for safety are high: becoming a specialist may take years. Because of the special competences needed in the field, a deep understanding of the substance is, of course, impossible for HR practitioners to obtain. However, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency (2009), human resource development practices should a) ensure that the competence of nuclear industry personnel is developed and maintained, b) organize work activities effectively, c) anticipate HR needs, and d) monitor and continually improve performance.

In this paper, we analyse the forms of collaboration between line managers and HR practitioners in enhancing learning and development in Finnish nuclear organizations.⁶

2. The nuclear industry's complex work environment

The context of the nuclear industry is characterized by safety critical work, i.e. work that may pose substantial safety risks to the environment or to society. In this setting, safety is absolutely essential, because of the potential harm to large numbers of

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individuals in a single event (Carroll et al., 2002). The all-encompassing demand for safety is also present in the dependency of nuclear power organizations on comprehensive national and international regulations. Compared to most other sectors, nuclear power organizations are more subject to formal requirements, rules and guidelines for technology and work processes (Kettunen et al., 2007).

It can be challenging for organizations that stress predictability and control to engage in new work practices. For example, March (1991) has pointed out the strong compliance orientation of safety critical organizations. Instead of actively exploring new opportunities, these organizations prioritize predictability and routines in their operations. In addition, organizational structures and hierarches are rigid, work practices are standardized, responsibilities are clearly defined, and decision-making is centralized (Kettunen et al., 2007). Thus, to ensure safety operation, organizations control their activities and comply with numerous rules and regulations. However, even by following these routines, the organizations are not completely safe from accidents. In threatening and unexpected situations, organizations have to work flexibly, and act and learn fast (Carroll et al., 2002; see also resilience, eg. Hollnagel, 2006).

The tension between systematic, clearly defined work, predictability and flexibility runs through all activity and poses many challenges for competence building. The nuclear industry has a strong tradition of nuclear specialist training that enhances safety by ensuring consistent and standardized work practices. This training is typically provided by industry professionals and organized by HR professionals. Still, the work of managers in nuclear power organizations is essential for upholding and implementing the safety agenda (Kettunen et al., 2007) and dealing with the all-encompassing tension in everyday work situations. Thus, our interest lies in the goal of enhancing flexibility, and developing novel practices and competences in a highly standardized environment (transformational activity, see e.g. Fukui & Sugiman 2010). We analyse the development of capabilities in the nuclear industry as collaboration between line managers and HR practitioners. Thus, our research questions are: What are the objects of collaboration between line managers and HR practitioners in supporting organizational learning and the development of capabilities? How do the current practices of collaboration support the detection of learning challenges that arise from complex and dilemmatic situations in work activity?

3. Human resource development in complex work – Whose responsibility, whose expertise?

We connect the question of collaboration in detecting learning challenges to recent trends in HR practices, which contain some contradictory features. These trends include the outsourcing of HR practices; an increase in HR technologies; and HR's new role as a business partner (see e.g. Martin et al., 2008). These trends are usually labelled as HR transformations, but in reality they also significantly affect the work of line management, as well as the division of work between line managers and HR.

Since the 1990s, firms have been outsourcing some HR tasks; first and foremost to gain cost reductions, but also to acquire new specialized HR knowledge from the market. Recent studies suggest that this trend has been slightly exaggerated in the literature (Martin et al. 2008, Introduction), but if they are not being outsourced, administrative HR services are however increasingly being centralized in shared service centres, detached from production units and teams, especially in large firms (Cooke et al., 2005).

These changes have been supported by the second driver of change, which is the intensifying use of different HR systems for collecting, processing, storing and analysing HR data. This has resulted in line managers becoming the main actors in producing input

for HR systems, and different HR tasks are taking an increasing share of their time. However, the devolvement of these tasks to line management may cause role ambiguity and demotivation. In the worst case, line managers are left wondering why they are doing HR practitioners’ work. HR practitioners are thus more dependent on line managers for HR delivery. Training line managers in using HR systems has become a central HR task of its own.

The third driver in HR transformation is the ever-increasing demand for HR to create a linkage between HR practices and business strategy. The role of an “HR business partner” is allocated to those, usually senior HR practitioners, who due to the aforementioned changes now have more time to concentrate on providing strategic insight (Cooke 2006). This is, of course, a very promising development, which shows that learning and capabilities truly are considered strategically important. However, these professionals are usually stationed at corporate headquarters, far from operational activities, and the task is highly challenging in both theory and practice. Studies have shown that the business partner role is not easily accomplished (Caldwell 2008).

Thus, to sum up, one of the main goals of contemporary HR is to support corporate strategy, at a time when flexibility, learning and the renewal of organizational capabilities are at the core of competitive advantage. At the same time, however, all the recent trends transforming the HR function have shifted HR practitioners further away from operational units and the context-specific knowledge of learning challenges. In this paper we analyse these trends and their impact on the Finnish nuclear industry.

4. Case, data and method of analysis

Nuclear power production in Finland consists of two power plants with four reactors that produce about a fourth of the nationally consumed electricity. The power plants are run by two different organizations, which together have 2800 employees in Finland. The organizations have slightly different HR structures: the first has a centralised HR department that provides services for the whole concern, which in addition to the power plant also includes other operational units. Every operational unit, including the power plant, also has a local HR partner, who works closely with line managers. In the second organization, the whole HR staff works at the power plant. Also in this organization, HR practitioners and line managers collaborate.

Table 1: Episodes of discussion concerning collaboration between HR practitioners and line managers

<i>Interview</i>	<i>Object of collaboration</i>			
	<i>Professional training</i>	<i>HR techniques and technologies</i>	<i>Learning challenges arising from complex work</i>	<i>Unclear</i>
No 1 : HR practitioner and line manager	-	9	1	1
No 2: HR practitioner and line manager	2	10	-	-
No 3: 2 HR practitioners	3	16	8	1
No 4: 4 Line managers	3	2	-	-
<i>Total episodes of discussion</i>	8	37	9	2

Our data consists of group interviews of managers and HR practitioners conducted in 2011 in two Finnish nuclear power organizations. A total of 10 persons were interviewed. The data consists of semi-structured interviews which focused on human resource development and management practices. The limitation of the interview data is that they

do not provide satisfactory information regarding the actual work practices of nuclear operators and their learning challenges. However, the interviews do reflect the HR practitioners' and line managers' conceptions of their collaboration.

First, we divided the interview data into thematic episodes (n=90), of which those concerning collaboration between line managers and HR (n=56) were selected for further analysis. These episodes were then categorized according to the object of the collaboration concerned. The objects of collaboration and their frequencies as episode themes are presented in Table 1. The objects of collaboration are further analysed in the following chapter.

5. Objects of collaboration between line organization and HR

In our analysis, we found three central objects of collaboration between line managers and HR practitioners: 1) professional training, 2) HR techniques and technologies and 3) learning challenges arising from complex work. Next, we show how these objects of collaboration were manifested in the data and discuss how the collaborative practices related to these objects support the learning of the predominant as well as the new organizational practices. The first excerpt⁷ illustrates collaboration concerning professional training:

HR practitioner: Planning training is similar to any other executive planning. So it starts after the summer holidays, like any other budgeting and planning. At the end of the year, the annual training programme, courses and training, forms a basic schedule. Of course, single needs will arise from annual maintenance work, for example new systems or appliances, which create new educational needs. But the bigger changes are possible to anticipate in training. And anticipation is essential...

Professional training is the basis of learning and developing capabilities in our subject organizations. Through training, the necessary competences are transferred to new employees, but the competences of current employees are also developed. The organizations have established practices for planning and organizing training. Training is also regulated by authorities, especially the professional training of control room operators. At least four types of education is distinguished: obligatory education regulated by authorities; general education, which runs annually; general education for current needs; and discipline-specific education, which aims to develop specific professional expertise. Training is strongly connected to the competences needed in work activity and to ensure safety operation, and is based on existing knowledge. The learning needs of an organization are anticipated and taken into consideration in educational planning. The training is provided by line managers and external experts. The role of HR is, for example, to co-ordinate annual planning and practicalities.

The second excerpt depicts collaboration that focuses on different HR techniques and tools. This was also the most common theme in the analysed episodes (see Table 1.)

Line manager: I found the space for writing down the outcomes of earlier performance appraisals, with that e-tool ...but it's a bit heavy and depressing, there's so much to take in... they [tools] should be simple, easy to use, so that they could support managerial work as much as possible, not make it more difficult. If you look at it from the other side [HR],

⁷ The excerpts of this paper are translated from Finnish to English by authors

they have their own objectives and I understand the elements arising from them... If they [HR tools] were easy to use, then I believe that they would work effectively. The objectives could be achieved, without creating more problems ...

HR practitioner: In HR matters, I try to feed the HR staff to them [managers] as much as I can. Know-how and everything, how things can be done more easily. It helps my own workload, if that knowledge can be implemented.

Line managers produce HR information and perform different HR tasks using IT-based tools and HR systems. Thus the tasks of line managers include more and more responsibilities that are key HR competences, and have traditionally been part of HR work. HR responds to this by training managers in using the HR systems and the techniques HR has developed for, for example, giving feedback, recruitment and performance appraisals. The role of HR has become one of technical support. Line managers are quite satisfied with the help of HR, and the relevance of the gathered information for managers or the organization hardly ever questioned. The third, still rather embryonic object of collaboration concerns the learning challenges arising from complex work.

HR practitioner: The connection to learning is, if and when gaps in competences are identified in disturbance situations... If it's clear that the problem is technical, there's no point in asking me, why the bolt is broken...but if you can see that it has something to do with current practices, or human mistakes... then, when the situation is talked about in the organization... someone just needs to collect and handle the information...

HR practitioner: I take part in recruitment, for example, when control room operators are selected. For seven years I've sat in on interviews and tried to find systematics: What is a good operator? How you can find this out in interviews?

One of the interviewed HR practitioners had collaborated with the safety department in analysing safety critical disturbances and “close call” situations. In this collaboration, the HR practitioners’ focus turns to human mistakes, learning needs and the development of work practices in the actual work context: learning is seen as a key issue for safety. The same practitioner systematically took part in the job interviews for recruiting new control room operators, trying to systematize and generalize the essential competences needed in control room operators’ work. In this form of collaboration, the general development of the field and especially the complex and problematic situations of productive work, are seen as drivers of capability development.

6. Discussion

The object of this study concerned HR practices in the Finnish nuclear industry, especially the collaboration between line managers and HR. Based on our interview data, we can categorize the objects of the collaboration into three themes: 1) professional training, 2) HR techniques and technologies and 3) learning challenges arising from complex work.

When professional training was mentioned in the discussions, it appeared to be a well-functioning, unproblematic issue. The forms of collaboration concerning training seemed quite established and the learning of predominant ways of working and standardized processes and the transfer of existing knowledge seemed well managed. This

is probably also the reason why this theme was mentioned only a couple of times.

The striking feature in the data was that most of the talk about the collaboration between line management and HR focused on different HR techniques and tools. Moreover, the problems that were discussed in this connection were not the kind of learning and development these systems and techniques serve, or how well they support different HR objectives, but how the managers are able to learn the systems and required procedures. Thus, for HR this generates a kind of “quasi-object”, a problem in itself, which is accepted without problematizing the outcomes of the use of the tools and techniques for developing actual productive work. The limitation of the data is that the interviews concentrated on the HR practices (i.e. the interviewees were not straightforwardly encouraged to talk about learning power plant operator’s work). However, the data does show what kind of issues practitioners consider as important and/or problematic concerning these practices. The learning challenges of productive work were barely mentioned.

One HR practitioner acted differently, trying to establish a connection between HR practices and learning needs in complex operator work. A good example of this was his participation in the analysis of safety critical disturbance situations, where his aim was to connect his own expertise in HR development to managers’ and workers’ technical expertise and process knowledge. This still quite embryonic form of collaboration had the potential to detect new ideas and innovations concerning work practices, as well to form a picture of the new competencies these innovations would require. We argue that this kind of collaboration would support the strategic side of HR, by not only concentrating on what is already known, but by jointly building and disseminating new ideas and resilient work practices. The findings of this working paper will be elaborated in more detail in our forthcoming article.

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