

The municipal school: Overcoming challenges from educational reforms by WPI

What does this case study demonstrate?

This municipal school is an example of how a workplace can use WPI practices to address challenges. The school introduces autonomous team work and utilises partnerships with committees and representatives in order to meet changes emerging from educational reforms. They participated in joint training sessions and open dialogue meetings where they could discuss and develop work organisation to meet new pedagogical demands.

Workplace innovation elements: autonomous team work; integration of technology, enabling dialogue in discussion forums.

Context: Educational reform, labour conflict and low student intake

The case concerns a Danish municipal primary and lower secondary school with 90 employees and 700 students. The present school is a result of a merger of two municipal schools in 2011. The school has been promoted in the media as a good example of how to meet the changes following the extensive educational reforms in Denmark. The educational system has been influenced by a lot of big changes during the last two years. A recent educational reform means a shift in practices and introduces several new features:

- Longer and more consistent school days.
- Clear objectives, monitoring and evaluation.
- The 'open' school; bringing the school out into the world and the world into school.
- Homework support and academic immersion.
- Inclusion of children with special needs.

Additionally, the collective agreement for teachers' working hours was changed in 2013. The maximum weekly teaching time is now supposed to be agreed locally. The teachers' union was concerned about management's full control of teachers' working hours combined with no collective agreements for preparation time. This concern led to conflicts that resulted in a lengthy lockout of the teachers. The sector has therefore experienced a conflictual situation for a while.

There was a common understanding between the interviewees that the organisation had to develop in order to 'survive'. The merger was a big challenge at the same time as the reforms called for new practices. It was then a matter of 'making-sense' throughout the organisation (following the merger) while simultaneously gaining competitive advantage. The school had one of the lowest intakes of applicants in the municipality so it was an important motive to attract new students by creating a more exciting and innovative school.

Workplace Innovation practices

From the point of view of managers, employees and representatives, WPI is important in order to support each other, learn from each other and to have an adaptive work organisation that keeps up with the development of society (reforms and so on).

The company utilizes partnerships with committees and employees to support dialogue and thereby handle new challenges. They formed their new work organisation (interdisciplinary teams) by conducting

meetings with committees and employees to formulate a common goal - to develop the best municipal school. They participated in joint training sessions to ensure that they were all involved as 'partners' in the process and to create a new way of organising work in an adaptive and exciting way.

Work organisation: New autonomous and interdisciplinary teams

Originally the individual teacher was responsible for teaching specific subjects across year groups. Now they are responsible for an entire year group in a team of teachers and pedagogues. This requires a different approach to teaching, because the teachers in the team should be able to teach a broader set of subjects. Previously the school was preoccupied with 'pure' academic competences. The new system is more focused on didactics: "It is important to strengthen teamwork because cooperation is crucial in order to implement the necessary pedagogical and didactic tools. That is why we thought that we'd better create some strong teams, who, of course, have the academic competences, but have to cooperate" (manager).

The team work style is promoted as being more adaptable to changes and therefore enhancing employees' influence on the planning of their work. One teacher said: "When working with autonomous teams, it is clear that it provides excellent opportunities for making adjustments along the way".

But it has also been difficult for the employees, as the manager explains: "Our intention was to show that we had confidence in their ability to self-manage. But it may have become a barrier for some, because they didn't know what exactly they were allowed to do". The management group is working on making a clearer framework and trying to enhance trust by being more visible.

The interviewed employees were all happy about the recent changes in the work organisation but tried to argue the views of their more sceptic co-workers, who are used to teaching in a more conventional style.

Workplace partnership: Discussion forums as a base for innovation

Changes are discussed in a lot of forums with both direct and indirect participation from employees. The educational development forum (a representative committee) plays a significant role when discussing changes in the organisation. Changes are also discussed with union representatives because of a regional framework agreement that secures cooperation between management and unions.

The management group is considered receptive of suggestions from employees: "They are very open to ideas and projects; if for example you ask: 'is it okay to spend a few hours on this idea?' I have never heard a 'no'. Innovative ideas run freely and they never interfere with them" (employee).

How did they do it? "Big bang" and participatory approach

The general approach has been to adopt practices in a 'big bang' fashion by conducting joint training for managers, representatives, teachers and pedagogues. Because of this approach it may be difficult for recently employed teachers to understand ideas behind the team structure.

The employees and representatives highlighted that the joint training and meetings boosted the development of new practices and made it possible for them to reach common ground and create a new profile for the school: "People have had different passions, and they have taken these considerations with them into the discussions". This has given rise to many 'standard-bearers' for the new development. It has helped the implementation process considerably" (Employee).

In the case of this municipal school it was clear that a 'big bang' change with a clear overriding goal (to create a better school for the students) and extensive participation was promoted as an important leverage factor:

"Everything we do must make sense in relation to that goal... We have tried saying that making mistakes is a major part of the process. We are allowed to do that, if we learn from it" (Manager).

So who benefits?

A lot of the teachers have prospered from the new work organisation practices. Others have difficulties with the changes. It is a big challenge for teachers that are only used to teach their 'own' subjects and not being a part of a team. For the representatives an important impact is that the tasks have been more evenly distributed among the employees. It is now easier for everyone to get 'their share' of the 'exciting' subjects.

The school has succeeded in creating a better school for the students and has increased the influx of applicants significantly during the last three years. The initiatives contributed to this by increasing influence, knowledge sharing and innovativeness amongst the teachers.

Prognosis

The employees found that WPI (especially autonomous team work) enhances the organisation's sustainability by making it easier for them to comply with changes. Changes in the educational sector will presumably be many in the years that follow.

However, it was discussed that the school could be better at evaluating the consequences of their new work practices: "...but we have been discussing it concurrently and tried to adjust some things" (manager). This is an important objective for the management group in the future.