1857: Narrating Organizational Change: Future-Stories and a Story of the Past

The 83rd Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management
4-8 August, 2023
Boston, Massachusetts, USA

Boston Common, Sheraton

Paper Session

Tuesday August 08, 10:00 AM - 11:30 AM

Future stories of meaningful work and leadership in change

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Background

- The meaningfulness of work is an important factor guiding working life and work, **part of well-being at work as a whole**

- Experiences of meaningfulness in change contexts (e.g. Hansson, 2014)

- Future orientation - 2035: stories of working life and its changes
  - Changing ways of thinking, acting and using technology (Kokkinen et al., 2020)

Kuva Arek Socha Pixabaystä

Aim

- Highlight the perceptions of meaningfulness at work in the future working life as reported by managers in the context of professional work

- Provide insights into the factors influencing the **decline and growth of the experience of meaningfulness** and related leadership practices

- Research questions:
    1) What kinds of change contexts underlie the different experiences of meaningfulness in the future stories?
    2) What kinds of weakening or strengthening experiences of r are present in the stories of the future?

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Meaningful work

- Why work is worth doing? (Lepistö & Pratt, 2016)
- Important enhancers: job design, relationships and organizational culture (Pratt & Ashforth 2003; Rosso, Dekas & Wrzesniewski 2010; Michaelson et al., 2014; Lips-Wiersma, Haar & Wright, 2018)
- The well-being of employees in an organization is key to work productivity
- Paradoxical nature: How is meaningfulness collectively produced and managed in workplaces (cf. Bailey, Lips-Wiersma et al., 2019)?
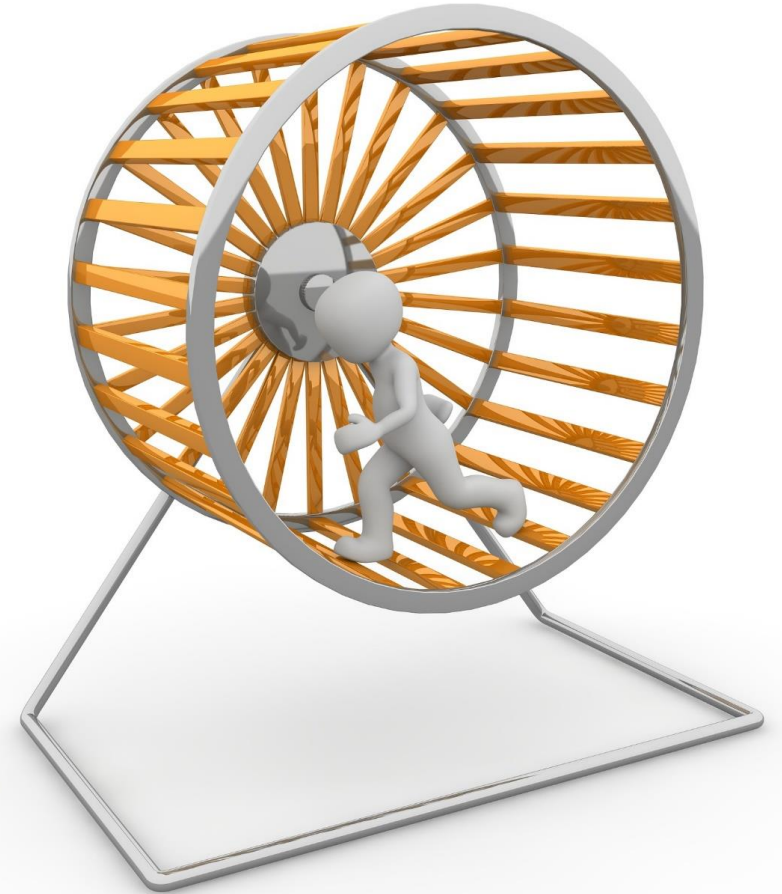
Empathy-based method, Data, and Analysis

- 25 stories (13 negative, 12 positive) from Finnish managers using the empathy method (Wallin et al. 2019, 2020) in spring 2022

- Participants wrote one or two different stories based on the frame stories

- As a variable, the state of well-being at work in Finnish organizations in 2035

- Key changes (Kokkinen et al., 2020): ways of thinking and acting, and technological change

- Analyzed with qualitative content analysis

Let's imagine we are living in 2035. Finnish working life — in both public and private organizations — has become increasingly technology-oriented and knowledge-intensive.

At the same time, the well-being and sense of meaningfulness of the staff in your organization are ==declining/on the rise==.

Live this situation and tell us more about it. Describe the reasons for the decline in staff's well-being and sense of meaningfulness. Also, describe your organization's policies and management practices in this imaginary situation.

Findings

- Three different contexts of change were identified as underlying the experience of relevance in change:

- **Technological change,**
- **Change in expertise**
- **Change in values**

- Consequences and causes of changes

Changing technologies:

Constantly evolving technologies, hybrid and remote working, online interaction (within the work community and with clients), machines and equipment, flexible working hours, information flow, multi-site working

Consequences:	-	+
Loss (-) and growth (+) of meaningfulness	• Blurred working hours • Feelings of inadequacy and incompetence • Rush • Loneliness • Boredom	• Flexibility of work • Freedom • Community spirit • Sufficiently challenging tasks • Reduction of human error • Focus on inspiring work
Causes	• Problems with systems and technology • Dispersed information and complicated technologies • Less focus on substance work • Simplified tasks • Technology and machines substitute for human interaction	• Appropriate technology-supported work • Communal hybrid work • Multiple workplaces • Systematic communication and information sharing
Leadership practices	• Lack of support for (technological) competence development • Distant leadership and management • Leader-centered decision-making • Bounded participatory possibilities	• Jointly agreed and appropriate remote working practices • Support for hybrid work • Regular interaction • Involvement of employees • Observing individual needs

Changing expertise:
Deep specialization, data, and analytical skills; technological skills; deep skills; collaborative skills; learning; training; and sophistication

Consequences:	-	+
Loss (-) and growth (+) of meaningfulness	• Diminishing motivation • Constraints to informal learning and skills development • Lack of a sense of community • Feelings of incompetence • Fear of making errors	• A sense of strong competence • Achieving a sense of community, multidisciplinary, and professionalism • Sense of control • Motivation
Causes	• Limited social interaction • Problems in getting help and learning tacit knowledge • Requirements for handling multiple tasks and hecticness • Flood of information • Competence gap	• Proactive competence development • Substance-focused work • Experiments and daily learning • Mutual trust • Multi-professional work • Individual careers
Leadership practices	• Distant leadership • Lack of emotional skills and intelligence • Lack of psychological safety and trust • Conflict	• Data-based management • Coaching • Proactive competence profiles • Supportive and constructive feedback and rewards • Systematic support for career development • Multi-disciplinary teams

Changing values: Values, goals, strategies, and attitudes

Consequences:	-	+
Loss (-) and growth (+) of meaningfulness	• Attitude problems • Cynicism • Changing jobs • Frustration • Experiences of unfairness	• Commitment • Genuine desire to work • The human meaning and value of one's own work • Community spirit • Customer satisfaction
Causes	• Focus on profit, economic results, efficiency, and growth • Quantitative objectives • Lack of humanity • Individualism	• Humanity • Well-being and community as value and means for productivity • Anticipation • Employee experience
Leadership practices	• Neglecting employees • Leader-centeredness • Failed (structural) changes • Disagreement and conflicts	• Systematic maintenance and development of well-being • Involving and engaging employees with strategy and values • Clear strategy, vision, roles, and practices • Appreciative leadership

To conclude

- The change in values is seen in a broader context, which also sets the stage for other changes: humanity vs. efficiency
- Conflicts of relevance: individualism vs. communality
- Welfare stories: self-direction, community and predictability
- Threat stories: loneliness, machismo and reactivity
- Both: emotional experiences of meaningfulness
- Future leadership practices that support meaningfulness at work
  - Proactive skills development, individual needs at work and personal career paths, community and equity
  - Strategic dimension of well-being at work, e.g. values and decision-making

Thank you!
Comments and questions most welcome

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