

Research and concepts

Partnership with internal customers – a way to achieve increased commitment

Roland Harnesk

The author

Roland Harnesk is a Research Engineer in the Division of Quality & Environmental Management, Luleå University of Technology, Luleå, Sweden.

Keywords

Partnership, Internal customers, Dialogue, Communication, Trust

Abstract

An often-discussed issue in the total quality management (TQM) philosophy is how to improve internal customer commitment. To find answers one must look at what the actual commitment is based on. Which decisive factors are contributing and how are they connected? As an employer one is not only employing just one part of a person but the whole person with personal, social and professional qualities. Many employers do follow "checklists" regarding how to deal with human resource issues, but they often do not really understand the content in the suggested questions of the checklist. This paper will include issues from social and behaviour sciences to enter deeper in the TQM philosophy and system thinking concerning co-workers' commitment. The purpose is to try to stimulate the debate using internal partnership as one way to attain increased commitment of co-workers. A model will be used to view decisive factors for partnership, all depending on communication. In this paper the term "partnership with internal customers" will be used to stress the necessary mutual agreement between employers and co-workers that are needed.

Electronic access

The Emerald Research Register for this journal is available at www.emeraldinsight.com/researchregister

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at

www.emeraldinsight.com/0954-478X.htm

The TQM Magazine
Volume 16 · Number 1 · 2004 · pp. 26-32
© Emerald Group Publishing Limited · ISSN 0954-478X
DOI 10.1108/09544780410511452

Introduction

The concept of partnership is a holistic view, usually based on system thinking, and has been adopted into modern management. Partnership can be used to find win-win situations with suppliers, external customers and other organisations. An often-discussed issue in TQM philosophy is how to stimulate co-worker commitment, but this is not usually described in a partnership context. Although the concept of partnership has been successfully used in many other contexts, partnership between organisation and co-workers seems to be a somewhat disregarded area. A win-win situation is the base of partnership and should have the same relevance when including co-workers. A successful partnership should confirm the sense of unity and remove "we and them thinking"; this will also support a long-term perspective. Bergman and Klefsjö (2001) emphasize that TQM needs to clarify the importance of making all stakeholders of the organisation winners in the long run. The purpose of partnership is to change outside control of people by management into inside control by people themselves. The responsibility for the organisation's performance would also be deployed to individuals.

Park Dahlgard (2000) has presented a list, which contains ten identified core concepts that TQM must focus on. Among these ten listed core concepts, one focuses on "employees/teamwork/motivation/empowerment", and another focuses on "building partnership between suppliers, customers and society". It is interesting to notice that employees are not mentioned in the second core concept: building partnership. This could indicate a difference in importance to include partnership also with co-workers. It is common among TQM authors to advocate everybody's commitment and focus on co-workers, but the next natural step, which could be partnership, is rarely described. Therefore the content of partnership needs to be discussed and clarified.

A difference between commitment and partnership is that partnership is based on equity, responsibility and interdependency in mutual win-win situations. The definition of



partnership used in this paper is: “partnership is a relation based on personal visions and desires which are combined to the organisations mission and vision”. To accomplish a partnership is a question of interpersonal activities based on human behaviour knowledge. Mutual trust is crucial in a partnership concept.

To find some answers about commitment, one must discuss what a true commitment is based on. In order to find commonalities between modern management theories and Eastern philosophies, Park Dahlgard (2000) has studied three modern management theoreticians, Deming (1986, 1993), Covey (1992) and Senge (1990) and three main Eastern philosophies, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. She has found common and central concepts and has categorised them in three categories: system, people and knowledge. Mainly based on her study, this paper suggests a number of decisive factors to support leaders in their interaction with co-workers. This paper discusses how these factors can be considered, when using partnership to attain everybody’s commitment. Decisive factors for partnership will be discussed, and a model will also be used to illustrate how these decisive factors are connected to obtain successful partnership. Five points have been identified as a common pattern and then used as decisive factors for partnership with co-workers: core values, personal maturity, personal motives, trust and equity and communication (see Figure 1). The reformulation and extension of points, in this paper, from Park Dahlgard (2000), is to

complement her study and emphasise the necessary interaction between organisation and co-workers to implement partnership. The purpose of this paper is to try to stimulate the debate using internal partnership as one way to attain increased commitment of co-workers.

Study approach

The choice of subject for this study is based on 20 years of dealing with human behaviour as a social worker, counsellor and consultant. The experiences have in many ways influenced the approach and angle of this paper. The discussion is, however, supported by modern management authors.

This study is mainly based on literature studies. Keywords used to search for articles and publications have been: partnership, internal customers and employees, in combination.

Decisive factors for partnership with co-workers

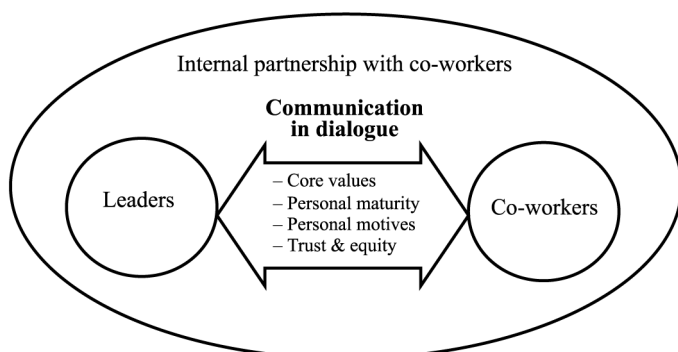
In this section the content of five decisive factors for partnership with co-workers will be discussed. The connection between these factors will also be discussed.

Core values

Core values are an often-used term in TQM and are, according to Hellsten and Klefsjö (2000), a way to emphasize chosen statements (principals, dimensions, elements or cornerstones), that should work together to constitute the culture of the organisation, and that they accordingly are basic concepts.

The core values of an organisation are general agreements between parties on how to act, especially when standard routines are not applicable. When discussing core values it should be important to also include issues of ethical and moral questions. Core value and character-building processes are based on human value issues like religion and ideology. The content of partnership is very much influenced by existing core values in the organisation. Senior leaders’ attitudes are of

Figure 1 The model shows how decisive factors for partnership are depending on a communication in dialogue between leaders and co-workers



great importance for co-workers as a guideline. If the leaders are not confirming agreed core values in action it is not likely that anybody else will (Deming, 1986).

To have impact on everybody's commitment core values must be well communicated, understood and accepted by all individuals. This will also be a way to neutralize contra-productive sub-cultures activities. If the organisation's core values and vision are well deployed and internalised, they also must be combined with an individual's personal intrinsic motivation, so that partnership has a solid ground to build on.

Park Dahlgard (1998) claims that:

We can say that core values are a precondition for trust, and is the precondition for building the necessary core competences into the organisation. An example of the relationship between competences, trust and core values is the policy deployment process . . . People are selfish and practise their own often bad values in order to achieve their individual visions and goals . . . empire will collapse in the long run if these competences are not built on core values.

A critical issue is that senior leaders begin to practise the core values they intuitively feel are important to their subordinates. Listening with respect to subordinates' opinions is crucial in this process. If people feel they cannot have influence they probably will give up their effort to participate in the core value development process.

Personal maturity

Both leaders and co-workers are mutually dependent on each other in a symbiosis even if roles and balance of influence are different:

Independent people who do not have the maturity to think and act interdependently may be good individual producers, but they won't be good leaders or team players (see Covey, 1992).

To make synergy, people must combine talents and abilities and create something greater together (Covey, 1992). This statement is emphasizing that personal maturity is an important factor in partnership.

Personal maturity, considering partnership, has a lot to do with interpersonal skills and the ability to use your own capability, especially to establish honest relations based on equity. A well-known mistake is to mix up authority with a wish to be authoritarian, especially in

decision-making processes. The mistake is probably more common among people with a lack of personal maturity.

Experience tells us that not so wise decisions are made when people are feeling uncomfortable or stressed. Personal maturity and integrity will affect to what extent decisions are made based on feelings or facts. Personal maturity is associated with people's ability to build relations with other people.

Social competence and interpersonal skills are vital for a supervisor. One of the 14 points by Deming (1986) is "drive out the fear". Fear makes people less secure and will affect their creativity. Security is a basic need, an unsatisfactory disturbance will call on satisfaction and take effort away from other areas, like creativity; for more information about basic needs, see Maslow (1943). A relevant question in every change and situation of insecurity should be: "how will this affect me?" It is hardly realistic to think that people will put much effort into matters of no interest to them, or even against their own interests. If people do not feel trust or have no personal motive to co-operate, partnership is hard to establish. Successful partnership is built on common ground and trust. The ability to mediate trust is basic in any leadership philosophy. Therefore personal maturity should be a considered criterion when recruiting leaders.

Personal motives

Hertzberg (1969) advocates that intrinsic factors such as emotional satisfaction are considered as motivators and extrinsic factors, such as monetary systems, are considered as hygiene factors. Establishing partnership starts with people's personal motives. Deming (1993), Covey (1992) and Senge (1990) all agree that all transformation processes start with individuals as their first step, even if they use different terminology. People's personal motives should therefore be considered. Bergman and Klefsjö (2001) have identified five important areas that significantly contribute to the development of both people and organisations:

- (1) self-confidence;
- (2) ability to communicate in dialogue;
- (3) consciousness of objective;

- (4) ability to contribute; and
- (5) learning from experience.

One important cornerstone of personal mastery is the ability to focus on ultimate intrinsic desires, which are closely related to the purpose and the deep meaning of life (Senge, 1990). Covey (1992) refers to the “central paradigm” when arguing for the intrinsic drivers for action. Every individual has personal desires and priorities based on earlier experiences. Often we are not even aware of the paradigm or our personal core values. According to Hackman and Oldham (1976) another intrinsic motivator is the feeling of autonomy and meaningfulness connected to the outcome of one’s effort. Both Ishikawa (1985) and Deming (1986) advocate that social motivation is an incentive provided by recognition from others.

An organisation consists of individuals and they are motivated by personal, intrinsic motives. To be able to combine personal motives with the organisation’s vision and core values, personal motives must be viewed. This is not only important to the organisation, but also to the individual himself or herself to be aware of. Successful partnership must be deeply rooted within individuals so that they can contribute and use their motivation and energy.

Trust and equity

As earlier argued, trust is crucial for successful partnership. Equity is based on mutual respect and should make trust easier. According to Deming (1986), “drive out the fear” means that people should also be allowed to make mistakes when improving their work. It is important to clear out all sources of hesitation in responsibilities and authority so that mutual expectations can be understood. Feelings of insecurity and hesitation will often not support people’s effort to be creative.

On the issue of hesitation, Argyris (2000) states:

Subordinates are often embarrassed to admit they are hesitant to take initiatives that they have been invited – and have agreed – to take. This puts them in a double bind. But if they expose them, they will be admitting that they are bypassing their earlier agreement and acting as if they were not doing so.

When people do not know what is expected of them they will hesitate in order not to do

anything wrong. Changes often mean to go from something known to something unknown and this can create a situation of uncertainty. Sometimes it also leads to a personal risk. Lack of trust will therefore be contra-productive in partnerships if people feel the situation is not comfortable.

People also tend to act the way they are expected to. If leaders do not trust the co-workers it will easily become a self-fulfilled prophecy; the co-workers will act as they are expected to. One example of this is McGregor’s (1960) X and Y theory, describing how a leader’s presumptions have influence on subordinate’s behaviour (see McGregor, 1960).

The ability to build relations, credibility and trust are often crucial for all leadership. In the behaviour leaders must confirm they trust people. The core values of human ethics will be shown in behaviour of the leaders. The behaviour of leaders greatly influences the organisation’s culture. Any incongruence between actual and agreed core values will be shown in the organisational culture and attitude.

Mutual honesty and respect is the basis for good relations between people, and “we and them thinking” must not be nourished. The imbalance between influence and authority may be an obstacle, but can be handled by leaders who have personal maturity and do not need to use their authority to maintain their position. Democratic principles are core issues of partnership without unnecessary hierarchical emphasis. Invitation to participate in decisions without actual influence and disinformation are examples of pseudo-democracy. As Hackman and Wageman (1995) argue:

Pseudo-participation is ill-advised, because people almost always are able to tell when they are being manipulated.

In partnerships it is important that mutual trust is established. Lack of information is often a source of misunderstandings and conflicts. Information is not the same as knowledge. However, a model or a theory can help the transformation from information into knowledge. As Deming (1993), states:

Without theory there is nothing to revise, nothing to evaluate, and experience has no meaning. The theory of knowledge helps us to understand that management in any form is prediction.

Theories of human behaviour are essential to understand other people. To be able to establish relations, people need to have basic knowledge of human behaviour. Interpersonal skills will then give them the ability to use what they know. Successful partnership must be based on an honest meeting in trust between individuals. Personal maturity would be a good advantage for key persons in partnership enabling them to build relations based on equity and respond to other people's need of trust.

Communication

Bergman and Klefsjö (2001) have pointed out communication as a key issue for the development of people and organisations. Core values have to be communicated in order to be used and the ability to communicate is often dependent on personal maturity.

Communication is also of vital importance when leaders try to understand and respond to co-workers' personal motives. Trust and equity must also be mediated to have any meaning. As illustrated in a model (see Figure 1), communication is identified as crucial for partnership.

Misunderstandings are common sources of conflicts. The key can be a developed dialogue (Senge, 1990; Bergman and Klefsjö, 2001), which can remove misunderstandings and support expected actions. The dialogue emphasizes a two-way communication, including active listening, trying to understand each other's message and together come to mutual understanding.

People tend not to express themselves honestly because they do not want to offend others or cause problems. Communication is done in many ways, maybe not always consciously. However, people's real intentions are often revealed anyway. Argyris (2000) argues that any form of ambiguity will create confusion and lead to a lack of trust and a lack of action because people do not know what they are expected to do.

In many ways, people reflect their identity in the eyes of other people and have a basic need to be confirmed, especially by people whose opinions are highly valued. Based on experience, people tend to present themselves and choose act and appearance, as they want to

be understood, not necessarily as we actually are understood. Dishonesty often leads to misunderstandings and confusion. An honest meeting is based on a feeling of security and is hard to accomplish in a situation where there is lack of mutual trust. Equity and insight into human behaviour can support understanding of yourself and others to provide honest meetings. Sometimes being humble, realizing what you do not know, can prevent unnecessary mistakes. Understanding is limited to people's imagination based on earlier experiences or knowledge. To understand, people tend to interpret selectively and look for things they have knowledge of and recognize. Every individual has personal experiences that they build their framework for interpretations on and further on how these experiences influence perceptions and ways of behaving. A way to understand what other people understand is the use of a dialogue. The ability to communicate is a social skill, which is influenced by personal maturity. As argued earlier, partnership is based on win-win situations, mutual trust, equity and interdependency. Since people have individual intrinsic motivators, those must also come to the surface. Personal motives must be communicated to be coordinated with the organisation's vision and mission. It is the responsibility of the leaders to build infrastructure and frameworks for the necessary honest meeting for interactive opportunities of partnership.

Measuring communication in a partnership culture is not an easy task to deal with since the interaction is hard to identify and many factors have influence and interact. Measuring quantitative parameters such as the number of different meetings or e-mails gives limited information of the real outcome. Qualitative data can be obtained by, for example, different surveys of attitudes but often with fragments of information and often without a holistic view. Individual interviews can also view individual opinions, but can be hard to use since many other relevant factors are not considered. Understandings are based on, and filtered by, many different interactive processes such as experience, context, motivation, tongue, relations, stress and traditions. Good communication is characterised by minor, if any, negative or unintentional consequences

caused by misunderstandings. As argued earlier, dialogue can prevent misunderstandings and help reach a mutual understanding. Infrastructure and conditions for dialogue seem to be inevitable issues for good communication.

An organization's performance results, together with general job satisfaction, could be one indicator of how well communication is functioning. However, that cannot be isolated from other interactive factors. A well-balanced employee satisfaction index could be one complement to other parameters for good communication. If an index for partnership is to be invented, other parameters for organizational performance must be considered, such as for instance, customer satisfaction, processes and economical results. However, any attempt to measure communication as an isolated parameter and from that to generalize about human behaviour tends to be risky.

Discussion

This section is based on the author's experience and many years of genuine interest in human behaviour. The reflections have, to a large extent, been influenced by experiences when discussing decisive factors for partnership with co-workers.

It is essential that the work environment can provide opportunities for people to have real influence on their own situations. There is no point in discussing the content of partnership if there are no interactions or honest meetings in a dialogue. Room for reflection is also necessary so issues of human ethics can be discussed. In many ways the attitude of the leaders is crucial for partnership. Personal maturity often means to participate in equity, not using one's authority for control. A leader without the acceptance of followers is no leader. Followers will base their acceptance of leadership on their experience and unforced trust. In a pseudo-democracy with a hierarchical structure, partnership cannot be established with co-workers since lack of equity is building obstacles for trust.

All relations are interactive and the mutual interaction is reflecting how we understand and respond to each other. The competence of the leaders in social skills is vital to create necessary possibilities for interactive co-operation such as

partnership. Unfortunately, many leaders are recruited based on their skills as craftsmen or competence in their profession, not from interpersonal skills and personal maturity. This often means a loss regarding two occupations; the one they left as good craftsmen, and the other occupation they entered and do not have the ability to execute.

Like activities in the organisation, all people, including leaders, are dependent on their social context. Poor performance of individuals can depend on social and private factors and is not the responsibility of the organisation, but must, however, be considered. Life is going up and down by natural causes and sometimes you contribute more and sometimes less, all depending on how you feel. The effect of poor performance can be the same if it is caused by bad work conditions or bad private situations, even though the legal responsibility is different. Private life and professional life are interactive. Any imbalance will, in some way or other, affect an individual's behaviour. People's social context is important to consider but is often neglected in an effort not to interfere in private business. However, mutual trust must be established so private issues also can be taken into consideration.

Conclusions

This study has focused on decisive factors to bring about successful partnership emphasizing the interaction with co-workers. All decisive factors are dependent on a communication in dialogue between leaders and co-workers. The purpose of this paper is to stimulate the debate of partnership with co-workers discussing the content of decisive factors (see Figure 1).

Without communication, core values cannot be deployed, personal maturity has no meaning, personal motives cannot be integrated into the organisation's vision and mission, and trust and equity cannot be mediated. All decisive factors are interdependent for successful partnership. Important issues are knowledge of human behaviour and communication, especially for key persons in partnership. To use partnership as an instrument to achieve everybody's commitment, it is essential to recruit and train key persons to obtain desirable competences in the organization.

References

- Argyris, C. (2000), *Flawed Advice and the Management Trap: How Leaders can Know When they're Getting Good Advice and When they're Not*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.
- Bergman, B. and Klefsjö, B. (2001), *Kvalitet från behov till användning*, 3rd ed., Studentlitteratur, Lund (in Swedish).
- Covey, S.R. (1992), *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People – Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*, Simon & Schuster, London.
- Deming, E.W. (1986), *Out of the Crisis*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Deming, E.W. (1993), *The New Economics for Industry, Government, Education for Quality Management*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA.
- Hackman, R. and Oldham, G. (1976), "Motivation through design of work: test and theory", *Organisational Behaviour and Human Performance*, Vol. 16, pp. 250-79.
- Hackman, J.R. and Wageman, R. (1995), "Total quality management: empirical, conceptual and practical issues", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 40 No. 2, pp. 309-44.
- Hellsten, U. and Klefsjö, B. (2000), "TQM as a management system consisting of values, techniques and tools", *The TQM Magazine*, Vol. 12 No. 4, pp. 238-44.
- Hertzberg, F. (1969), *The Motivation to Work*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, NY.
- Ishikawa, K. (1985), *What is Total Quality Control? The Japanese Way*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.
- McGregor, D. (1960), *The Human Side of Enterprise*, McGraw-Hill, New York, NY.
- Maslow, A.H. (1943), "A theory of human motivation", *Psychological Review*, Vol. 50, pp. 370-96.
- Park Dahlgaard, S.M. (1998), "Core value deployment: the need for a new renaissance", *Total Quality Management*, Vol. 9 No. 4/5, p. 45.
- Park Dahlgaard, S.M. (2000), "From ancient philosophies to TQM and modern management theories", Licentiate thesis, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Linköping University, Linköping.
- Senge, P. (1990), *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practise of the Learning Organisation*, Doubleday/Currency, New York, NY.