

EMPOWERING LEADERS OF SME NETWORKS FOR SAFER WORK ENVIRONMENT

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This paper presents a method to empower and educate leaders of SME safety networks in order to influence attitudes towards increased safety activity. A supportive handbook and a course method was developed comprising three meetings with 8 to 10 participants. The course includes theory, reflexion and discussion but also practical experiences of the method. For the empowerment process following issues were focused; social support and openness, time and stages of change, analysing experienced incidents in a dialogue, consultative leadership and communication and feedback skills.

Safety intervention, empowerment, SME network leaders

1 Background

In order to support occupational safety development in small and medium sized enterprises (SME), an intervention methodology aimed at influencing safety attitudes and behaviour was tested and evaluated. Eighty-eight farmers and farm workers divided into nine network groups participated. Each group gathered on seven occasions during one year (2000-2001), assisted by a process leader supporting the change process. A pre-post questionnaire was used to evaluate the effects, and questionnaires, interviews and memos were used in order to evaluate the process. The results showed significant increase in safety activity and reduction in risk acceptance, while risk perception and manageability was unchanged after the intervention. The effects of the intervention were evaluated after four years in relation to a control group, and the significant results from the intervention remained. Therefore the purpose of this study is to develop this methodology by empowering and educating network leaders in order to support a continuing safety process.

The previous intervention (Stave et al., 2007) was based on group discussions in networks. The new approach of the methodology was 1) to provide repeated meetings and sufficient time and support for reflection on practice in order to motivate for restructuring of attitudes and perceptions towards increased safety activity, 2) to ensure that safety communication was performed as a dialogue, which may provide a mean to better identify with the problems and solutions, making the participants the owner of the problem, 3) to provide a group, continuously supporting a positive safety culture, rejecting risk acceptance, 4) to facilitate ways of increasing perceived risk manageability and stimulating an action-oriented way to manage safety. The education of network leaders should act as a raw model for their own work in their groups, so that the theories

behind the method should influence the empowerment of the leaders as well as their work with their own network.

2 Objectives

The objectives of this study is to present a method aimed to empower and educate leaders of networks for small and medium sized enterprises (SME), in order to spread and ensure sustainability of an ongoing safety process.

3 Method

Results and experiences from previously performed safety interventions (Stave et al., 2007 and Eklöf and Törner, 2005) were applied together with literature studies in order to develop a supportive handbook and a course method to empower leaders of SME networks for safer work environment.

4 Results

The results achieved so far are here presented as a course proposal adjusted especially to leaders of SME networks. The education/empowerment is conducted by a researcher and comprises three meetings with 8 to 10 SME leaders. The first meeting includes theory, reflexion and discussion using the supportive handbook that now is under development. The second meeting includes experience and practice of the methodology by performing a network meeting, each participant practicing as the leader. Between the first and second meeting the group leaders are assigned the following; to recruit their group; to write an incident diary and to make a safety information search. After the second meeting, the monthly network meetings are going to start. After one year of monthly meetings a third meeting with the network leaders will be held to evaluate and develop the methodology using a pre-post questionnaire as well as a group interview of the leaders and analysis of their memos.

The following issues are in focus in the empowerment process, supported by the handbook:

- *To change with dialogue*
Change of attitude and behaviour takes time and different stages of change require various support (Prochaska and DiClemente, 1982). A process developing communication and feedback skills, learning with dialogue and reflection in action.
- *The role of the network leader*
The leader should not act as an expert, rather as a consultant (Schein, 1987), to support and help the group to focus on safety and to encourage new perspectives. The leader also needs support for self confidence, striving for an open and trustful climate, supporting self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001).
- *To work with the network group*
By using an incident diary, real experiences can be analysed and shared within the group, leading to new insight. Manageability should be emphasized and a positive attitude towards solutions.

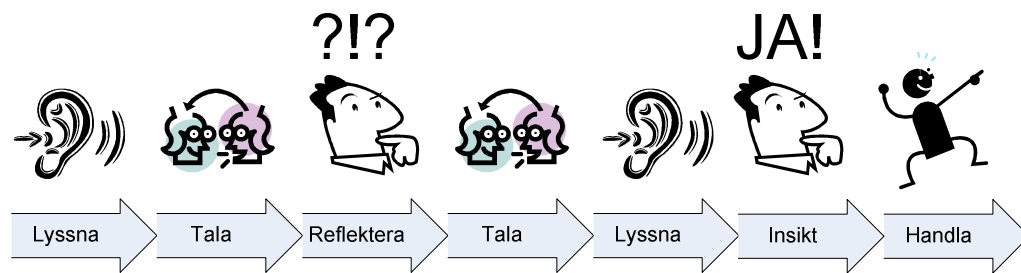


Figure 1. The empowerment dialogue based on listening, talking, reflecting, talking, listening, insights and action, continuing in a loop process.

5 Discussion

Empowerment is not easily captured but in a review of different instruments to survey empowerment, Arneson and Ekberg (2006) present the following dimensions that were most frequently used: control, participation, competence and meaning, self-image and internalisation of goal. Empowerment is a process from the bottom and up (Leverack, 2004). The intention in this study is not to modify behaviour but to support both network leaders, and through them network members, to re-evaluating safety attitudes and to assist in the change process towards increased safety activity and safety priority. Our aspiration is that safety conscious and active leaders could act as early adopters, according to the theories of diffusion of innovation (Rogers, 1995), paving way for other SME leaders.

The empowerment process in this study is based on dialogue and reflection; that is learning by listening, dialoguing, reflecting and discussing, leading to insight and action followed by dialogue and listening etc in a loop process (see Figure 1). This is in line with Wilhelmson (1998) writing about 'learning dialogue', where the aim is to change perspective and to train conversation skills in small groups. It is of great importance that a new perspective is attained so that instead of doing more of the same, new methods and solutions will be tried, questioning underlying goals and assumptions (Argyris, 1990).

Reflection about practice is encouraged through making analyses of experienced incidents, following the chain of events upstream, and identifying different sources of risks. By discussing real examples, the gap between practice and procedures could be revealed, and solutions could be sought through communication with others in the same work situation. This pedagogy is very close to the theories of empowerment through 'critical thinking' by Frieres (1970) which Wallerstein and Bernstein (1988) write about stating that it does not appear spontaneously. A facilitator is needed to support the dialogue in order to proceed from an individual level through patterns and structures into actions. They suggest that this may be carried out in five steps where 1) the network leader asks the members about what they see and feel about the problem 2) the group should identify factors influencing the problem on different levels 3) experiences are shared between group members 4) the network leader asks why the problem exists and 5) manageable solutions and plans of actions to solve the problem is explored. There are also other closely related theories such as individual experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) that can be understood as an ongoing interchange between action and reflection, where

past experiences provide the basis for future ones. Arneson and Ekberg (2005) successfully used Problem Based Learning (PBL) in an empowerment project. The results of their qualitative analyses showed that the following factors were important for the empowerment process: reflection, awareness and insight, self administration and group solidarity, social support, action and activity.

Leaders of networks for small and medium sized enterprises (SME) do often have to develop, plan and solve their health and safety problems on their own. Their expertise is in production rather than in health and safety issues, and improvements in occupational health and safety may therefore not be so easily acquired and incorporated. Health and safety management are often perceived as being separate from production. Learning in small companies takes place within the work, in meetings with others, through a verbal dialogue. In order to proceed from safety knowledge to activity, someone must supply entrepreneurs with this knowledge, face to face, using examples from their working life (Bornberger-Dankvardt et al., 2003).

The method and material in this study is under development and have not yet been tested. Our strive is to make research applicable to affected groups that have little access to expert help, that is to empower for safer work environment.

6 Acknowledgements

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7 References

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