The meaning of co-workership among university employees

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Outline

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What is co-workership?

• Origin: characterization of member of the church community who performed voluntary work for the church.

• Contemporary meaning (Tengblad et al 2007 -> how workers’ handle their relations with:
  • their employer
  • their work
  • their colleagues

  ->These relations should involve a sense of «going beyond the call of duty»

• Some claim that it is a Scandinavian concept
• ....but this is disputable. Would be like claiming that leadership is Scandinavian just because we think that the way leadership is practiced here is the right way

• Note: Co-workership is just as profound and essential to the organization as leadership, whether there is an outspoken emphasis on co-workership or not.

• Research done so far: Sweden and Norway (increased popularity from late 1990s)
Why has co-workership become so important?
(Note: this part of the world)

Structural and cultural changes such as:

• Organizations less hierarchical – decentralized management
• Increase of knowledge intensive work
• Increased competition -> innovation, creativity, motivation
  • The realization that workers thrive when they are not controlled from the top.
• The meaning of work has changed – self-realization, carrier, sense of community, identity
The university as case

- Long traditions for autonomy (academic freedom is established by law in the sector)
- Longstanding traditions for open dialogue, critique and opposition
- Core activities such as research and teaching have thus far influenced the administrative functions
- The administrative and the academic staff make for two separate worlds
- Individualism, competition and merits
- At the specific university of this study there was no explicit organizational strategy to spread and implement ideas about co-workership.
The study

- **Aim:** Find out what co-workership means among workers

- **Method:** semi-structured interviews conducted in the participants’ workplaces, approx 1 hour long.

- **Participants:** academic staff, technical/administrative, and managers

- **15 interviewed:** 7 women, 8 men
  - 8 academic staff, 7 management/administration

- Interviews have been approached in a hermeneutic fashion where knowledge from previous interviews influences the interview-guide for later interviews (1st guide prepared based on existing research)

- Material analyzed by categorizing answers and anecdotes in themes. Aim has been to keep close to the empirical material at hand and not theorize too early (also called ‘open coding’).
This resulted in 10 main themes:

- Work
- Commitment
- Responsibility
- (Spirit of) community
- Participation
- Care
- Trust
- Leadership
- Rights
- Balance
«You can do your work in a way that is straightforward and the minimum sort of, or you can do things perfectly»

«The first that comes to mind is that it has to do with employees taking responsibility for their workplace without necessarily being instructed to do so by a leader»

«It is about caring» (bry seg)».

«Co-workership is about balancing opposites»
Co-workership is positionally determined:

There is a difference in what employees and leaders emphasize.

• Leaders emphasize the issue of **responsibility** (tasks, goals, social).

• Leaders see co-workership as a ‘**tool**’ that can help increase workers’ reflections about themselves as ‘company men/women’.

  o Workers emphasize more the issue of **rights to influence**, participate and do the best possible job they can.

  o Workers also see co-workership as the path to empowerment and how to **work despite leaders’** specific style of leadership.
Co-workership seem to have to do with:

- Attitudes
- Norms
- Behaviour

-> A strong component of how one *ought* to be in our material
Co-workership is social in character:

Depend not on the individual alone

**Paradox:**
At the university, where self-management has a long tradition, and where resources are not tied to ‘the line’, *co-workership can be detached from leadership.*
Co-workership is associated with something positive

Only one pointed out that it could be seen as management’s way to make workers do more or to get rid of middle-managers.

Two informants saw the possibility of cultivating communities with enforced loyalty.
The road ahead…