How to promote organizational development through internal process-evaluation?

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ABSTRACT

A management approach, known as managerialism, has reflected various ways on public sector professional organizations. Many organizations have adopted trends like "knowledge management" and "learning organization" to exploit human capital more efficiently, for example by creating some communities of practices. Performance and wellbeing at work would be effected by the management of people in the most sustainable way. The learning culture can be enabled or hindered by day-to-day operational task management. To tackle this challenge and to promote organizational development a public sector R&D organization operating in the field of welfare and health launched a tailor-made, 1 ½ year lasting training programme for a manager group (N=41). In order to conduct an effective training programme an evaluative work orientation was adopted to promote organizational development and learning. That meant a systematic monitoring and documentation of the process of the program. This kind of internal self-evaluation consisted of continuous steering function and scanning of emergent effects. Triangulated qualitative and quantitative evaluation data was collated.

Key words: managerialism, organizational learning, learning culture, training prgramme

1   INTRODUCTION

New ways of thinking, originating from business life, have influenced numerous reforms, which pursuit to modernize public organizations. Typically those ideas have been connected with the general paradigms like new public management (NPM) or managerialism. They have given impetus to many projects and pilots making an effort to develop more performance-oriented and client-focused management. Concepts like strategic human resource management (SHMR), best practices, and knowledge management have been absorbed eagerly by public organizations (Wiig 2002). Whatever is hot in the corporate world finds its way into the public sector. Patton (2001, 330) has warned evaluators about this new rhetoric because it is already affecting expectations from stakeholders about what kind of findings should be produced by evaluations.

New perspectives alerted by these topical trends have added fuel to the old rhetoric that stresses personnel as an organization's most important resource. Pressures at work have been on the increase within working life: intensification of work has become increasingly frequent. Day-to-day operational task management can enable or hinder learning culture and it effects on wellbeing at work: low organizational justice is a risk to the health of employees (Elovainio et. al. 2002). Awakening to these challenges concerning human capital has brought up an increasing need for management training. A public sector R&D organization, operating in the field of welfare and health, launched a tailor-made, 1 ½ year lasting training programme for a manager group.

Characteristics of professional organizations beget distinct challenges to managerial issues. In the ideal type of professional organization, members direct their own work in line with jointly approved strategies and goals. McAuley and his colleagues (2000) have called into question a strong suggestion that professionals take little interest in the activity known as managing. They proved by empirical study that interviewed research scientists were willing to adapt and

absorb new approaches to management in order to progress their professional work.

In order to conduct an effective training programme, evaluative work orientation was adopted to promote organizational development and learning. That meant systematic monitoring and documentation of the process of the training programme. Such an internal process evaluation consisted of continuous steering function and scanning of emerging effects. The aim of this article is to describe, through an evaluation experience, usability of process use of evaluation in a small-scale internal evaluation context.

2. PROCESS USE OF EVALUATION

Typically, organizational development and HRD projects are intensely action-oriented and solely evaluated. According to my experience, if evaluation occurs it is probably outcome- oriented (e.g. Geerthuis et al. 2002). On the contrary, ongoing internal evaluation integrated in organization development processes can be an asset to promote organizational learning (Sharp 2001). The main reason to choose to use an evaluative work orientation in this particular case was a desire to steer the process of the project more knowingly based on rigorously gathered data. In that sense, the applied approach is quite close to action-research, in its practical cognitive interest. Hence, the core issue was how to collect such feedback information and to create that of learning arenas, which are needed to promote the project's development and learning in the organization.

Patton (1998) has underlined that the core issue in evaluative work orientation and process use of evaluation is how to learn to think evaluatively. That is more than just data collecting, specific findings, reports, and use of them. For an internal consultant, like myself, an evaluative work orientation should be an integrated part of thinking and acting. To clarify potential role confusion, in this case, my core responsibility was to carry out the training programme, so I was not an evaluator at the first place, but a specialist who have adopted an evaluative work orientation. Hence, in terms of evaluation, we are talking about internal self-evaluation. This applied evaluation approach is close to developmentative evaluation (Patton 1997, 104

106), which is formative in its nature and focused on improving the project. This kind of approach can be described as both user-focused and improvement-oriented.

Patton (1998, 225) has defined process use as follows: Relating to and being indicated by individual changes in thinking and behaving that occurs among those involved in evaluation as a result of the learning that occurs during the evaluation process. It follows that evaluation should be judged by its utility and real use. The focal role of intended users who have the main responsibility to apply evaluation findings is highlighted. Evaluators are rather seen as facilitators or consultants who create a helping relationship with stakeholders in a participatory and responsive way (Donaldson 2001). In this particular case, indented users were the participants of the training programme, which included the top management of the organization and the project management team. These primary users were the key players within the process of the project.

According to Patton (1997), there are four different uses of evaluation logic and processes: (1) enhance shared understanding, (2) increasing participants' engagement, (3) supporting and reinforcing the program through intervention-oriented evaluation, and (4) program or organizational development. In this specific case, especially the last two categories existed; they will be discussed later on in this article. Forss et al. (2002) have extended the categories of process use of evaluation introduced by Patton by identifying five different types: (1) learning to learn, (2) developing networks, (3) creating shared understanding, (4) strengthening the project and (5) boosting the morale. There can be found some natural overlapping between the two categorizations. By the five-type classification, the authors wished to clarify the borderline between use of findings and process use. They argued that the idea of use has been bound up too much to the exploitation of findings and recommendations released in the end of the evaluation process: the importance of a final report has been over-emphasized. Patton's (1997, 20) message is what happens from the beginning of a study will determine its impact long before a final report is released. It follows that a great deal of use takes place during an evaluation course.

On the one hand, it has been criticized that process use occurs due to luck (Forss et al. 2002, 43). Being aware of that, it was designed and planned, and taken as a guiding principle for the entire evaluation course. The major risk at process use - resided in all kinds of evaluations - is the tendency to provide legitimacy and status quo. Genuine utilization requires very sharp observation and readiness to constantly exploit evidence of any kind. Especially this is a challenge to an internal evaluator who is typically acting in several roles simultaneously. As a matter of fact, in the methodological literature on evaluation it has been recommended that an internal evaluator should operate from an independent position within an organization. That would prevent his or her potential bias (Sonnichsen 2000; Love 1991).

An another problematic thing is a risk of losing touch with reality (more in Patton 1997, 26-29): one is not able to judge the work of own. The development process might be so engaging and turbulent that it is difficult to get needed reality check. One potential way to handle the situation and get feedback is to use an external evaluator, involved in monitoring and implementation analysis, as a reflector (e.g., Preskill & Torres 1999, 59).

Sonnichsen (2000) has stressed that internal evaluation is an emerging paradigm that appears in various forms. It can be understood as a form of action research that supports organizational development and intended change. In this particular study, the type of internal evaluation was mostly an adaptation of evaluation principles (Sonnichsen 2000, 55). Actually, literature concerning utilization of evaluation is mainly focused on doing external evaluations and few attentions are paid to the special challenges emerging in internal contexts. The major advantages of internal setting of the evaluation were the knowledge of the organization's personnel and operations. Deep connoisseur in the organization's culture and conditions qualified me, on the one hand, to understand and interpret implicit meanings and nuances, but on the other hand, posed a potential negative influence on the data quality and could bias my observations.

3. DRIVING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

The study was grounded in the evaluation approach described above together with some suppositions on the nature of organizational change. Primarily, the management development intervention was regarded to be as a tool for enhancing change in organization. Those who are acquainted with OD-tradition would easily link this kind of framework with training-driven-effort. Although, training is regarded as a key element in a change process, it is relatively different from in terms of how non-linear and dynamic a process is regarded to be. In addition, organizational development strategies typically do not pay much attention to evaluation issues or if they do, evaluation is defined technically and located as a final phase in carrying out a development effort, so it has not necessarily been understood as a continuous and integrated part of a change process.

What is change? The topic of organizational change has featured prominently in discussions of organizational behavior and organization theory (Hatch 1997, 350). This complex phenomenon can be scrutinized from various dimensions like radical and incremental change. Those perspectives classify organizational change by their consequences or outcomes. (Buhanist 2000.) In my mind the nature of change and change strategy have to be parallel. In this particular case, change was understood as an open process-like developmentative path (Seppänen-Järvelä 1999), which may include wide variety of activities and interventions leading to vision created in an organization. That kind of developing strategy is relatively close to the other process-oriented approaches like Kari Murto's interaction-oriented development model pursuing to a well functioning community (Murto 1991; 2001) and Edgar Schein's (1999) well known Process Consultation.

Locating the time and nature of change is not easy: according to some empirical findings people just in similar positions and jobs have big differences in the way how they perceive change occurring. Another crucial issue is in what extend do various development efforts promote change. Often even successful projects or interventions do not accomplish a lot of change (Buhanist 2000, 105.) Often such interventions are rather supporting status quo than renewing established

practices and culture of an organization (Kevätsalo 1999). In terms of evaluation, the focal question is that what kind of evidence of change is needed or can some kind of evaluation support change or learning processes.

Hatch (1997) finds learning organization as a new metaphor that challenges former modernist models of organizational change. Those assumed organizations adapt to external pressures; instead it suggest that organizations create their internal dynamics, which are described as processes of organizational learning. Learning like change is a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon: Easterby-Smith (1997) argues that the creation of a single framework for understanding organizational learning is unrealistic. He found six, highly divergent disciplinary perspectives: psychology and OD, management science, sociology and organization theory, strategy, production management and cultural anthropology. Furthermore, he makes difference between concepts "organizational learning" and "learning organization". The former is discipline-based and more analytic, whereas the latter underlines action and the creation of an "ideal-type" of organization.

4. CASE: A MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTION

4.1 Background and goals

The case organization (referred later in the text as the Centre), with total of 400 employees, focuses on research, development and the creation of information, which implies a number of challenges that pertain to the staff's competencies and professional renewal. The Centre forms part of the public sector research community and it conducts actions that are strategic and applied in nature. It is a knowledge-based, professional organization where the level of education and competence is high among the staff.

According to the case organization's staff inquiry (2000), the staff members saw that superiors mostly provided encouragement, listened to and dealt fairly with their subordinates, although they pointed out some challenges in management:

- How could the appraisal and feedback practices be improved so as to ensure that all employees would receive feedback on their work and achievements and feel that their contribution is appreciated?

- How could the "ultimate objectives" of each work task be better brought up in discussions between superiors and subordinates?

- How could the confidence in the management be reinforced?

According to the staff strategy (2001), based on the staff inquiry, among other thing, management should be competent and provide encouragement, and in addition, priority is given to the staff's well being, commitment, and motivation. It underlines that the competent management creates outcomes, commitment and energy, and leads to a rewarding working culture. Those in supervision and leadership positions are expected to have a genuine dedication to managerial work. An increasingly important element of management work is the ability to built up confidence, integrate skills and competencies, and create different ways of communication and interaction.

As a matter of fact, there was no major visible crisis in terms of managing in the case organization. Rather, the programme could be understood as a method for sustainable organizational development, in this sense, it was not merely "training". The programme was addressed to the all levels of the management: from the top to the front-line (N=41). Twenty-four of them were women and sixteen were men. They were highly educated senior experts: approximately half of them had doctoral degrees and the rest had master's degrees.

The overall goal of the programme was to strengthen competency and commitment of those responsible for management and supervision tasks. The training programme focused both on individual development and reaching organizational goals. Participants shaped naturally their own personal goals, which were potentially reorganized and clarified gradually during the ongoing training process.

According to the project plan the goals from individual's point of view were:

- Strengthen competence in managerial practices, especially in management of people.

- Support ability to strategic thinking and planning.

- Give methods for self-evaluation and renewing of work communities.

- Bolster professional development and well-being at work.

From the organization's perspective the goals were:

- Enhance shared understanding about leadership and managership.

- Clarify the role of managerial duties.

- Reinforce better quality in managerial work.

- Facilitate cooperation between divisions and groups.

- Enhance dialogue about management practices and organizational culture.

The goals were relatively vague; rather they were like markers on the path, guiding the conduction of the training programme. Individual and organizational learning and development were the focal concerns about the goals. They were not intended to be measurable yardsticks because the evaluative interest was not focused on some immediate outcomes in terms of goal attainment. I have understood that measuring progress in learning is difficult, because the payoffs are subtle and delayed, and particularly, they are more apt to appear as strategic advantages, such as greater flexibility and responsiveness (e.g. Brodtrick 1998, 87). So, my core supposition was that the process itself was the most important outcome.

4.2 Execution

The training programme was initiated in March 2001 and will be closed in the end of the 2002. It was carried out in an open process-like, in the other words, the programme was not linearly tightly planned beforehand in order to exploit feedback emerged from the process evaluation. By the end, it will consist of totally 11 one-day lasting training sessions. In addition, three two-hour lasting consultation sessions for six management teams of divisions were integrated in the training program. Wide variety of themes like communication and interaction were on the agendas of the training sessions. The ultimate idea of such an intervention was to reinforce

change in the nature of the management team from an administrative organ to a more strategically thinking community of practice. In this sense, the training sessions were learning spaces, alike in an intellectual and a physical manner.

I was the person responsible for the implementation of the training programme, which was carried out as a project. The project management, including planning, execution, coordination, and self-evaluation, was co-ordinated by me. Subcontractors and trainers were hired to conduct specific training sessions. Therefore, the content of the program was fully tailor-made according to the organization's needs. A tentative impression of the training needs was found out through a brief questionnaire posed to the managers in the spring of 2001.

In the autumn 2001, the first step of the training process was a writing exercise: all of the participants were asked to write a short story about the management style of their own. The idea behind the storytelling was that it would have helped to reflect one's profile as a manager and to clarify one's developmental needs. The process was continued to the next step by pre-interviews conducted by the director of division (responsible for HR-functions) and a deputy director general. Those semi-structured conversations served as a meeting-point between the top management and the front-line managers. They were arenas mainly for dialogue about the current status of the organization's climate and perceived training needs concerning the managerial issues. After this "preparation" phase, the training sessions themselves were launched.

The training sessions, where the management of the entire organization has gotten together, were the most important forums for interpreting and sharing meanings, purposes and agendas that involved verbally explicit knowledge. This was understood, as Choo (2000) has suggested, an endeavor towards a knowing organization. A shared language and shared interpretation made knowledge derived from personal intuition a property and characteristic of the group (Järvinen & Poikela 2001). In a way, it was assumed that the training program would have supported the participant group to become a community of practice, a group, which can share experiences in the atmosphere of mutual trust.

5. DATA AND METHODS

Evaluation process, which went through the project's life span, included monitoring interventions and outcomes regularly over time to provide feedback for fine-tuning the training programme. Triangulated qualitative and quantitative data was collated. In the other words, the idea was to gather data from various sources using wide variety of methodologies.

Data was collected in order to answer the following evaluation questions:

- On what extend are the participants and the entire organization progressing towards the desired outcomes?

- How can the programme interventions be improved in order to reach the goals?

- What are the participants' perceptions and experiences of the training programme and its effects?

Integration of evaluation into the training programme processes was a guiding principle. Purpose was to make data collecting procedures reinforce the program interventions in achieving the goals. Good examples of that kind of process use were "writing exercise" and "pre-interviews". On the one hand, they were important elements in carrying out the program itself, and on the other hand, they offered valuable evaluation data.

Writing exercise. Writing exercise was about short stories about personal management style written by the participants. The purpose of this exercise was to help a participant to orientate to the training programme by clarifying personal goal setting. The texts gave valuable information about how professionals saw them as managers and what kind of problems they had faced so far. The stories must had been read as the expressions of espoused theories (Argyris 1994), and it was understandable that the stories consisted of rhetorical and idealistic features, and can not be understood as an oversimplified mirror of "real life".

Pre-interviews. The interviews were conversation-like sessions between the top and front-line managers. In terms of evaluation, these sessions can be described as evaluation as an intervention. The main function of the conversations was to facilitate communications among different management levels and to give an arena for clarifying the ultimate goal of this management development intervention. According to Forss at al. (2002), one aspect of the process use of evaluation is boosting the morale, which I found highly important in this type of organization development context. For example, the implementation of the numerous conversations was very time-consuming, although as a side effect it created the positive atmosphere of commitment. Especially the top managers reported about gained fresh insights.

Questionnaires about training sessions. Every training session was assessed by same questionnaire. That made comparing as well as monitoring possible. The questionnaire contained of 10 structured questions, and in addition, two open-ended questions. Up-dated results were presented in Intranet site.

Interviews. During the course of the programme, face-to-face individual interviews were conducted with the randomly selected sub-group of participants (n=5). Each of the interviews lasted approximately one hour. They were focused on several themes, although they remained open-ended and assumed conversational manner. Transcripts were analyzed by using the Atlas/ti qualitative analysis program (http://atlasti.de).

Typically that kind of unstructured interviews can be a prolific source of information, but on the contrary, in this study, the majority of the interviews offered only relatively superficial information. My conclusion is that it was a bias caused by internal evaluation context. The interviewees were too polite and did not reveal critical perceptions, although I tried to stimulate them by softly provocative questions. Nevertheless, the interviews were useful in terms of strengthening the project (e.g. Forss et al. 2002, 36) or evaluation as an intervention (e.g. Patton, 1997). By answering evaluative questions, the interviewees had to self-evaluate their personal goal attainment and the relevancy of the training sessions.

Survey research (staff inquiry). The case organization used to conduct a staff inquiry on every other year, and the next survey research will be carried out in November 2002. Some evaluation questions concerning the management and leadership functions will be integrated in that study.

Questionnaire to all participants on the final

stage of the programme. A comprehensive questionnaire will be prepared and posted to all of the participants on Intranet. It will scrutinize mainly the content, execution and consequences of the training program. The results and major evaluation findings will be communicated in a finale meeting when a possible follow-up of the programme will be discussed.

Diary. Keeping my personal field diary was a method to follow-up and document the process. The diary was unstructured in its nature and I took notes frequently when ever I needed to write down or clarify my thoughts. To educate myself as a reflective practitioner and reinforce evaluative thinking, I found the diary a very fruitful method. The phrase "how can I see what I am thinking until I write it" seemed to be true. Accordingly, writing was a one way to visualize action based on tacit knowledge.

Participant-observation.   Participant-observation took place especially during the training sessions, in which I was not merely a passive observer. Instead, I had to adopt variety of roles within those situations. There were three themes, which I tried to observe systematically: (1) atmosphere in the training sessions, (2) interaction within the participant group and between a trainer and participants (3) substance of the training sessions. After the each session, I wrote my "report" in the field diary. Typically, personal observations were based on intuition and interpretation, although I tried to rest my conclusions on some "objective" things and incidents like monitoring roughly the frequency of acts of interaction. Findings from the participant observation were mainly used in planning the training session; in addition the notes in diary remained as an important document describing the process of the programme.

Self-evaluation reports produced by the hired trainers. After the each training session, the trainers were asked to produce a self-evaluation report of that occasion. The report was semi-structured by the themes regarding (1) preparing for the sessions, (2) the substance, and (3) the execution of the sessions.

Preparatory and feedback discussions with the hired trainers. Because any external evaluation support was not available in this particular case, the only way to ensure a possibility to reality-test was to organize some reflective feedback discussions with the hired trainers. In addition, I

wanted to ensure that hired trainers understood needs of the case organization thoroughly, and vice versa, that I did get the right feedback from them. At the early stage of the process, one group meeting was arranged, and during the course some face-to-face discussions were arranged. All of the discussions were tape-recorded and transcriptioned. Analysis was assisted by Atlas/ti qualitative analysis program (http://atlasti.de).

All in all, triangulated data consisted of questionnaires, interviews and survey. In addition, evaluation data was gathered from the hired trainers by the self-reports and feedback discussions and from myself by participant-observations and field diary. This multi-dimensional data offered a comprehensive picture of the training sessions and the ongoing process.

6. CONCLUSIVE POINTS

In this article, I told a story   based on empirical data and experience about how to use evaluative work orientation to steer a process of a organization development project more knowingly based on rigorously gathered data. I discussed the nature and pitfalls of evaluation strategy like that. On the basis of the past experience I would like to draw some lessons learned. First of all, evaluative work orientation itself has proved to be both useful and demanding approach. The major challenges were the consequences of the internal setting; for example, the role confusion caused of various, parallel roles that I was supposed to carry. Although, I got needed support inside the organization: the participants alias informants did understand my evaluative work orientation very well. That was highly important asset, which encouraged conducting this kind of time consuming evaluation effort.

Process use is not inherently positive (Patton, 1998: 227), but is this case, it has been helping to monitor the course of the training program. The point was mainly to use feedback for learning purposes. It has been often criticized in the literature that the exact evidence of organizational learning is hard to show out but here, actually, outcome-evaluation on learning effects was not the ultimate issue. Anyhow, if the systematic and constant feedback were not applied, the entire training programme, or at least the core parts

of it, would have been carried out in a very different way. In this sense, the main conclusion was that the process evaluation helped to adjust just in time to changing situations within the organization, not only to conduct the training in a mechanical way. It has offered a comprehensive framework how to support an organizational development intervention. The use of evaluation methods, for example, a systematic use of feedback or reality test, has proved to be a valuable way to promote organization's capacity building.

The most challenging thing has been learning to think and act evaluatively constantly. In a conventional way of utilization of evaluation, there are certain moments when "using" exists. That is momentary in its nature. On the contrary, in process use of evaluation, "use" is present all the time. One needs deep commitment and positive attitude towards that kind of evaluation approach. It follows that also appropriate evaluation competencies are required; the right attitude is not only enough. Definitely, it is not an evaluation strategy for beginners. Even though, I would argue that required skills and competencies could be learned most effectively by action and experience. In this light, real project context has been my best teacher in getting acquainted with process use of evaluation.

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