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## **How successful Swedish organisations achieve sustainable health**

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**Roland Harnesk\* and Karin Schön**

Division of Quality and Environmental Management,  
Luleå University of Technology,  
SE-971 87 Luleå, Sweden  
E-mail: Roland.Harnesk@ltu.se    E-mail: Karin.Schon@ltu.se  
\*Corresponding author

**Ingela Bäckström**

Division of Quality and Environmental Management,  
Luleå University of Technology,  
SE-971 87 Luleå, Sweden

Department of Engineering, Physics and Mathematics,  
Mid Swedish University, Östersund,  
SE 831 25 Östersund, Sweden  
E-mail: Ingela.Backstrom@mh.se

**Abstract:** The costs connected with the rapidly increasing number of sick leaves have risen to alarming levels in Sweden and, for instance, Norway and the Netherlands. To find out how to handle the situation on an organisational level, a case study has been carried out at two organisations, which have been awarded for their excellent working environment and low number of sick leaves. One is a small manufacturing company and the other is a large public health care organisation. Both organisations are nonhierarchical with responsibility and authority delegated to different groups. The data collection has mainly been carried out through brainstorming in groups, structured in tree diagrams, complemented by interviews. Important methodologies for the managers are emphasis on low prestige and visibility, and functioning as coaches with activities aimed at building relations. On the basis of the result of this study, suggestions are presented, which are considered possible for other organisations to adopt.

**Keywords:** sustainable health; methodologies; leadership; partnership.

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**Biographical notes:** Roland Harnesk is a Bachelor of Science in Social Work at The University of Umeå in Sweden. He has presented a licentiate thesis at the Division of Quality and Environmental Management and is a Doctoral Student at Luleå University of Technology in Sweden. His research is focusing on leadership issues using the partnership as scope. He has been teaching in the field on quality management for five years.

Karin Schön is a Master of Science in Industrial Engineering and Management and a Doctoral Student at the Division of Quality and Environmental Management at Luleå University of Technology in Sweden. Her main research interest is quality improvements within the frame of Six Sigma with a special interest in sustainable health and co-worker satisfaction.

Ingela Bäckström has a Bachelor Degree of Science with a major in Business Administration from Mid Sweden University. She is a Lecturer in Quality Technology and Management at Mid Sweden University and a Doctoral Student at the Division of Quality and Environmental Management at Luleå University of Technology in Sweden. Her main research interests are quality management methodologies and methodologies for sustainable health among co-workers.

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## 1 Introduction

Since around 1980, employees' sickness absence and the connected costs have risen to alarming levels in Sweden, and also in, for instance, Norway and the Netherlands (Nyman, 2002). The number of people absent due to sickness for more than 365 days has increased by about 30% in Sweden between 1997 and 2001 (The National Social Insurance Board, 2000, 2003). The combined costs for sickness benefits and disability pensions were 10% of the total expenses of the Swedish government in the year 2001 (SOU, 2002:5).

The connection between psychologically unsatisfactory working environments and a high frequency of sickness is well documented (see, for example, The Swedish Labour Inspectorate, 2000; Dolbier et al., 2001). The connection between participation and satisfaction is also well described in the literature (see, for example, Kondo, 1993; Kondo and Dahlgaard, 1994; Hackman and Oldham, 1976; McGregor, 1960).

Docherty et al. (2002) discuss how leadership must be adjusted to the new demand of autonomy and flexibility in modern working life. This means that authority must be deployed down in the organisation in order to create participation. Because of the complexity and higher pace, it is no longer possible to keep a traditional supervising leadership. Instead a more supportive approach has now become necessary (Docherty et al, 2002).

Abrahamsson (2003) also discusses how work organisations and work environmental problems are approached by modern management concepts to adjust them to the new demands of modern working life. She states that it was primarily during the 1990s that many Swedish industrial and public organisations went through extensive organisational changes. The purpose of implementing some of these modern management concepts is that the organisations should rapidly adapt to a continuously changing market through independent, versatile and committed coworkers and a flexible organisation. This trend is still strong (Abrahamsson, 2003).

### 1.1 *The purpose of the paper*

The purpose of this paper is to describe and discuss how two successful organisations have worked to achieve sustainable health among their coworkers. Through the description and discussion, the intention is to identify methodologies that are possible for

other organisations to adopt. Other causes of illness related to the working environment, such as injuries or accidents, are not discussed in this paper.

### *1.2 The Alecta award*

In Sweden, Alecta (an insurance company for occupational pensions) has instituted a national award that comprises leadership, internal partnership, working environment and profitability. Every year, one or several organisations in different categories are given awards, based on an analysis similar to that of quality awards like, for instance, the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (NIST, 2003) and the European Quality Award (EFQM, 2003).

### *1.3 Sustainable health and quality in working life*

A fundamental notion in this paper is sustainable health. The WHO's definition from 1946 states, "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". In this study, that definition of health is extended to also include 'sustainability'. Therefore, this paper focuses on the methodologies used by the studied organisations and also on how, in a long term perspective, these create a high rate of healthy employees compared to the average value in Sweden.

Because of the rapid increase in costs connected to absence due to sickness, current research in Sweden is looking at the subject from different angles. For instance, in a study of seven companies, Söderlund (2003) presents a theory of 'health factors' based on the question: "What makes people function in the best possible way, develop and feel good?" The health factors identified in that study are categorised as: tasks, working team and organisation.

Means to achieve the aim of a task are:

- variation, challenges, belief in the future
- personal responsibility, flexibility and pride
- meaningfulness of using one's competence.

Means to achieve the aim of a working team are:

- all help one another, straight communication
- humour, to get on well together, to be able to see one another outside work
- to have trust in each other, honesty, work discipline.

Means to achieve the aim of an organisation:

- short decision making procedures, managers present in daily work
- positive feedback from managers, explicit guidelines
- managers ready to listen, balance between demands and resources.

Docherty et al. (2002) have studied sustainable work systems and argue that the growing flexibility caused by globalisation and information technology in the last two decades has increased the pace and demand for higher flexibility and adaptation. The disappearance of bureaucratic boundaries without creating structures, processes or resources to replace

them, leaves people much to their own judgement. The growing autonomy means endless choices and possibilities, causing stress. The increased intensity has become ‘the kiss of death’ or ‘the spice of life’.

Also Schabracq and Cooper (2000) claim that loss of control in modern working life causes stress and that too many and too quick changes can both provide the foundations for illhealth and lower productivity. They also suggest that investing in human potential may be the most profitable approach.

Benders and van de Looij (1994) advocate four general characteristics to perceive quality in working life. These are: work content labour relations at the micro level employment conditions work environment.

They claim that the leadership style has important impact on employees’ satisfaction with other job characteristics. Furthermore, in relation to the quality of working life, Lewis et al. (2001) claim that, besides the extrinsic rewards, intrinsic rewards are key predictors of productivity, efficiency, absenteeism and turnover. They argue that the intrinsic rewards include traits such as: task content skill level autonomy challenge.

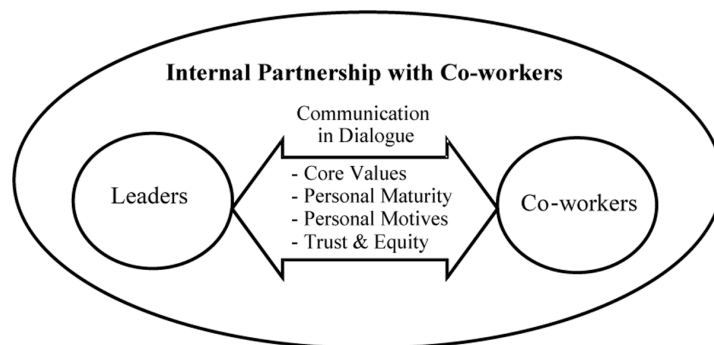
They further argue that important traits in an organisation to determine quality of working life are: salary benefits supervisor style communication discretion.

This paper presents examples of an adjusted, supportive leadership, from two studied organisations, caused by the new demands in modern working life.

#### 1.4 Partnership

From the ‘health factor’ theory by Söderlund (2003) and the aspects of quality in working life, the relation between managers and coworkers is identified as important for health. This relation is also discussed in a literature study by Harnesk (2004) focusing on how to achieve increased coworker commitment. Here, the concept of partnership was found to be relevant. The study identified four decisive factors and how they depend on a fifth factor, communication in dialogue between managers and coworkers. Bergman and Klefsjö (2003) and Senge (1990), among others, have also pointed at communication as a key issue for the development of people and organisations. The factors are illustrated in the internal partnership model in Figure 1. This model was used in this paper, as a theoretical framework, especially when analysing the collected data.

**Figure 1** The internal partnership model shows how decisive factors for partnership depend on communication in dialogue between leaders and coworkers by Harnesk (2004)



Core values have to be communicated in order to be part of a culture, and the ability to communicate is often dependent on personal maturity. Communication in dialogue is also of vital importance when leaders try to understand and respond to the coworkers' personal motives. Trust and equity must also be mediated in order to be meaningful. A well developed dialogue includes active listening and efforts to understand each other's messages to jointly come to a mutual understanding (Harnesk, 2004).

## 2 Description of case organisations

### 2.1 Fresh AB

Fresh AB develops, manufactures and markets ventilation products for indoor environments. The company was established in 1969 and has developed into a market leader in Sweden. The customers are wholesalers and retailers all over the world. In 2002, Fresh AB had 54 employees. The company has deliberately worked to have a diversified organisation and an equal mix of men and women including 15 people from seven countries. The average age is 40.

In 1990, the present owner bought the company. The decreasing market nearly caused a bankruptcy in 1993 and in 1994 a new executive manager was appointed. The new manager's assignment was to make the company profitable in two years. Since 1995, the turnover has increased by an average of 22% per year.

All coworkers at Fresh AB are organised in customer teams. The teams are divided into customer controlled teams, internal customer controlled teams and management teams. The management teams and the executive management are there for coaching the other teams when they need help to solve serious problems. All teams have full responsibility for activities from ordering to delivery, and invoicing to customers (see Figure 2). Every coworker is also a member of one of about ten cross functional development groups.

**Figure 2** The cornerstones of the organisational structure and culture at Fresh AB

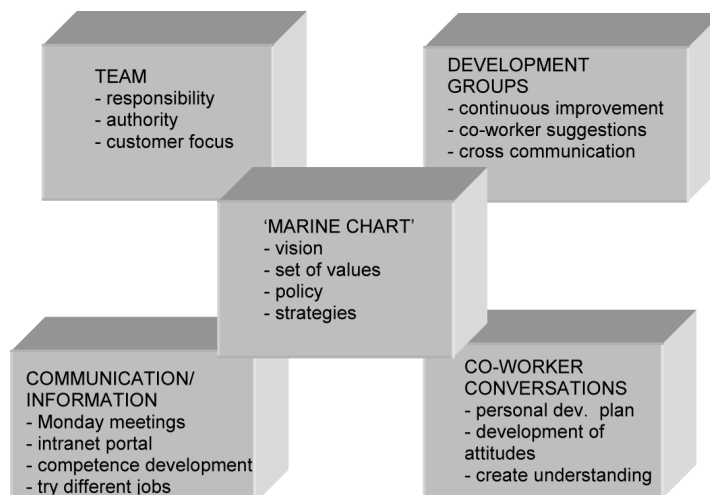


Figure 2 illustrates the cornerstones of the organisational structure and culture of Fresh AB, which is built around 'the Marine Chart' with a particular vision, values, policy, and strategies. The methodologies are designed to be as flexible as possible in four areas:

- teams
- development groups
- regular developmental conversations
- communication and information (For more details, see Bäckström et al., 2004a, 2004b).

### *2.2 The department of emergency and accidents at the south stockholm general hospital*

The Southern Stockholm General Hospital ('Södersjukhuset') is a corporation owned by the Stockholm County Council with about 3,600 employees. In the following text 'SÖS Emergency' refers to the Department of Emergencies, Casualties and Accidents, which was included in this study.

SÖS Emergency is the largest department of its kind in northern Europe and provides emergency medical care to more than one million people, who visit the centre at Stockholm every day. The ward receives some 50 high priority ambulance receptions every day. In 2002, there were 397 full time workers employed at SÖS Emergency.

The organisation at SÖS Emergency consists of one management group for the department, and four groups that are each managed by one head nurse. SÖS Emergency may be described as a flexible and flat organisation with short decision making procedures; a result of delegated authority. All coworkers also participate in cross functional working teams dealing with protective and developing issues.

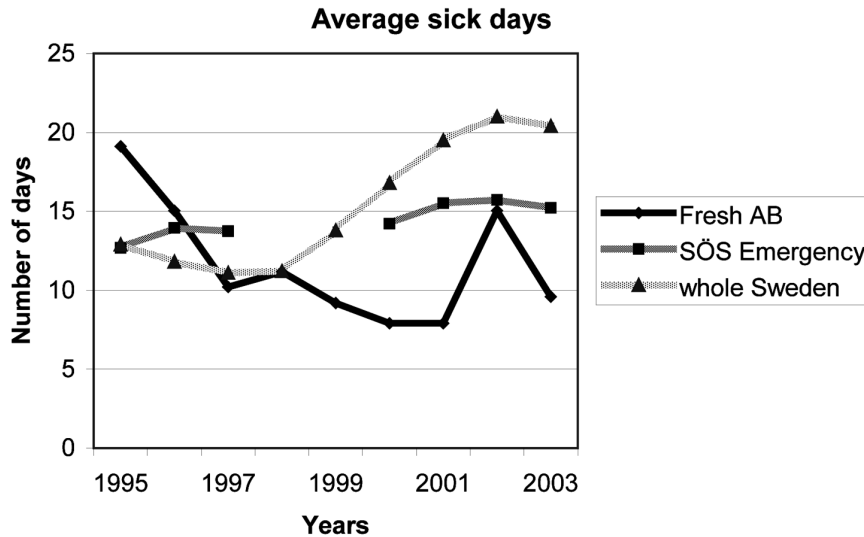
SÖS Emergency has deliberately chosen to have a diversified organisation. There are, for instance, 14 different languages spoken at the department. In comparison with other departments at the hospital there are more male employees. The department uses a model for 'work time planning' that allows the coworkers to make their own working schedule. The working periods have different values and give full time pay for part time work.

### *2.3 Average days of sick leave*

Figure 3 shows how the number of average days of sick leave has varied over time for the two organisations. For comparison, the average number for Sweden as a whole is included.

As the diagram shows, the average days of sick leave at Fresh AB and SÖS Emergency are lower than the average number for all organisations in Sweden. In 2002, the average number of days of sick leave in the studied organisations was about 50% of the average value in Sweden. At Fresh AB, a few coworkers had to stay at home for a number of days in 2002 because of accidents not related to their working situation. Because of the size of the organisation, these accidents had a big and misleading effect on the average number of days of absence. At SÖS Emergency, information about sickness absence was not available for the years 1998 and 1999.

**Figure 3** Average days of sick leave per person at Fresh AB, SÖS Emergency and the average value as a whole in Sweden. Since no data were available for 1998 and 1999, there is a gap in the curve of SÖS Emergency



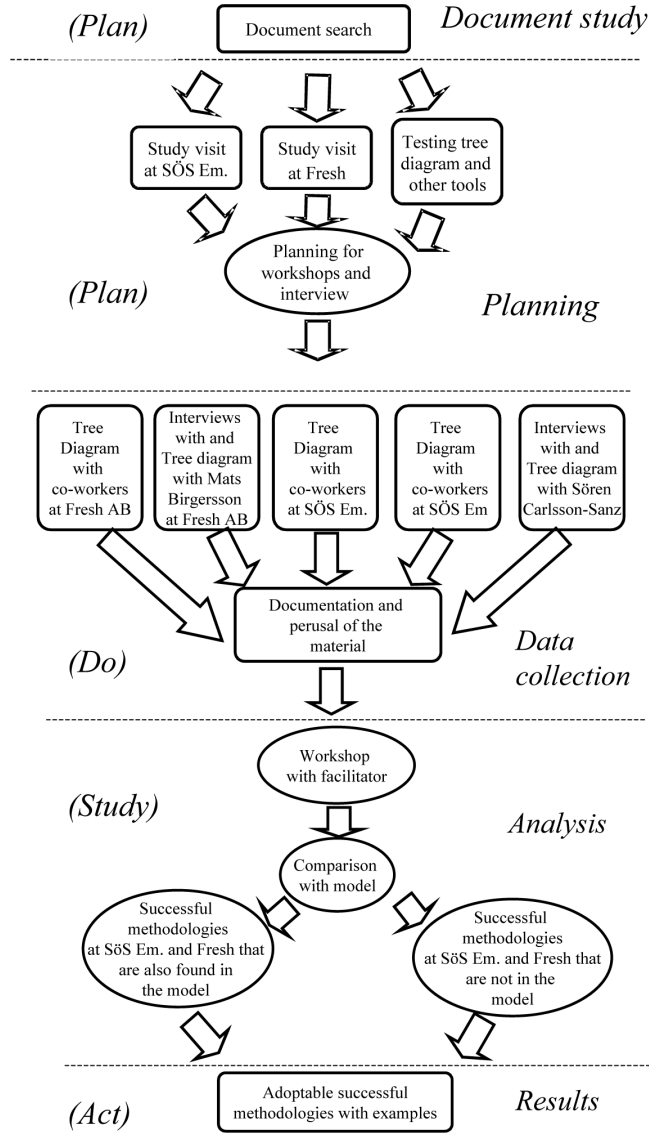
### 3 Research methods

Since the study aimed to explore successful organisations' methodologies for achieving sustainable health, a case study with an explorative, qualitative approach was chosen. The selection of the two case study organisations (Fresh AB and SÖS Emergency) was based on their recognised status as successful organisations. They both received the Alecta award in 2001.

#### 3.1 The research process

The research project started with two study visits to build relations, present the project and to receive an overview of the organisations. This was also the start of data collection from relevant documents, articles and reports. The data collection was made by using brainstorming, structured in tree diagrams by the employees. All documented data from the tree diagrams (Mizuno, 1988) were then complemented by management interviews in both organisations. The collected data were then analysed. The research process is illustrated in Figure 4. The process follows the improvement cycle 'Plan-Do-Study-Act' (Deming, 1986). For more details about this study, see Bäckström et al. (2004a, 2004b).

**Figure 4** The figure describes the research process



### 3.2 The data collection

#### 3.2.1 The tree diagrams

The research team tried to identify a tool that would structure qualitative information from a complex situation in an easy way for the respondents, as well as inspire creativity. The tree diagram (see Mizuno, 1988) tool was ultimately chosen on the assumption that the interactive process would give answers that could not be obtained as a result of individual interviews. The creation of the tree diagrams always started with the question: "Why are you among the best workplaces in Sweden?"



Different individual suggestions were written down on post it notes and placed on a whiteboard. The next step was to further explore each of the suggestions in order to find out how it was related to the first question. From a consensus process, the group formulated a final answer. By continuing like this, the idea was to guide the group stepwise with new questions like ‘Why?’ “What is creating this?” “How have you worked to achieve this?”

The tree diagram process was concluded with an evaluation of the answers at the lowest level of the tree, listing the most detailed methodologies in order to find out which methodologies were considered most important to the group. At Fresh AB, a group of six persons, representing the whole organisation, participated in the tree diagram creation, in March 2003. At SÖS Emergency, two separate tree diagrams were made with four participants in each group, consisting of a mix of nurses and staff nurses, all women, in May 2003.

### *3.2.2 Interviews*

After the tree diagrams were completed for each organisation, an interview with the CEO of Fresh AB and the Department Manager of SÖS Emergency concluded the data collection. After each interview, a separate tree diagram was constructed with the manager in the same way as with the coworkers, so as to have as a complement and also for comparison with the coworkers’ tree diagram.

### *3.3 The analysis process*

The members of the research team analysed all the data collected together with an external facilitator. When all the data had been recorded on note pads, the analysis process started with developing categories, as suggested by Merriam (1988) and Goetz and LeCompte (1984). The analysis was first made separately for each organisation and then, as a cross case analysis. The internal partnership model (in Figure 1) was then used as a frame to sort the data from the cross case analysis. From that analysis, a new set of methodologies, considered possible to adopt in other organisations, was selected.

## **4 Empirical findings**

### *4.1 Fresh AB*

#### *4.1.1 Tree diagram*

The empirical findings from the tree diagram at Fresh AB resulted in a final assessment of the most important methodologies, made by the coworkers. This came as a result of a stepwise process down to the lowest level of the tree diagram. The tree diagram started with the question: “Why are you one of the best workplaces in Sweden?” The most important identified activities were:

- everybody participates in competence development programmes
- the coworkers are encouraged and not punished
- the managers listen to the coworkers’
- the coworkers were forced to understand the importance of communication and information.

#### 4.1.2 *Interview with CEO*

The interview with the CEO, Mats Birgersson at Fresh AB, ended with a separate tree diagram and the most important activities performed to reach the epithet: “One of the best workplaces in Sweden”, in his opinion, was:

- the regular developmental conversations
- the vision process
- answering the question: “Why do you go to work?” with: “Creating value for others”.

When Birgersson started in 1994, the company was in bad shape. “The coworkers didn’t understand anything of what they were doing”... “So the competence of the coworkers was a shock to me”, he said. Birgersson understood that the company had been managed in an exceedingly top-down manner. He started a developmental conversation programme with all coworkers to understand the coworkers’ competence situation. He also introduced a programme for all coworkers in 1995, performed by the employment service agency for new entrepreneurs. His vision was to increase the holistic view, make all coworkers conscious of the crisis, and bring about a change of attitude. Resistance to his efforts was widespread and it was hard to sell the idea. During the interview he said that, in the beginning he invested about 50% of his time in building relations with every individual coworker by walking around in the factory. His belief was that nobody wants to be treated as an anonymous person in a collective environment, but prefers to be addressed as an individual. “Everything is a matter of communication”, he stated. He also emphasised the infrastructure for cross communication at many meetings, aimed at enabling the employees to exchange information and talk to each other. “The developmental conversations are the basis of the leadership”, as he expressed it.

Another mission he described was to tear down the hierarchy, “because hierarchy will be an obstacle to people talking to each other”. An informal structure creates equity and commitment, he argued. “Trust between managers and coworkers comes from conversations, communication and visibility. Practice what you preach”, was also something which he also saw as vital for building this trust.

Birgersson’s idea of good leadership is also to build and communicate visions. He likes to use metaphors to sell his message, like ‘The Marine Chart’. He also describes the organisation as ‘a train’ with an engine consisting of the driving forces, passenger carriage for those who just go along and braking carriages for hesitators or ‘objectors’. His advice is: “Abandon old beliefs, look for engines and don’t waste too much time on braking carriages”. He also mentioned that the policy document ‘The Marine Chart’ had been developed by the coworkers alone, on their own initiative, when Birgersson was away on a business trip to Japan.

He advocated some important characteristics of leadership: be authoritarian in combination with situation based leadership to force things to happen at times, but be a coach to support the coworkers’ own decisions. “It’s a matter of helping people to motivate themselves”. If a suggestion comes up his response is: “Let’s try; if it doesn’t work we can always just go back to where we started”. His comment on the positive sick leave statistics was: “We don’t talk about sick leave; we talk about health presence”.

Birgersson described how he constantly repeated the question: “Why do you go to work?” and like a mantra the coworkers answered: “To create value for others”. “You can only reach your own self fulfilment through making value for others”, he said. “It can

only be reached together with other people”. The development of a diversified organisation is another example of an ethical dimension, and it was done in an effort to increase the understanding of other people. His comments about the organisational culture at Fresh AB are:

“Culture stands for: cultivation, refinement and education”. The cultivation is implemented by sowing seeds from ideas. We refine them through a high level of communication and competence development. Education is harvesting. It is a sort of self fulfilment for the organisation that people are healthy, because then the economy is functioning.”

#### *4.2 SÖS Emergency*

The empirical findings from the two tree diagrams at SÖS Emergency resulted in a final identification, made by the coworkers, of the most important methodologies (see Bäckström et al., 2004a, 2004b). The two tree diagrams started with the same question as at Fresh AB: “Why are you one of the best workplaces in Sweden?” and the most important identified reasons were:

##### *Tree diagram 1*

- the managers are visible and available and there is mutual trust between managers and coworkers
- responsibility and authority are distributed in accordance with interest and competence
- evaluation is made with inquiries and discussion groups
- the model for working time planning is developed by the coworkers
- the corporate culture is open to new methodologies and ready to solve problems instantly.

##### *Tree diagram 2*

- the managers listen with a sensitive ear and are on our side
- the management group have common missions and the right person on the right spot
- we have an encouraging atmosphere and like to spend time together
- there is a desire to learn and share knowledge from many highly competent coworkers
- proposals from the coworkers and cooperation groups lead to results and solve problems
- we have agreed on methodologies and tools in a job that is unpredictable
- we have open and straight communication and try not to speak ill of each other behind her/his back.

##### *4.2.1 Interview with the department manager*

The interview with the department manager, Sören Carlsson-Sanz at SÖS Emergency, also resulted in a separate tree diagram and the most important identified methodologies for being: “One of the best workplaces in Sweden” were:

- authority followed by responsibility is highly valued by leaders
- there is no competition, but cooperation and decreased work load
- we have influence, for instance through participating in debate programmes, articles and lectures
- we carry out scientific studies and reflect on society and participate in actions with external resources
- there is a forum for decision making and an interest in sharing knowledge
- we have created room and channels for communication and information
- opportunities for long term rehabilitation of sick listed coworkers and use of direct treatment.

At most clinics doctors are the managers, but Carlsson-Sanz is a nurse and was selected by a unanimous coworker group in 1994. He referred to the clinic as ‘a worn out work place that raised a mutiny’. He described his vision of good leadership as: visible and working together with the coworkers ‘on the floor’. The leadership abilities he wishes to emphasise are: holistic views, structure, mediation of trust, knowledge of human behaviour, supportive attitude, imparting and showing respect and no false authority. During the interview he, in particular, emphasised the importance of creating a forum for communication in dialogue and competence development.

Through various different, externally financed, preventive projects they try to fight against the sense of meaninglessness often caused by the work at emergency clinics. They take part in and share, for example, books, lectures, reports and documentary films and, according to Carlsson-Sanz, “the coworkers are growing and feel that they are doing something important”. He emphasises the importance of reflecting on ethical issues and use straight communication to avoid conflicts. “People must talk to each other and not about each other”, he points out. The diversified organisation of the clinic is a valued asset in his view. Throughout the interview he returned to the issues of participation and dialogue.

When concluding the interview on how sustainable health can be achieved Carlsson-Sanz advocates: “room for debate and straight communication without false authority”.

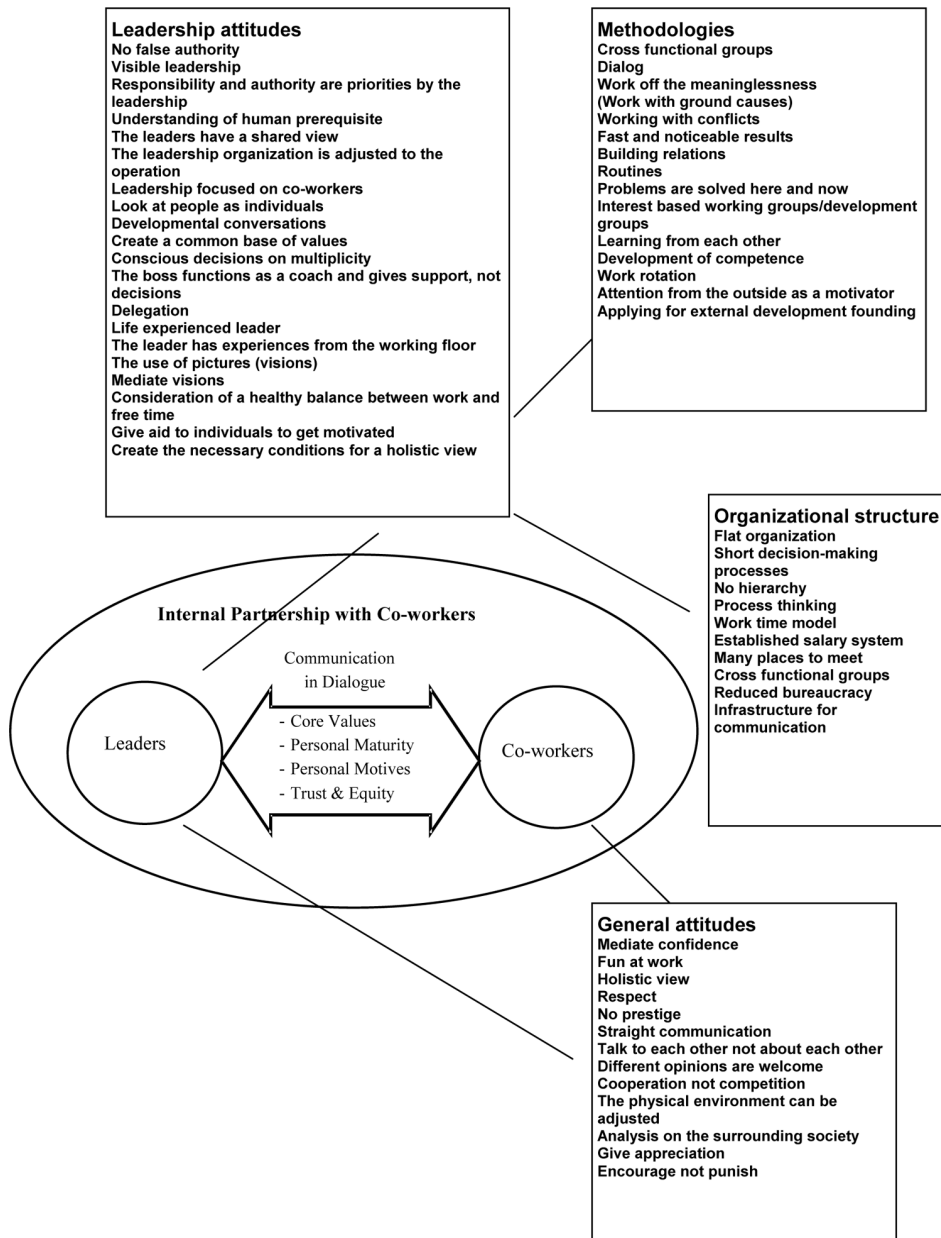
## **5 Analysis**

### *5.1 Cross case analysis*

The empirical findings from the two studied organisations were, as a next step, subjected to a cross case analysis to look for conformity between the organisations. In this analysis, all data collected was taken into consideration, including observations, interviews and tree diagrams. All the data was then sorted under the five decisive factors including the internal partnership model (see Figure 1) plus one factor named ‘Other’, including detected factors, which did not have any obvious connection to those in the model.

From this analysis the research team identified the methodologies functioning in the two studied organisations and considered possible to adopt by other organisations. Then four new, more relevant, categories were formulated. ‘General Attitudes’ concerns everyone in the organisation, both managers and coworkers. The other presented areas are considered more dependent on the managers’ attitudes. The following paragraphs summarise and comment on the main findings shown in Figure 5.

**Figure 5** Results of the cross case analysis based on the findings from the two organisations



### *5.1.1 General attitudes*

The empirical findings show that communication in the organisations is highly valued. The coworkers verify that the atmosphere is open, without prestige, with mutual respect, and based on trust. They use straight communication, i.e. “they talk to each other, not about each other”. Different opinions are welcome and people cooperate instead of compete. They are encouraged and corrected, not punished when making a mistake. The coworkers have a lot of direct influence on their current working situation and they can therefore make adjustments according to their own situation. Another attitude, which both organisations emphasised, is that work is judged to be fun.

The coworkers in both organisations gave positive comments on their managers’ personal attitudes. The managers are described as having an understanding of human conditions and meeting people as individuals which makes it possible for them to receive personal support. The balance between work and leisure is also taken into consideration by the two managers. Every coworker has regular developmental conversations about their current situation, needs and plans for the future. A great deal of effort is made by the managers to unify the coworkers through visions of a common direction.

The use of ethical dimensions is also described by both organisations. This provides conditions for a sense of ‘doing good’ and stimulates the debate and unity of a common base of values. At Fresh AB they have a strong customer orientation and constantly talk about why they go to work, with the answer: “making values for others”. At SÖS Emergency they focus on the patients and what is best for them, but also participate in various preventive societal projects.

### *5.1.2 Leadership attitudes*

The managers of the studied organisations were considered by the coworkers to be visible and supportive coaches, with no false authority. Experience and ability to establish trust when coaching coworkers are also valued. The organisations are designed for a balanced delegation of authority and responsibility to the coworkers.

### *5.1.3 Methodologies*

Both organisations are characterised by having many cross functional groups. The focus is on relations and understanding each other in activities like work rotation and learning from each other. Again, communication between coworkers and between managers and coworkers is underlined. If conflicts occur they try to sort them out instead of avoiding them.

Their problem solving methods are described as quick and easy, based on delegation of decision making processes, which leads to fast and noticeable results. The problem solving methods focus on solving basic causes, even if the problems are caused external. At SÖS Emergency, they also handle recurrent traumatic situations in their daily work by ‘mirroring’ (debriefing). Various competence development programmes are also common in both organisations. The public attention gives both pride and motivation. Recruiting and keeping coworkers is, according to their own information, not difficult in either of these organisations.

#### *5.1.4 Organisational structure*

Both organisations studied have designed their infrastructure for coworker influence. The organisations are flat, nonhierarchical and nonbureaucratic. This makes the decision process short and creates an infrastructure for communication. Furthermore, they have regular meetings in different constellations such as crossfunctional groups. Processes focusing on the customer provide a holistic approach and characterise both organisations. At Fresh AB, for instance, they have established a salary system and at SÖS Emergency they have a model for work time planning, both developed by the coworkers.

#### *5.2 Cross case analysis vs. the internal partnership model*

After the cross case analysis was completed a comparison with the internal partnership model was made, in order to study the relevance of the model.

Neither organisation uses the term 'core values', but ethical and moral issues seem to be present in their daily work. Both organisations work towards a diversified organisation in order to reflect the society outside the organisation and to create a dynamic atmosphere inside the organisation. The core values, such as mutual agreements, are also established in the policy documents of both organisations.

The issue of personal maturity is strongly represented when discussing desirable leadership abilities among coworkers, and in the coworkers' competence development programmes. The conversations, with respect, in a professional manner may also be seen as an example of personal maturity to clarify mutual expectations. Covey's (1992) formulation is strongly applicable to both organisations; "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".

Both organisations are designed for coworker influence and therefore the coworkers' personal motives should, in such an environment, have good chances of being fulfilled. The regular developmental conversations on an annual basis, give the coworkers an opportunity to express personal desires and provide opportunities to combine those with the interests of the organisation. The individual competence development programmes are also examples of efforts to satisfy individual needs.

Trust and equality are evidently pervading characteristics of both organisations. This is shown in their communicative attitudes and seems to be well incorporated in both organisations' methodologies. Groups often make their own decisions, and mutual trust and respect between managers and coworkers seem to be established. The nonhierarchical, flat structure of both organisations underlines their effort to establish equality.

The empirical findings from the two organisations also strongly emphasise the importance of communication, as suggested in the internal partnership model (see Figure 1). They have both designed a successful infrastructure for dialogue, both as coworker influence on different cross functional groups and regular developmental conversations between managers and coworkers.

### 5.3 *Cross case analysis vs. sustainable health*

The findings of the cross case analysis support Söderlund's (2003) theory of the 'health factors', as indicated by the responses to the question: "What makes people function in the best possible way, develop and feel good?" The conformity of the studied organisations and the presented 'health factor' theory is striking. The statistics on the average sick leave rate also support the view that the health factor theory is applicable to both the studied organisations.

There is reason to believe that increased responsibility for coworkers, mentioned at both SÖS Emergency and Fresh AB, can cause stress, as discussed by Docherty et al. (2002). This subject never came up as a negative consequence in either of the organisations during the data collection phase. In terms of the concepts used by Docherty et al. (2002), one may ask whether it is more relevant in these organisations to talk of 'the spice of life' rather than 'the kiss of death' when referring to trends in modern working life.

## 6 Discussion and conclusions

The studied organisations differ in both size and business, but they basically use similar methodologies. The restart from critical situations has most certainly provided special conditions for the processes of change in the two organisations described. It is also hard not to recognise the managers' influence and their personal approaches to leading the processes of change. The mutual established teamwork based on good leadership together with the coworkers' commitment, is once again proven to be the essence of success. The public attention that comes from winning awards and receiving other kinds of recognition is a natural proof of being on right track and an inspiration for continued efforts.

The internal partnership model was used as a theoretical frame and seems to be relevant in both organisations. However, the decisive factors in the model seem to be too general and should therefore be redesigned to a more detailed level for better utility in the future. The 'health factor' theory by Söderlund (2003) and discussions of quality in working life by Schabracq and Cooper (2000), Benders and van de Looij (1994) and Lewis et al. (2001) are strongly supported by the results of this study.

There are of course many concurrent methodologies behind the success of the studied organisations. Some of them are unique like, for instance, the personal characteristics of the managers and internal routines that may be difficult for other organisations to adopt. Other methodologies have been considered possible for others to adopt in their efforts to achieve good working conditions resulting in less sick leave, such as:

- infrastructures for straight communication and dialogue (cross functional groups and development groups)
- relation building activities and meetings
- regular developmental conversations
- coworkers' influence (on their own daily work, salary and timetables)
- delegated responsibility and authority to working teams



- flat flexible nonhierarchical and nonbureaucratic organisation
- suggestions for improvements dealt with seriously (results and quick feedback)
- establish holistic view (work rotation and cross functional groups)
- mutual respect without false authority or penalty for mistakes
- balance between work and private life
- good public attention.

From the methodologies used, other managers and practitioners should be more concerned about building close personal relations with coworkers; they should pay attention to the importance of communication in dialogue, realise how each individual function is important for the performance of the system, note and respect the fact that the organisation has hired a person with positive and negative values, who wants to be proud of him/herself, and maybe the most important issue – give much effort to establish trust in all directions. These suggestions are not new or revolutionary, but already known to be winning concepts in management theory. A relevant question for further research seems to be: ‘Why are these methodologies not used to a larger extent?’

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