

Displacements in organisations' responses to the inspections of their psychosocial working environment

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to analyse how organisational activities correspond with the Working Environment Authority's description of psychosocial working environment problems at the workplaces. Through the case study of twelve workplaces the activities are analysed focusing on the relationship between the Working Environment Authority's problem descriptions after an inspection visit, and the solutions implemented by the workplace to solve the pinpointed problems. The Garbage Can model of decision making frames the understanding of how the workplaces decides, which activities they initiate as a result of the Working Environment Authority inspection. Displacement of the problem solving is suggested as a category of decision-making. The analysis shows, how the organisations choose relevant or displaced activities depended upon their agreement in the problem description, their acceptance of suggestion solution, and their success in establishing a reasonable understanding of the causes of the problems. The inspection visit is regarded as an opportunity to implement solutions to problems in the psychosocial working environment, which already exists as a possible and legitimate improvement activity in the workplaces, as well as a push to start a process to develop new solutions.

Key words: Displacement in decision-making, Garbage Can model, psychosocial work environment, working environment authorities.

1. Introduction

The development of an inspection strategy in the Danish Working Environment Authority (WEA) concerning the psychosocial working environment (PWE) and how the workplaces reacted to the inspections were the main points of interest in a 2009-2011 research project entitled "Organisations reactions to the regulation of the psycho social work environment" (Starheim 2012), from which this paper draws its main insights. The investigation of the empirical materiel contributed to answer the overall research question: How do workplaces react to the inspections of their PWE?

2. Methodology

This paper presents findings from the project's *case studies* at twelve workplaces recently screened¹⁰ by WEA. The cases were chosen to include more workplaces receiving notices than the actual distribution of notices in general, because it was important to have an overrepresentation of workplaces with experiences with WEA demands to improve their PWE. Semi-structured group and individual interviews with workplace representatives

¹⁰ Most workplaces in Denmark should receive a screening visit from the WEA according to the Work environment reform in 2004.

were conducted, and additionally chronicle workshops¹¹ were carried out at five of the workplaces involved. The interviews were recorded and partly transcribed and thorough notes were obtained during each chronicle workshop.

The Garbage Can model as an analytical framing of how workplace activities were chosen.

To further investigate and explain what kind of improvement activities the workplaces chose to carry out as a result of their received notices, we have turned to the Garbage Can model of decision making in organizations (Cohen et. al. 1972; Enderud 1976; March 2008). The Garbage Can model is developed as a supplementary understanding to the rational decisions model, which can be short coming to explain how decision processes can be understood in organisations. The model aims at an understanding of organisations to be seen more as anarchies than stable and able to obtain maximum information to make the optimal decision, as the rational decision models suggest. This state of looser connections in the decision process is regarded as another way of making intelligible decisions, and not as isolated or pathological traits in the organisation. The solution works for the organisation in spite of the lacking resolution of their problems. Time is regarded crucial in this understanding how problems, solutions and participants meet and configure a decision more in terms of the time correlations, than of appropriate connections between the elements.

The model describes how streams of buckets run through the organizations and how the buckets are regarded as opportunities to make choices by throwing garbage such as; problems and solutions into the buckets.

From this point of view, an organization is a collection of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be the answer, and decision makers looking for work. (Cohen et al 1972 p.2)

Depending on how the opportunity to make choices is defined, and how narrow or broad the occasion appears, it will attract more or less attention in the organizations awareness. As a result of the organizations attention and energy and the decision makers access to the decision structure, the model suggests that the decision making not always leads to problem solving, but includes two other types of outcome; flight or oversight of problems.

Inspired by the Garbage Can model we regard the WEAs inspections as an opportunity to make a choice (a bucket are introduced in the organisation) and our analysis shows how the WEA description of problems and solutions are grasped in the organization and influence the decisions of what kind of activities they decide to implement. The case studies are therefore analysed with the aspect of how the workplace regards the WEA problem description, how they are able to establish a reasonable and legitimatised (Hasle et. al. 2003) explanation of the causes of the problems and how they react towards solutions suggested by the inspectors.

After a brief introduction to the key concepts in the Danish WEA inspection practice we present our finding from the case studies in twelve workplaces.

¹¹ A type of workshop that involves participants in mapping important events and developments in the history

3. The WEA inspection process and outcome

The inspection practice regarding the PWE is consisting of the assessment of six risk factors; 1) work load and time pressure, 2) emotional demands, 3) threats and violence, 4) traumatic incidents, 5) working alone 6) the risk of bullying. The WEA inspectors conduct the assessment through workplace visits; meetings with members of the health and safety committee and management, observations, talking to the employees, and sometimes by performing group interview with employees. If the inspection process shows imperfections in the safety or health plan within the six risk factors, the inspectors can distribute a notice describing the specific problem to be improved at the workplace. The conclusion of the inspection will be published at the WEA website with a green smiley for the workplaces receiving no notice, a yellow smiley for the workplaces receiving an improvements notice, and a red smiley for those workplaces, which have to involve a work environment consultant in their solution process.

4. Findings - How do workplace activities concur with WEA’s problem descriptions?

The following figure introduces some key results of our study of the workplaces inspection process:

Workplace and Numbers of employees	WEA assessment	Reported activities	Work place agree in: Problem description Solution
Cleaning Company A 100+	Red Smiley Notice on threats and violence	Action plan to prevent threats and violence	Agree on problem Expand existing relevant solution
Cleaning Company B 100+	Yellow Smiley Notice on time pressure	Action plan regarding time pressure	Agree on problem Existing relevant solution initiated
Home for mentally handicapped people B 100+	Red Smiley Work load and time pressure	Revising organisation and management structure.	Agree on problem Developing relevant solution
Sewer Cleaning 0-19	Green Smiley Work Place Risk Assessment	Work Place Risk Assessment	Agree on problem Existing relevant solution initiated
Car Dealership 20-99	Yellow Smiley Workplace assessment	Work Place Risk assessment Attention on the risk of bullying	Agree on problem Implementing relevant solution
Public administration B 20-99	Red Smiley Work load and time pressure	Action plan: Workload and time pressure.	Agree on problem Difficulties finding causes and solution
Prison B 100+	Yellow Smiley General PWE	Project aiming at the psychosocial work environment in the whole prison after 6 years	Agree on problem Difficulties finding causes and solution
Home for mentally handicapped people A 20-99	Red Smiley Work load and time pressure	Action plan on work load and time pressure. Action plan to prevent threats and violence	Agree in problem description Difficulties finding causes and solution
Prison A 100+	(Green) Smiley Work load and time pressure in the social workers group	Action plan to prevent workload in the social workers group	Disagree in problem description and the severity of the problem Solving another

			problem
Bus Company 20-99	Yellow Smiley Notice on threats and violence	Action plan on traumatic incidents Work Place Risk assessment	Disagree in problem description Expanding existing possible solution by calling it traumatic incidents.
Public administration A 100+	Red Smiley Work load and time pressure. Threats and violence	Action plan: Workload and time pressure. Action plan: Threats and violence	Disagree in problem definition and suggested solution regarding the risk of threats and violence.
Public administration C 20-49	(Red Smiley) Notice: Threats and violence	Seeking information about action plan to prevent threats and violence	Disagree in problem definition Disagree in suggested solution

Figure 1. The result of WEA visits at twelve workplaces

The figure shows the type of workplaces in our sample, the outcome of the inspection process and the type of risk in the PWE, that the WEA notice regards. It also gives an overview of different reported activities that the workplaces have started. In our analysis we have searched for not only what kinds of activities the workplace have started, but also how they regarded the evaluation of the WEA compared with their own evaluation of their PWE.

We found that at five workplaces the WEA description of the problems corresponded with the workplaces' own understanding of their problems. These five workplaces made action plans for improvement activities that appeared relevant and in line with the WEA inspection description of the problems. They agreed on the way the problems occurred at the workplace, and mostly the solutions were clear and understandable as for example revising the workplace Risk Assessment, which is mandatory in every workplace in Denmark every three year. This is the situation in the Car Dealership and the Sewer Cleaning Company. The Car Dealership had recently merged into a large national company, with a full time H&S manager, who had been engaged in improving activities at the other car sale office and their mechanic workshops for years. He used the WEA visit to emphasize the legislation demands of the Risk Assessment in his discussion with the local manager. Additionally the WEA inspection's investigation of the risk of bullying evoked his attention to the potential bullying problems in the mechanic workshop at the WEA inspected site.

For the three other workplaces; Cleaning Company A, Cleaning Company B, and the Home for mentally handicapped B, they already had identified the need for changing the organization of the work, and had considered and described a possible solution. An example of this is Cleaning Company B located at a hospital, where the inspection notice pointed at the stressful mornings, where the employees all at the same time would pick up their cleaning equipment from the store room, making it a noisy and chaotic daily event. It made the manager rethink the work flow in the mornings and made it a part of the overall change. Although the chaotic mornings had been discussed in the cleaning company, the inspection notice became a part of the legitimacy in a bigger workflow change, which also included a shift from the culture of solitary work into a culture where management contact should be welcomed and not regarded as unnecessary control.

In the Garbage Can perspective the management in the Car Dealership and the Cleaning Company A had an issue, which was looking for a problem, and they were decision makers looking for work. They grabbed the opportunity to initiate the work

environment improvements activities they already had developed, and welcomed the WEA's delivering the bucket with a decision opportunity and an adequate problem.

5. Discussion of findings: Deviations from the WEA's understanding of the problem, - three types of displacements

In our sample we found that the rest of the workplaces had a more conflicting and disturbed process in complying with the WEA demands, than the first five cases. Using the Garbage Can perspective, the workplaces can be divided into three groups: 1) Agreement in problem description, but not being able to cooperate and find solutions. 2) Agreement in problem description but difficulties finding causes and solutions. 3) Disagreement with WEA problem description or suggested solutions

5.1 Agreement in problem description is not always followed by cooperation on possible solution.

Agreement in the WEA problem solutions seems to be a necessity, but not sufficient in the workplaces choice of a possible solutions. For Prison B the inspection visit resulted in a notice in 2003, but the workplace postpones their actual improvement process until 2009. The workplace had their attention on the problems before the WEA inspection evaluated the problems and described them in their notices, as a mixture of the risk of threats and violence as well as a culture with large conflicts between employees and management. In the follow-up interview the workplace members addressed several changes in their situation that made these improvements activities possible in 2009: A budget for improving activities, and a new management and a new group of younger prison guards, which created a room for a more cooperative culture in the prison, which made it possible to improve the PWE. Hence in Prison B the problem solution structure were characterised by low decision activity and high problem latency, - e.g. problems were activated but not linked to choices (Cohen et al 1972 p.10). The WEA notice in 2003 made an occasion to underline the necessity of making a choice regarding the PWE, but was not strong enough to influence the organisational decision structure, that was paralyzed by internal conflicts. Interestingly, the workplace members reported that the WEA problem description back in 2003 did correlate with their own workplace assessment and they characterised the WEA report as: "Thorough and précis". Nevertheless it took six years to make the organisations decision structure able to deal with the problems.

5.2 Agreement in problem description but difficulties finding causes and solutions

Another pattern of reacting upon the WEA notice in spite of agreeing in the problem description, we found in two workplaces, which had difficulties making a clear problem analysis that led to failure to find appropriate solutions.

At Home for mentally handicapped people, they welcomed the WEA's visit as an opportunity to get help with sorting out their problems in the work environment and making the necessary changes. The WEA described the PWE problems with workload in terms of the employees' engagement in making a daily life with activities for the residences, and how the resources did not match this level of ambition to the life of the mentally handicapped. Unfortunately, the process stopped when the H&S representative went on maternity leave and the manager's conflicts with the upper management level resulted in a long termed sick leave.

Public administration B reported, that they had a supportive upper level management, but the push from the WEA inspection was welcomed, as they haven't had a clear problem description and the lack of knowledge on how to work with the problems abstained them

from engaging in improvement activities regarding the PWE. For Public Administration B it was helpful for their improvement motivation that the WEA inspectors confirmed their notion of the problems as complicated and although seemingly rooted in the same fusion of three municipalities, it had a confusingly different impact on the three different administration centres.

In these WEA inspection processes we found a high compliant attitude from the workplace members and agreement in the WEA's description of their problems. None of the workplaces mentioned that the WEA proposed concrete solutions, but expressed how they were satisfied with developing solutions for themselves. This was not, however, followed by improvement activities that solved the problems in the PWE at the workplaces.

5.3 *Disagreement with WEA problem description or suggested solutions*

In the Bus Company, they openly disagreed with the WEA descriptions of problems in the PWE. In the Bus Company, the manager's experience with the inspection was dominated by his frustration about the discussions with the inspectors about their conflicting notion of risk of threats and violence when transporting mentally handicapped people. However, very late in the interview he mentioned that they recently had activated a plan for taking care of drivers experiencing traumatic incidents. This plan made sense according to his opinion on, what the chauffeurs could experience like incidents with customers collapsing in the bus or well-known customer's sudden death.

Another example of displacement of activities from the WEA problem description we found in Prison A where the improvement activities directed at lowering the workload of the social workers in the prison did not solve the problems in the first place. But as a member of the H&S committee commented: *"It is because the root of the problems is, that we don't agree on what the social workers' core task is, and that is why we haven't solved the problems for this group of employees. However, the notice keeps us on track and makes us continue to try to solve the problem, even if our first described activities did not resolve it."*

In this case, the prison was aware of the problem that the notice described, but could not agree on how serious it was, holding it up against some of the other problems in the PWE. In Prison A the risk of violence and threats is a much more visible and relevant problem including most employees and accepted by everyone as a serious problem. The prison made a parallel effort to solve the problem with violence in relation to the prisoners' daily recreation hour in the prison yard. This effort was successfully implemented and the problem was solved using a new way of grouping the prisoners in the yard.

At Public Administration A the inspection visit was initiated following a complaint from the H&S representative, who several times had tried to make the upper level management concerned about the high workload and the inadequate physical working environment after a fusion of four administrative units into one. The WEA inspection resulted in three notices about high workload and time pressure, but additionally they gave five notices about establishing escape routes to prevent the risk of violence in the offices. Following this, establishing escape doors in every office became a key activity in their efforts to solve their problems. The H&S committee evaluated the solution as 1) expensive, 2) an annoyance to the employees, who could not keep their private offices and 3) not actually a solution to the problems with threats and violence, since these occurred most frequently during social worker visits to private homes, and not in the offices. Despite this, the escape doors were established, but the whole process with implementing the action plan was slow and obstructed. In the follow up interviews with the workplace, they did not report, that they actually solved the problems with the risk of threats and violence.

In the same period Public Administration A managed implementing a mindfulness

program as an improvement process directed towards the PWE. The displacement of the link between the problem analysis and the chosen solution become clear however, when the workplace members openly agreed that the problems were rooted in the organisational structure, and not in the employees lacking coping capacities. The solution was not only displaced from the WEA problem description but was also lacking connections with the workplaces own description in the causes of their problems. Nevertheless, the work place member evaluated the activity as improving the PWE at the workplace.

6. Conclusion

The study found that the workplaces actually did start improvement activities regarding their PWE, but not always referring to the WEA problem description. Five of 12 workplaces in our case study complied with the WEA notice with relevant solutions. Characteristic of these workplaces were their agreement in the problem description of the WEA. Furthermore these workplace had solutions developed, and was looking for issues their solutions could be the answer to. In the seven cases it appeared that agreement in the problem description seems to be necessary, but not sufficient for the work place to start relevant problem-solving activities. In these seven cases we found three different causes to displace the problem solution: 1) Agreement in problem description, but not being able to cooperate and find solutions. 2) Agreement in problem description but difficulties finding causes and solutions. 3) Disagreement with WEA problem description or suggested solutions.

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