

Odense City Museums: Hosting project and autonomous teamwork

What does this case study demonstrate?

Odense City Museums developed a new work organisation that supports autonomy and facilitated development opportunities for a group of museum hosts that was overlooked. Odense City Museums' story presents an example of how improved job quality can be a way to make use of employees' talents. The Workplace Innovation (WPI) practices were introduced to strengthen the psychosocial work environment for employees.

Workplace innovation elements: Self-managing teams, facilitating learning and development, representative participation

Context

This case study describes WPI at museums with 140 employees divided between nine worksites in a larger Danish municipality. Both management and employees describe the managerial structure as 'flat'. Management consist of one CEO and four area managers (Head of Operations, Head of Communication & Strategies, Head of Cultural Heritage and Head of Public Relations).

It is a knowledge-based workplace where half of the employees are academic personnel and half unskilled and skilled employees. The professions in the focus of this case study are the museum hosts and the craftsmen in the open-air museum (the Funen Village). The museum hosts sell tickets and make sure that the exhibitions function. Previously, the hosts played a somewhat peripheral role in the company and were often overlooked. The craftsmen in the Funen Village lacked management capabilities and wanted more job autonomy.

During the last years, the pressure to compete with other attractions (cinemas, amusement parks) has increased, and the museums realise the importance of employee involvement in development of the work organisation in order to create appealing experiences for the guests.

Autonomous team work in the Funen Village

A new team work structure was introduced in 2012 at the Funen Village. According to the manager, it has been a major request from the employees. The idea is that the teams are able to utilise the professional skills of the individual team worker.

Craftsmen, gardeners and other trades are employed at the Funen Village. Previously, the craftsmen's work was centred on maintenance. 80% of their work day was used to maintain the buildings but the Funen Village is a 'living' workplace, where guests watch them working on the antique buildings. Therefore, the craftsmen wanted a more flexible work organisation where they had the opportunity to convey their tasks to the audience.

Now the team will self-organise work, task sequence, work mode, etc. It improves their ability to plan, so they can perform tasks that are interesting for the guests during business hours. They also have more time to talk about their craft.

The team control their work organisation, duty roster and budget. Beforehand, there was a functional manager who made the schedules and then distributed tasks to the various professions. The new model implies that management has confidence in the employees' abilities to prioritise.

'Good hosting project' for the museum hosts

The manager explains: "We thought that the museum hosts were left to themselves and wanted to create a process, where they were more valued and became an integral part of the workplace" (manager).

The 'hosting project' was based on experiences from other types of businesses (for example Legoland, a Danish theme park) on how to create an exciting experience for the guests. The point is to consider the total experience and therefore supporting the ability to see what role the hosts played in creating a good experience for the guests.

The museum hosts went on training and formulated new 'work codes' on how they greet the guest, which products to sell, how to inspire the guests to explore the exhibitions and the like. The 'codes' formed a great way to involve the employees in the process. The museum hosts received a book about 'good hosting experiences' that contained many tools for how to deal with guests: "The book helps you to keep the principles alive" (Museum host).

It varies from worksite to worksite to what extent the tools and codes have been utilized by the employees. It has been a bit challenging for some hosts to participate in the project because it places new demands on them. The representatives were concerned that some employees felt less involved in the process than others.

Partnership with unions

New projects and organisational changes are debated in a joint committee with union representatives, OHS representatives and management representatives (based on a regional framework). This committee is also initiating new practices such as training and support for new employees. The issues debated are treated seriously: "We get input from all levels of the organisation. It is important to get everyone on board" (Manager).

How did they do it?

Both the self-managing team practice and the hosting project have been implemented with many meetings. The management group tried to get employees' views on the process. The general steps in the implementation process of both practices have been: 1) training, 2) implementation, 3) follow-up meetings. Adjustments have been made along the way in an ad hoc manner. Patience and continuous follow-up meetings were particularly important for the employees: "It is easy to fall back into old habits. So it is important to do regular follow-ups" (Employee).

The process in relation to the hosting project was a little 'confused' in some worksites and it was difficult to involve employees to an adequate extent. The joint committee has followed the process and has focused on making sure that the employees were involved.

So who benefits?

Management, representatives and employees agree that the new practices provide greater job satisfaction for employees while simultaneously enabling the company to provide better service.

The museum hosts had a straining psychosocial work environment before the changes. They were 'forgotten': "It was hard for us to see how we fitted into the bigger picture" (Museum host). The focus in general has shifted to a customer focus from a narrow focus on specific disciplines. The company has switched to a 'holistic' approach and working for the same goal. The museum hosts describe that recognition improves the psychosocial work environment. However, it varies a bit from workplace to workplace how they can relate to the 'good hosting' concept which is based on experiences at

McDonald's and Lego. It's been a little difficult to relate the concept to everyday life in some of the museums.

Previously, there were many conflicts in the Funen Village because of absent local management and unclear divisions of responsibilities. Both managers and employees wanted a work organisation that supported initiative and cooperation. The craftsmen are no longer considered as 'just a tool' but also communicators at the museum. They have become a more integral part of the workplace. They have introduced a different way of considering productivity. They do not solve the maintenance tasks as fast as beforehand, but are feeling happier and motivated when communicating with the guests: "It's a snowball effect – and it's fun to be involved in developing our work organisation" (Employee).

Prognosis

The employees were happy about the changes and felt involved in the change process. However, the employee participation could have been better realised in some workplaces. Their message to other companies considering similar practices is that there must be willingness to follow the process 'all the way through': "You can get a completely different organisation if you focus on autonomy and job satisfaction".