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Research project: Why are people avoiding the position as middle managers?

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Abstract

This research project has been presented at the Pragmatic Constructivism conference in Göteborg, October 2011.

1 Background

It is a well-known fact that Danish organizations experience severe problems in attracting and keeping qualified people for positions as middle managers. People tend to choose specialist functions that do not expose one to the dilemmas and paradoxes of the middle manager position. The Danish employers association (DI) is crying out for knowledge that may help them develop solutions and reflections on the problem complex and the picture seem to be parallel to the Norwegian case.

2 Research hypothesis

The 'middle manager problem' should be seen in the light of the increase of complexity that has come to characterize the middle manager position in recent decades. Before 1980 the situation was rather simple: The middle manager's primary task was to make sure that orders were given and accepted, and see to that the employee/employer-contract was respected. During the 1980s the situation changes completely. The tipping point is the growing awareness and acknowledgement of the ever changing character of organizations and their surroundings. In this context it becomes imperative to make sure that employees keep track of the general development, and the major task is to make sure that employees learn. The concepts of 'life long-learning' and 'the learning employee' emerge, and the middle manager's primary task is a pedagogical one.

Approximately anno 1990 organizations become aware of the problem that not all learning is relevant to the organization. The learning employee must learn but no guarantees are given that the learning is fruitful for the organization. Therefore, a new coding emerges that bear similarities to that of a love relationship. The proactive employee emerges who should actively take initiatives in favor of the organization, anticipate the needs of the organization before it is uttered explicitly, share the organization's world view, and show passion and engagement. The middle manager becomes the mediator of a love relationship between organization and employee, and must make sure that the employee is given opportunities to show her genuine love to the organization (which does enhance complexity a bit).

During the last decade yet another coding has emerged, namely that of religion. In this context employees are expected to be able to view themselves in the light of the organization's larger ethical purpose. The questions are: How is your existence in this organization meaningful? How do your life story and values correspond with that of the organization? The middle manager becomes the convener of meaning, much alike the role of a priest or a shaman.

Middle managers anno 2011 are expected to be capable of operating from all of these positions, e.g. to act as mediators of learning, love and meaning. The middle manager is to commute from one position to another, and that involves a number of dilemmas and paradoxes. For instance: How is it possible, within the logic of love, to expect the employee to develop new personal competences, and at the same time, within the logic of religion, to expect that the

employee gets insight into her own authentic values? The hypothesis in short: potential middle managers choose not to take on the challenge of management because the position as a middle manager has developed into a highly complex social situation with expectations which are oftentimes incommensurable and paradoxical.