



Lost in Translation—the Practice of Decoupling Work Environment Policy¹

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ABSTRACT

Although companies and top managers claim that the work environment is a high priority, implementing such policies across organizational levels remains a challenge. In this regard, the Greenlandic labor market is no exception. Using the concept of decoupling as a theoretical lens, our in-depth case study of four major Greenlandic companies reveals where and how decoupling occurs during the translation of work environment priorities from top management to practice at the operational level.

Our contribution is twofold: First, we advance decoupling theory by showing how it unfolds through micro-mechanisms with policy-practice decoupling at the top and means-ends decoupling at the local level. Micro-mechanisms which will be relevant in other contexts for work environment management as well as other fields. Second, we shed light on the unique challenges associated with work environment management in Greenland's labor market. This nuanced understanding can help managers address these mechanisms and reduce the impact of decoupling.

KEYWORDS

Arctic labor market / Greenland / micro-mechanism / occupational safety and health (OSH)

I. Introduction

Across the globe, managing the work environment has become a critical concern for organizations. Despite growing attention, a persistent challenge remains in translating formal policies into daily managerial routines. Often, there is a clear disconnect between what organizations state in their formal work environment policies and what happens in practice. In other words, companies frequently respond to work environment expectations by separating their external communication from internal operations—resulting in the phenomenon known as decoupling (e.g., Brunsson 2002; Greenwood et al. 2017; Meyer & Rowan 1977).

The work environment constitutes an issue, which is subject to extensive legal and normative expectations, and research in work environment management generally

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points toward a decoupling problem (Hasle et al, 2017, 2021; Hutchinson et al. 2022) also termed the ‘sidecar’ function (Frick 1990; Hasle et al. 2021).

Managing the work environment can be understood as a management technology, for which formal leadership holds responsibility and makes decisions regarding implementation at all levels of the organization. In this context, decoupling refers to the separation between the stated work environment policy and its actual implementation in practice. Such segregation may stem from external institutional pressures that compel organizations to adopt certain policies to demonstrate compliance, while their internal practices continue largely unchanged. Hutchinson et al. (2022) shows, for example, how artefacts such as a written plan become a symbol of doing something without taking active steps to complete the task. The same segregation is found on a more general level, such as in corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Athanasopoulou et al. 2025) and the ISO 14000 standards, in which companies are not fully implementing the formal accreditation system (Aravind & Christmann 2011).

The work environment resembles an opaque field, resulting in a broad grey zone for what is needed to secure compliance with external requirements. The increased institutional pressure from society raises the question of how work environment policy at the management level is transformed into practices at the workplace level. A process which can be expected to contain an element of policy-practice decoupling, and furthermore how means-ends decoupling may be reflected by deviations between practices and the necessary work environment effort at workplace level, as indicated in safety research pointing to the discrepancy between ‘Work As Imagined’ and ‘Work As Done’ (e.g., Borys 2012; Mendoza et al. 2024). Nonetheless, both at a general theoretical level and specifically within the field of work environment research, there remains a notable paucity of studies that explain how decoupling is enacted and from there how decoupling can be remediated (Hengst et al. 2020). The purpose of this study is to address this gap in research. Moreover, the study seeks to advance the limited amount of research that examines work environment issues in the Greenlandic context.

We do that through a qualitative multi-case study of work environment management in four large Greenlandic companies. We contribute to the literature by identifying the decoupling mechanism on the micro-level that shapes the implementation of work environment policies and practices from top management to the operational level. Key mechanisms include ambiguous and implicit communication from top managers, and uncertainty among local managers and workers about what to do, resulting in superficial activities without any relevant outcomes — means-ends decoupling. While these results originate in Greenland, we argue that this institutional environment illuminates decoupling mechanisms, which are also likely to occur in other contexts and can be used to develop strategies to reduce decoupling. From a Nordic perspective, the results are significant, as they highlight the reactions and challenges that emerge when a Nordic regulatory tradition is imposed on workers and managers with a markedly different cultural orientation in Greenland.

2. The Greenland context

Greenland’s labor market and work environment legislation present unique challenges rooted in its relatively recent industrialization. Historically reliant on hunting and fishing,

Greenland transitioned to an economy dominated by industry and salaried employment only after World War II, with rapid development following the introduction of local government in 1979 and Self-Government in 2009 (Rud 2017). Today, approximately 90% of the population is wage earners (Departement for Sociale anliggender, Familier, Arbejdsmarked og Indenrigsanliggender 2024), yet most belong to the first or second generation of industrial workers. This demographic shift is compounded by limited educational attainment and a cultural preference for self-employment, with one-third of the workforce expressing such aspirations (Høgedahl et al. 2021).

Greenland's work environment legislation with minimal contextual adaptation largely mirrors Danish law, which, like the other Nordic countries, builds on reflexive regulation (Aalders & Wilthagen 1997; Hasle et al, 2014). Greenland adopted the Danish work environment law from 1975 in 1986, albeit without key provisions such as mandatory safety organizations and elected safety representatives. Significant revisions came in 2005 and 2023, but still lagging 10–15 years behind the Danish revisions (Kappel et al. 2023). Throughout this process, lawmakers assumed parity between Danish and Greenlandic labor conditions, neglecting Greenland's distinct socio-economic context. Enforcement remains under Danish jurisdiction via the Working Environment Authority (WEA), headquartered in Copenhagen with a small team of six officers in Nuuk. Inspection practices have similarly lacked adaptation to Greenlandic realities, as most Danish statutory orders remain unimplemented, leaving companies reliant on general legal provisions.

Empirical evidence suggests Greenlandic firms prioritize occupational health and safety but struggle with compliance, particularly regarding workplace assessments (WPAs), establishment of safety organizations, and competency development. These difficulties are exacerbated in smaller enterprises and those located far from the capitol Nuuk (Kappel et al. 2023). The persistence of these challenges underscores the inadequacy of a legislative framework transplanted from Denmark without significant modification.

In sum, Greenland's work environment governance reflects a tension between formal legislative alignment with Denmark and practical constraints shaped by cultural, geographic, and institutional factors. Studying these constraints can open possibilities to strengthen the implementation of efficient work environment programs as well as to identify decoupling mechanisms, which may be manifested in this weak institutional environment.

3. Theory

From the initial phases of the case studies, we observed the paradox that top executive management vocalizes the high priority of the work environment and the participation of workers, but we soon discovered that first-line managers and workers remained passive toward the work environment. We wondered why the top executives did not care that their priority for the work environment is not (or weakly) implemented in practice. This contrasts with other types of decisions related to economic performance, which management strictly monitors. The neo-institutional construct of decoupling provides a useful theoretical framework to illuminate and explain this paradox.

The key argument in neo-institutional theory is that organizations seek legitimacy for their decisions and actions, even in cases where the pursuit of legitimacy may conflict

with rational economic objectives (Greenwood et al. 2017; Meyer & Rowan 1977). Companies need to respond to the pressure from institutional structures, which may lead to decoupling when companies pretend to comply with the institutional pressure (Boxenbaum & Jonsson 2017; Bromley & Powell 2012; Wijen 2014). Decoupling explains how organizations try to handle the dilemma of not being able to comply with or implement the expectations from external stakeholders embedded in the cognitive, normative, and regulative structures (Boxenbaum & Jonsson 2017; Meyer & Rowan 1977). Accordingly, the management makes decisions and communicates initiatives both inside and outside the organization, which are not implemented (Meyer & Rowan 1977) or are implemented in a weakened form (Bromley & Powell 2012; Wijen 2014).

The balance between rational practice and the priority of legitimacy varies between different companies. The difference is mainly related to a distinction between predominantly technical environments and predominantly institutional environments (Boxenbaum & Jonsson 2017; Bromley & Powell 2012). Examples of organizations located in institutional environments include education (Hallett 2010; Wiseman 2022) and public administration (Brunsson 2002; Howlett 2003). For these organizations, it is more difficult to measure the effects of activities than it is for organizations in a technical environment. The four cases in this study encompass production, retail, construction, and transportation, all of which are located in a technical environment, in which it is easier to identify the consequences of decisions related to the core business, and economic and operational KPIs (key performance indicators) can be expected to take precedence over OSH (Brandl et al. 2022; Hasle et al. 2021).

Yet even a predominantly technical environment cannot remove the importance of institutional pressure. Organizations are—according to neo-institutional theory—loosely coupled systems (Orton & Weick 1990; Weick 1976), even though organizations resemble coherent purpose-based systems. At the same time, they function as loosely coupled systems, in which functions function as more or less independent units in contemporary networks, whereby certain functions may be subject to a strong institutional environment, even if the company's core business is in a technical environment. Work environment policy constitutes such an institutional field (Dyreborg 2011; Hasle et al. 2021; Kongsvik et al. 2016) and is characterized by a high degree of institutional pressure in our four case companies.

3.1 Decoupling

Decoupling covers an overall institutional framework as originally defined by Meyer and Rowan (1977, p. 357) and pointed out even more sharply by Brunsson (2002, p. 7):

Organizations can also produce double standards or double talk, i.e., keep different ideologies for external and internal use. The way management presents the organization and its goals to the outside world need not agree with the signals conveyed to the workforce.

Building on this basis definition, Boxenbaum and Jonsson (2017, p. 88) point to the contradictions between institutionalized pressure and internal organizational efficiency as well as contradictions within multiple institutionalized pressures. These perspectives direct attention to decoupling at the macro and meso levels but not to the micro

processes that constitute the practical decoupling in organizations, and newer research has started to explain reasons for decoupling decisions at lower levels in the organizations (Alvesson & Spicer 2018; Brandl et al. 2022; Bromley & Powell 2012; Powell & Rerup 2017).

The first important question relates to the extent of separation in practice. Bromley and Powell (2012) distinguish between two variants of decoupling, with policy-practice decoupling as the original form. Yet decoupling also happens when decisions are implemented in the organization but not to the full extent, resulting in means-ends decoupling (Bromley & Powell 2012, pp. 9, 15). Means-ends differs from the original theory in that decisions are executed but in a weakened form, and 'have a weak relationship to the core task of an organization' (Bromley & Powell, 2012, p. 3). Work environment constitutes an example in which institutional pressure from regulation requires companies to take certain actions, which are separated from the core business in the form of the 'sidecar' function, as mentioned above (Frick 1990; Hasle et al, 2021).

By extension, means-ends decoupling expands the range of causes underlying organizational decoupling and offers explanations for why organizations fail to realize their intentions. The differences between the original theory of decoupling (policy-practice) and the means-ends perspective contribute to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of organizational phenomena.

Policy-practice refers mainly to decoupling initiated by top management in response to institutional pressures from the organizational context. Means-ends, by contrast, shifts the focus to internal processes, specifically the gap between intention (means) and its implementation (ends). This perspective highlights a rationale comparable to policy-practice, as far as lower-level managers may deliberately decouple intentions (Dick 2015). However, research has identified additional causes of means-ends decoupling, which extend beyond conscious managerial choice. Employees themselves may initiate decoupling, just as they may reinforce managerial intentions (Dick 2015).

Several contributions suggest that decoupling arises from opaque relationships within organizations, where those expected to comply with the means do not fully understand the underlying intentions (Jabbouri et al. 2025; Wijen 2014). For example, one study of CSR illustrates variation in the degree of decoupling depending on whether lower-level managers are involved and granted space for independent initiatives and interpretations of means, compared to organizations where means are imposed as top-down, standardized initiatives (Athanasopoulou et al. 2025). Other studies emphasize that a lack of knowledge and resources among those responsible for implementation constitutes another source of means-ends decoupling (Stål & Corvellec 2022).

Thus, means-ends decoupling enhances our understanding of how organizations implement policies only tenuously connected to organizational goals (Jabbouri et al. 2022, p. 136). A key observation is that means-ends decoupling often occurs in activities outside the organization's core functions (Bromley & Powell 2012; Stål & Corvellec 2022).

These conditions position means-ends decoupling as a broader and more nuanced theoretical framework for analyzing organizational processes, including work envisionment. It is important to emphasize, however, that this does not imply a rejection of policy-practice. The two forms of decoupling may coexist and be observed simultaneously (Wijen 2014).

Decoupling at the local level takes place as practices performed by individuals and in small teams (Fredriksson et al. 2013; Hallett 2010). In a review of neo-institutional



theory, Alvesson and Spicer (2018) point out that examining the role of the individual’s institutional work contributes to the understanding of decoupling at the micro level. Individuals do so through different interpretations and actions, although they are faced with otherwise identical demands and decisions (Lounsbury 2001; Vo 2016).

A final important question relates to the limits of decoupling (Bromley & Powell 2012; Hallett 2010; Tashman et al. 2019). A complete disregard for institutional norms and frameworks, an obvious inconsistency between what is said and what is done, and a total absence of justifications for actions will lead to a loss of legitimacy. In other words, there are limits to the extent to which organizations can decouple without negative consequences. Brandl et al. (2022) point to the need for a certain level of policy-practice coherence. To maintain legitimacy, a minimum of visible measures and activities is necessary. Certain activities must be undertaken, but they may have little influence on the outcome. Those activities often have formal status and a formal aim, but no, or only partial, consequences for practice.

3.2 Work environment from policy to practice

Building on the key decoupling theory, we suggest a simple model to guide our analysis of decoupling mechanisms. We presume that policy-practice mainly takes place at the top management level and means-ends at the workplace level, although the two have overlaps, and for instance, top managers, by initiating certain activities, can also contribute to means-ends decoupling. We further expect competition between technical and institutional pressure, and that decoupling for both concepts unfolds through individual and team activities.

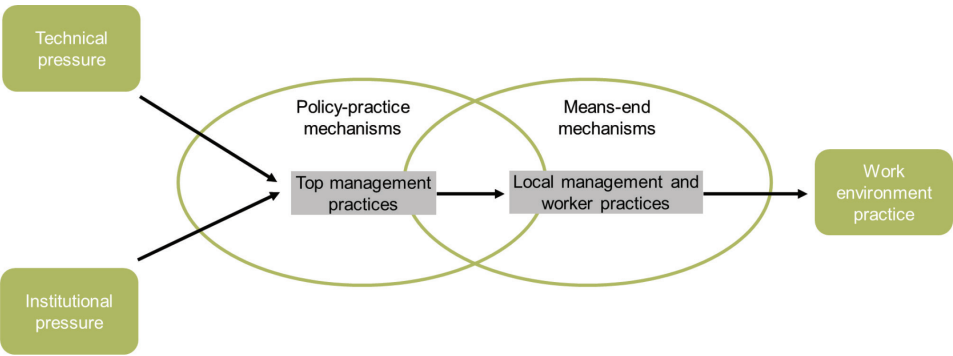


Figure 1. Relations between policy-practice and means-ends decoupling.

4. Methodology

The aim of this study is to study how decoupling functions in practice in relation to the work environment. The study is part of a larger study of work environment management in Greenlandic companies in practice (Kappel et al. 2023, 2026). We designed the research as a multiple-embedded case study (Yin 2014) to obtain data about managers’

and workers’ perceptions of the work environment in their respective organizations and job functions, covering subunit from each of the four cases such as local factories, retail shops, and headquarters. In accordance with the case study design, we selected companies as maximum variation cases (Flyvbjerg 2013; Yin 2014) in four major business sectors in Greenland, encompassing production, construction, retail, and transport.

The primary source of data is semi-structured qualitative interviews (Roulston & Choi 2018). The interviews comprise a combination of what King (2004) conceptualizes as ‘realist interviews’ and ‘phenomenological interviews’. A realist interview focuses on exact information, which in this study includes information about concrete work environment activities in the organization. The phenomenological element of the interviews covers the participants’ interpretations and personal views on the work environment at their job location.

The interview guide was based on the results from a previous quantitative study (Kappel et al. 2023) supplemented by pilot studies in the four companies. Main topics in the interview guide:

- Information about the project, anonymity, and consent;
- Interviewee’s background, position, education, and experiences;
- Primary tasks and attitudes toward work;
- Experience and attitudes toward work environment;
- Local work environment activities, including the safety organization and workplace risk assessment;
- Qualification of first-line managers and safety reps;
- Understanding of work environment;
- Division of responsibility.

We adapted the questions in each interview to the respondents’ job functions and the particulars of each company to accommodate the differences in work environment practice between the four companies. Likewise, the respondents’ tasks and responsibilities relating to work environment varied based on their hierarchical position in the organization.

We have completed 88 interviews covering all hierarchical layers in the companies (Table 1).

Table 1 Distribution of interviews in the four cases

Company	Position	Interviews	Company	Position	Interviews
Case 1	Top executive	3	Case 2	Top executive	4
	OSH staff			OSH staff	
	Middle managers	5		Middle managers	2
	First-line managers	3		First-line managers	8
	OSH representative	3		OSH representative	2
	Workers	4		Workers	5

(Continued)



Table 1 (Continued)

Company	Position	Interviews	Company	Position	Interviews
Case 3	Top executive	2	Case 4	Top executive	1
	OSH staff	3		OSH staff	1
	Middle managers	6		Middle managers	9
	First-line managers	4		First-line managers	9
	OSH representative	3		OSH representative	3
	Workers	3		Workers	4
				External	1

Some the interviews took place as group interviews, and in all, 114 respondents participated in the 88 interviews. The interviews took place in Nuuk and three cities outside Nuuk. Three senior researchers conducted the interviews with the participation of five student assistants. The researchers worked in interpreter tandems (Resch & Enzenhofer 2018) with bilingual student assistants from the social sciences at Ilisimatusarfik (Greenland University). The researchers conducted the interviews in Danish, but respondents could choose their preferred language, and the student assistants translated. The student assistants were involved throughout the project period, and in addition to the transcription of interviews, they participated in analyzing the results to assist with the interpretation of the Greenlandic culture. The duration of the interviews varied from 15 minutes to more than 120 minutes. All interviews took place at the respondents' workplaces. All respondents are secured anonymity.

The article applies an abductive analysis drawing on theory and empirical data (Haig 2005; Thompson 2022). The abductive approach allows us to uncover an understanding of how decoupling works differently at the micro level (Guette & Vandenbempt 2017; Kelling et al. 2021) and thereby provide theoretical insight into how decoupling transpires in business organizations. We further build on realist evaluation (Pawson & Tilley 1997) to identify possible decoupling mechanisms.

All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. We used the software NVivo to assist with thematic coding (Gibbs 2007). The coding took place in two rounds, inspired by the Gioia method (Gioia et al. 2013). We initially focused on the embedded opinions that the respondent's statements expressed (first-order). We further employed second-order coding of analytical categories of decoupling and completed the analysis with a pattern-coding process (Miles & Huberman 1994) focusing on elements across the four cases. The coding identified relatively direct examples of decoupling of the work environment efforts. However, we also included codes that nuance, problematize, or contradict decoupling.

5. Findings

As indicated in Figure 1, we expect that policy-practice decoupling mainly originates in top management behavior, and we start by analyzing how top management handles



issues related to the work environment, and we subsequently follow how directions from top management are reflected in the behavior of local managers and workers.

5.1 Top management policy

The work environment legislation specifies that it is the company's top management as the employer, who is formally responsible for ensuring that the company and its workers operate within the framework of the law (Kappel et al. 2026). Statements and actions by the CEO and other top managers thus form the policy for the company on the work environment.

As for most large contemporary companies, the home pages of all four cases highlight the importance of a healthy workforce. The form varies from being part of their mission and vision statement to inclusion in sustainability policies with, for example, adherence to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 8 on decent work. In the interviews, all the CEOs confirmed the priority of thriving workers and, more specifically, a safe and healthy work environment. For three of the four companies, they justify the high priority of the work environment by a substantial risk of serious occupational accidents.

Due to the normative and regulatory institutions that prevail in the labor market, this answer could be highly anticipated. The interesting question is how and to what extent such obvious priorities translate into organizational practice. Diving into the behavior of the top managers, we realized that these statements were communicated inadequately to lower-level managers and to workers at operational level – indicating a strong element of policy-practice decoupling. Yet, as decoupling does not primarily constitute conscious cheating but rather a pragmatic attempt to get around the many more or less conflicting priorities, we also found examples of top management actions communicating positive work environment priorities directly to local sites. An example is the CEO in Case 3, who toured all the company's local sites and organized meetings with the workers, in which they could express concerns about the work environment, among other subjects. However, it was a one-time event without plans for repetition.

Decoupling through flawed communication was by far the dominant feature and took the form of three mechanisms, which show how policy-practice decoupling can take place in practice.

- Shifting responsibility to workers and managers
- Passivity toward the work environment
- Ambiguous priority of work environment activities

5.1.1 Shifting responsibility to workers

One decoupling mechanism is to leave responsibility to the workers. The top managers expressed, in various ways, the opinion that workers have a large share of responsibility for the work environment. The CEO of Case 3 explicitly expressed this position, but started to point to the high priority of the work environment:



At management meetings, when we talk about change, there are a lot of people who are good at saying that we need to have safety first before we work. So, such a safe first way of thinking. I think it is very well incorporated into the organization. I have. I'm comfortable somewhere where people take it seriously.

But then the CEO said later in the interview that safety is primarily the workers' own responsibility:

[Safety] is not to come from above. You must look out when you cross a road. Yes, you must do it yourself, and you must know that if something prevents you from looking out, then you have someone to address. The security in this opportunity. The culture or mentality, meaning that I as a worker of [case company] am responsible for the safety of my workplace.

Two other statements from this interview also emphasize the claim that the high priority of safety is mainly the responsibility of the individual worker:

It is a dangerous workplace. Everyone knows it's a dangerous workplace, and I think that it also helps [us] to take care of each other, *and* because I fundamentally believe that safety starts with the individual. The environment also starts with the individual.

This channels an understanding of responsibility whereby the top manager signals that safety is a high priority, but at the same time transfers responsibility to the individual worker rather than pointing out that the responsibility is rooted in the organization itself and with the (top) management.

5.1.2 Passivity toward the work environment

Another decoupling mechanism is related to how the work environment is anchored in the priorities of top management. The four CEOs point out that the work environment has a high priority, but their own activities show a different picture of the realities. None of them involves themselves in the work environment. The legislation requires the establishment of a safety committee with middle/first-line managers and safety representatives, chaired by a responsible top manager. A similar work council, including managers and shop stewards, is required in the collective agreement. None of the CEOs gave priority to chairing or joining these committees. As expressed by one of the four CEOs (Case 4):

Interviewer:	Formally in relation to all this work environment efforts: Do you ever say: Now I want to see that work environment report, or the latest work environment report?
CEO:	No. I get sent a lot of it, all by myself. But from the Safety Committee, so that you can say: I will get it, but not all of it, and certainly not in detail... But it is possibly an area I could have ... There are many areas where visibility is needed. And I would say: It's probably more through the production management than you do those things and not so much me.

The same interview gives another example of inactivity in practice:

The other thing is, in other words, they must also have control of the work environment and safety before we get started. So, we have control of our safety organization on our sites. Do we have control over our workplace design? Do we know what we do if an accident occurs? What [do we do] and how do we react?

At first appearance, the CEOs expressed a priority of establishing and running a safety organization, but subsequent interviews with managers and workers revealed that most sites did not have a safety organization, and that the CEO never requested managers to secure the establishment of this organization. The inactivity in the two quotes, which are just two of several, is reflected in the fact that the CEOs expected the formal work environment policy to be followed up by middle managers and workers. But they did not, or only sporadically, follow up on whether the local units implemented the policy.

5.1.3 Ambiguous priority of work environment activities

The low priority is emphasized not only by what was expressed but also by what was not included in the answers to our questions about how they, as CEOs, in practice, ensured that the work environment efforts had a high priority. Across the four interviews, the CEOs expressed confidence that the managers at lower levels will take on the responsibility for the work environment and that these managers will contact the top managers on their own initiative if there should be problems or a need for action. This kind of statement signaled ambiguity to lower-level management as the CEOs indirectly indicated that the work environment is not sufficiently important for them to be involved in.

One newly appointed CEO (Case 1) expressed a need for the development and prioritization of work environment efforts: *And I just want to say that we are not there yet. But, but, but we spend both time and resources on organizing it now.* However, the CEO did not indicate how he will ensure the priority of the work environment. He explained, for example, that he had found a qualified manager to take care of the work environment, but at the same time, he allocated other tasks to him, leaving no reasonable time for him to take up the work environment responsibility. The CEO thereby practices without a full-time work environment as a professional. This example also indicates the limited allocation of resources to work environment efforts, which the lower levels strongly experienced. The same limitations of resource allocation became unveiled by local managers who told of obvious work environment issues ranging from repair of holes in harbor quays, to outdated ventilation, to lack of training for safety representatives and managers. The CEOs knew about and expressed recognition of the problems but did not allocate resources.

Finally, with respect to the CEO's priority of the work environment, another CEO (Case 2) explained that the work environment is not a topic usually brought up at the weekly management meetings, indirectly signaling that the work environment and work environment policy are not sufficiently important to discuss at management meetings—contrasting with the priority expressed in formal announcements.

5.2 From policy-practice to means-ends at the local level

It can be argued that the fact that top managers do not engage directly in work environment activities but signal that it is important can be sufficient to encourage managers and workers at a lower level to become actively involved in the work environment.

However, when general statements from top managers are not followed up by actions, managers and workers are likely to interpret that the effort is not of a high priority. Consequently, as the interviews revealed, the work environment may be addressed in a weaker form than top managers' signals, thereby resulting in means-ends decoupling. Decoupling in the four companies and their various sites manifested itself differently, but we could identify across the cases five mechanisms connected to means-ends decoupling:

- Focus on operational objectives
- Insufficient resource allocation
- Symbolic activities
- Knowledge gaps

5.2.1 Focus on operational objectives

The four companies operate predominantly in technical environments, which is reflected in clear and measurable KPIs regarding production, lead times, and turnover. But they do not have quantitative KPIs for the work environment and HR management, with one exception: one company has a KPI on worker turnover. A quote from a middle manager (Case 2) illustrates the priority of the KPIs:

Yes, and it is of course an expression of what it is that is demanded from above. This thing about being a middle manager relatively high up as a sales manager, you I am being pressured by the management with KPIs. With numbers to be looked for, also instead of motivating the worker to create the result.

Without KPIs comparable to the operational field, goals in the work environment will often be vague and subject to interpretation, which creates ambiguity about how to work with the topic in practice. In turn, this can contribute to a downgrading of efforts around the work environment.

An example emphasizing the ambiguous interpretation by workers and managers lower down in the organization is the difficulty in separating the work environment from the CSR programs that two of the four companies had initiated. One of CEOs recognized this issue (Case 2):

It's something we, I think so, I think it's something we have been focused on CSR and sustainability, if we put the same energy into the safety committee, then it will work. But we clearly do not.

The existence of tangible KPIs for production and sales takes precedence over the work environment. Several respondents, particularly workers, stated that economics and

increased efficiency were more important than the work environment. This is perhaps not surprising, but has the consequence that workers experience pressure to accept risky solutions or that managers tacitly accept risky behavior.

The focus on performance is particularly evident in cases where customer interest in the work environment is expressed, for instance, through the requirement for certificates and audits. In these cases, the local management is far more interested in the work environment than usual.

5.2.2 Insufficient resource allocation

Allocation of resources constitutes a key mechanism in means-ends decoupling. Top management signals the priority of the work environment but does not allocate sufficient and relevant resources. The lack of resources constitutes barriers related to time, human resources, and economy. This means-ends decoupling mechanism is an example relating to both top management and local resource application. Top management ignores the existence of these barriers, even in cases where the limitations are obvious and well known.

One of the critical resources is time. A middle manager (Case 4) with overall production responsibility pointed out:

When I was told that I needed to go up in production volume, I had to get up to those hundred tons, and I got whip and whip and whip from above. So, the safety group here at the factory has received much lower priority. We were to hold the four meetings annually. They were never held because we never had time for it.

This is just one of several examples where the first-line managers reported that there is no time to undertake activities related to the work environment and worker well-being. A contributing factor is that many of the locations are understaffed due to major challenges in recruiting labor (Case 2):

Worker: Then I have taken on some positions around safety now as a safety representative. But I would say that it is very difficult to arrange meetings here, precisely because we constantly have a shortage of workers, so it is difficult to hold meetings.

The limited resources also concern investments in the work environment. Many locations outside the capital, Nuuk, reported worn facilities and technology, which constitute both an operational and a safety barrier. These barriers contain both technical and decoupling elements. The decoupling element is evident when lower-level managers and workers point out the need for investments for the sake of work environment, which top management either rejects or chooses to ignore without addressing the problem. One production manager (Case 4) framed the problem as follows:

... everything that can be done locally, must be done locally and it is the factory manager who is responsible, and they must know, as well as what budgets and funds they have within their own framework. And if they then exceed, then they must send an application on to the production director or someone else who has larger and more stripes on their



shoulders. And I experience a bit of conflict occasionally ... some people report to me that they have sent an application several times, but they never get an answer.

Sometimes, the managers at the local units simply do not allocate resources to establish and run the compulsory safety organization. The following quotes resemble several similar examples from the interviews:

Interviewer: And have you heard anything from the company about anything that needs to be done about the work environment?
Worker: No, I haven't. (Case 3)

and

First-line manager: We are keen to bring up some topics, but we do not hold any meetings. There is otherwise a positive attitude towards holding meetings. But it just doesn't happen. (Case 3)

5.2.3 Symbolic activities

One central aspect of decoupling is the symbolic nature of many activities. One example is the compulsory WPA, which companies are required to conduct at least every third year or when conditions in the workplace change. The four companies implement to a varying degree WPA but most often without consequences, as explained by a safety representative (Case 3):

Interviewer: What about the workplace assessment? Is this something you have been involved in?
Worker: I know that we fill [it] in on the system. And I know it is being monitored from Nuuk.
Interviewer: Are there any things that have been done after you have had a workplace assessment, where you say, 'Now we have to...?' Or any initiatives that have been taken?
Worker: No.

Another worker (Case 1) conveyed his experiences of the WPA even more directly: *I have filled it out once. The workplace assessment is not used very much in Greenland.*

A corresponding example appears in discussions at the meetings of the local safety committees, which have almost no practical consequences:

There has been a lack of systematics and structure in things. There is no. I was at the first safety meeting as a supervisor, and at the meeting there I thought, for example, there was first and foremost a lack of agenda for the meeting. It was like, 'What did we talk about last time? Shall we discuss that?' And then we discussed that, and then people kind of ask: 'What? Do you have anything new?' And everyone was a bit like: 'When,' and we have 90 days without work accidents, so you have to bring cake. (Manager, Case 4)

Sometimes, the symbolic mechanism can be quite explicit. For example, a middle manager has just explained the structure of the safety organization to the interviewer, and then, the interviewer continued: *Yes, it looks highly organized. How often do you meet? Manager: Never. (Case 1)*

Managers and workers know that they should do something about the work environment, but they interpret the message of low priority, and certain activities, such as meetings on the safety committee and filling out WPA questionnaires, are undertaken without any practical consequences and constitute, in reality, only symbolic activities.

5.2.4 Knowledge gaps

Knowledge is a crucial resource for managing the work environment. The interviews reveal a lack of knowledge among managers and workers about both the formal requirements (tasks and rights) and the concept of the work environment (what can be hazardous). The workers generally have little knowledge about formal rights and obligations, as well as risks and prevention. They usually remain passive unless encouraged by first-line or middle-managers.

Another consequence is that there was a lack of interest among workers in being part of the safety organization, even though this is a statutory right. The workers explained that they abstain from taking on the role of safety representatives, also when encouraged by management:

HR Manager (Case 2): Yes, and many times, I think it's because the workers don't understand what it means to be a representative. We also have workers who do not understand their rights according to their collective agreement. Then we (also) have many workers who do not know that they can make demands via the safety committee and the cooperation committee.

And a middle manager (Case 4) speaks about the same topic:

Interviewer: A worker representative?
 Manager: No, we don't have any.
 Interviewer: You don't have any?
 Manager: No, no one wants to be one, even union representatives they want to, they don't want to.

As already mentioned, there are differences between the cases and their production sites, and we did find a few cases where workers accepted the role of safety representative, and some of them explained how they achieved a well-functioning collaboration with management.

Language barriers exacerbate means-ends decoupling related to the knowledge issue by creating uncertainty about understanding and acting in the work environment (Case 3):



Worker: Yes. There was such a follow-up course. And that was three years ago now. And it was in Danish, and it was a colleague from Denmark who travelled around and gave these courses on the entire coast. But as soon as you get outside Nuuk, people speak in Greenlandic, so after they have been on this course, I had a colleague who said: “as soon as I got out, I forgot everything that was said.” Because it was in Danish.

Another example in Case 4 shows how a translation error can lead to a misinterpretation:

Middle manager: About what I mentioned about ventilation.
 Interviewer: Yes.
 Middle manager: I had really hoped that they [the workers] would all have marked it as lousy [in the workplace assessment], so that we could get funds to solve the problems. But unfortunately, it was misunderstood because it was formulated incorrectly in Greenlandic.

The result was that even though everyone considered ventilation as a problem, it did not appear in the WPA as a problem, due to the linguistic error. In this case, it can be argued that it is not a decoupling. It is an error. However, decoupling occurs when linguistic ambiguities are accepted. There were no consequences because of the obvious mistranslation, a problem that can be enhanced when workers came from Asia who speak neither Greenlandic nor Danish.

We found a few examples of awareness of the problems, as expressed by a manager from Case 4:

And that's also the way our HR acts. We use YouTube and take advantage of the fact that it is visual and completely different from writing and written communication. Because it is not only the ordinary workers who can have problems with language – it is also plant managers, who do not necessarily have a lot of skills in the Danish language.

5.2.5 Local diversity—not everything is decoupling

In all four companies, there are units that have managers who give priority to the work environment and workers who take an active part in this work. But this happens in a minority of units. Yet, these few places show that decoupling of the work environment is not inevitable. But it requires that local managers and workers themselves take the initiative to implement an active effort. There are no clear signals of expectations for greater efforts from the top management of the four companies. The managers and workers in the few active units could explain in detail how they organized work environment activities. We present two of several examples (Case 1):

Interviewer: Do you hold safety meetings on the site?
 Middle manager: Yes, every 14 days.

And a statement from a worker in Case 4:

We have the safety groups where we have representatives. So, it's easy for us, if there are some things that need to be sorted out or regulated, we have an opportunity to bring it up that way. So yes, it works in conjunction with the safety groups. That's what I would say.

6. Discussion

This study focuses on understanding the practical mechanisms, which make decoupling an organizational reality. We did not find evidence for deliberate double talk—the policy-practice variant of decoupling, in which CEOs tell one story outside the organization and at the same time internally instruct managers and workers to abstain from doing as communicated to external stakeholders. Our findings thereby support Bromley and Powell (2012) who points out that policy-practice decoupling is rather a pragmatic and rational attempt to handle many and often contravening external and internal requirements. As a not-deliberate activity, policy-practice decoupling moves closer to means-ends decoupling, but we argue that with the role of top management to articulate the internal policies of the company, it makes sense to maintain the distinction. The CEOs focus in their daily work on the economic performance of the organization and make pragmatic attempts to find ways to address the daily conflicting demands. The top management practice resembles what Palmer et al. (2022) call ‘spray and pray’ in change management, with management communicating widely without follow-up, hoping that the message will get through. This metaphor fits into the work environment efforts in the four case companies. Top management signals that the work environment is a key area of action and subsequently hopes that workers and managers at lower levels will take the message to heart. There are no follow-up activities from the top managers. A few units take the intentions signaled by top management seriously. However, in most units, a series of means-ends decoupling mechanisms makes the implementation of the work environment take place in a weakened form. We found three basic mechanisms.

- Pushing/shifting responsibility to the local managers and workers, including the expression of trust in lower-level management's ability to take responsibility for the work environment and the attribution of direct responsibility to individual workers;
- Passivity toward the work environment, including deciding not to join safety committees and works councils;
- Ambiguous priority of work environment practice, including a lack of demand for work environment reporting and limited allocation of resources to work environment at the local level.

The transition of policy-practice decoupling from the top level is mainly reflected in a means-ends decoupling at the local level. This form of decoupling comes from both interpretations of top management's signals and from managers' and workers' own priorities based on their experience from everyday work.

With ambiguous top management signals, it falls up to the local units themselves to give priority and implement work environment efforts. This is a task that has been

successful in a few places (Kappel et al. 2026). Yet, it is evident that the majority of respondents draw a picture of a weak and inefficient effort. In most of the workplaces studied, this is a task that is downgraded or ignored by both managers and workers. By examining the phenomenon at a micro level, we found four means-ends decoupling mechanisms:

- Focus on operational objectives
- Insufficient resource allocation
- Symbolic activities
- Knowledge gaps

Means-ends decoupling cannot only be interpreted as an institutional element. Decoupling is intertwined with technical elements. A clear example is the limited resources, which is an objective fact. The local managers are pressed for time due to the general shortage of labor in all four companies, and they use their time for core business operations, leading to the exclusion of other management tasks. One of these tasks is work environment activities and personnel management in general, resulting in means-ends decoupling. Another example is limited knowledge among both managers and workers of the work environment in general and the more specific regulatory requirements. Other examples of intertwined technical and institutional elements are the limited availability of the compulsory work environment courses and the language barrier, creating uncertainty regarding the legal requirements. The consequence is that policy-practice decoupling from top management is enhanced by technical challenges at the local level.

As pointed out, there are a few locations that prioritize the work environment. These units emphasize the diversity of means-ends decoupling, illustrated by managers and workers at the local level whose interpretation and commitment became decisive for the scale and character of implementation of the often loosely formulated intentions behind workplace environment initiatives. This finding is further reinforced by the missing clear causal link that exists between the ‘means’ articulated at the top level and the ‘ends’ realized in the operating units. For most local units, the results are symbolic activities in accordance with earlier studies of decoupling (Bromley & Powell 2012).

The influence of the technical environments of the case-companies provides space for comprehensible KPIs identified and announced by top management in areas such as the finances, production figures, and schedules for projects. Managers and workers understand these KPIs more clearly than the opaque goals in the field of work environment, and they use them actively in their everyday work. The importance of KPIs is reflected in the few examples of a clear relation to the work environment, such as, for example, external audits. The KPI receives significant attention in these examples, not for protecting workers, but because of the fear of losing market share.

The study examines decoupling in the context of Danish legislation, workplace culture, and practices in a labor market operating under different cultural conditions. Denmark and the other Nordic countries have a longer established tradition for work environment management, but we expect that this type of decoupling mechanism will also appear in the Nordic and European countries. The mechanisms will just be embedded in more elaborate policies and programs, as the fundamental differences between the core business logic and sideline institutional pressure will still be present (Hasle et al.

2021). The importance of these mechanisms may even grow with the increased internationalization as cultural differences rise, and managers and workers may get divergent views on the work environment. In the Nordic countries, managers unfamiliar with Nordic traditions for cooperation about the work environment may be recruited, while workers with a Nordic background may find themselves working alongside colleagues who do not recognize the purpose of electing a safety representative.

For practitioners, the findings give important knowledge to mitigate decoupling. We must disappoint top managers in their hope that the rank and file will follow suit after the declaration of the importance of the work environment. Top managers must take tangible actions to show priority in reality, such as participating in safety committee meetings, putting the work environment on the agenda at management meetings, requesting reports of work environment performance from workplaces, and not least allocating sufficient resources to the work environment. Such actions will show the lower ranks that the work environment is indeed important and thereby motivate them to mitigate means-ends decoupling.

7. Conclusion

Using a neo-institutional lens, this study primarily explores the microprocesses leading to decoupling across four Greenlandic companies, emphasizing the interactions between top management's work environment directives and their operational enactment. Through this analysis, we identify policy-practice decoupling mechanisms at the top level of the companies and means-ends decoupling at the workplace level. These insights contribute both to the advancement of decoupling theory and to the development of more resilient work environment practices adapted to the unique organizational and geographic contexts, such as those represented by Greenland.

Our findings indicate that the work environment efforts in the four companies in Greenland are deficient. The top managers in the cases state that the work environment is a high priority. However, with no follow-up, the local units refrain from implementing efficient work environment measures. Decoupling is taking place, although there are examples of a few workplaces with an active work environment organization and qualified efforts to secure the work environment.

We have studied these decoupling mechanisms in connection with the implementation of work environment policy in Greenland, but we can assume that the policy-practice decoupling mechanisms at the top management level and their consequences for the means-ends decoupling at the local level are likely to appear in other policy fields. The results, therefore, have relevance for other institutional fields than work environment policy in Greenland.

Yet, with a targeted effort at the top level, it is possible to implement efficient management of the work environment among companies in Greenland – a finding which is relevant to both further research and practice. An obvious topic for further study is to uncover why some workplaces are more successful than others. Despite the findings of this study, which demonstrate that top management inaction leads to decoupling between the stated work environment policy and the work environment practice, this question remains.

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