Determination of Leadership in a Day Care Organisation

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Abstract

Quite often leadership is investigated only from the point of view of the leader and not all the elements which affect leadership are considered. Nevertheless, it is not just the leader who determines and creates leadership. In this article the aim is to discuss different elements which determine leadership and to show how these elements should be considered when for example the leadership structures are changed. These other elements which determine leadership include for example employees' individual needs for leadership, the role of the teams and groups, the physical structure of an organisation and how the leadership in arranged and carried out at the municipal level. The article will especially focus on the employees' role and in doing that, it is close to the concepts like organisational citizenship and distributed leadership. The context of the paper is Finland.

Tiivistelmä

Johtajuutta tarkastellaan usein vain johtajan näkökulmasta eikä huomioida kaikkia niitä tekijöitä, jotka vaikuttavat johtajuuteen. Johtaja ei ole kuitenkaan ainoa, joka määrittää ja luo johtajuutta. Tässä artikkelissa tavoitteena on tarkastella erilaisia tekijöitä, jotka määrittävät johtajuutta ja todentaa, että nämä tekijät on huomioitava kun esimerkiksi muutetaan johtajuuden rakenteita. Näitä muita tekijöitä, jotka määrittävät johtajuutta, ovat muun muassa työntekijöiden yksilölliset tarpeet johtajuudelle, tiimien ja ryhmien rooli, organisaation fyysinen rakenne ja se, kuinka johtajuus on järjestetty ja toteutetaan kuntatasolla. Artikkeli painottuu etenkin työntekijöiden rooliin ja on näin lähellä sellaisia käsiteitä kuten alaistaidot ja jaettu johtajuus. Artikkelin konteksti on Suomi.

Introduction

Leadership theories and research have a tradition of a more than hundred years (Bennis & Nanus, 1986). However, most of the research has focused solely on leaders and "the followers have been viewed as recipients or moderators of the leader's influence, and as vehicles for the actualisation of the leader's vision, mission and goals" (Shamir, 2007, x; see also Yukl, 2002). This leader-centred view may raise too high perceptions of the role of the leaders. Meindl and his colleagues use the term the *romance of leadership* (Meindl, Ehrlich & Dukerich, 1985; Meindl, 1995). According to the romance of leadership, "leadership is a central organisational process and the premier force in the scheme of organisational events and activities" (Meindl et al., 1985, 79). This kind of a view may narrow the impact of the other elements, which affects leadership and puts the leader in a too central position.

Recent literature has emphasised the role of the followers in influencing leadership and seeing leadership as a relationship between the leader and the followers (Shamir, 2007, xx). This relationship is influenced by the characteristics and behaviour both of the leader and the follower/s. Due to that, research should not focus solely on leaders or on followers but on both of them. Leadership in this article is understood in the same way: it is a relationship especially between the leader and the followers. Moreover, this article also considers other elements which influence and determine leadership[1].

This article is based on the results of a study carried out in two distributed organisations in Finland (Halttunen, 2009). The aim of the study was to describe day care work and leadership in a distributed organisation in day care context. The specific aims of the study were to describe day care work and professional relationships in a day care setting, and to investigate how leadership in day care was carried out and what was expected from it. In addition to how leadership was in practice carried out, the findings of the research gave perceptions of the elements which determine leadership in early childhood education.

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1   In this paper, leadership means the leadership of the day care centre leader although in the original research also the leadership of the employees was investigated.

The context of the study

In Finland, a day care centre leader has traditionally led only one day care centre, or a supervisor of family day care has just led family day care. In practise this has meant that a leader of a day care centre led one day care centre and meanwhile had duties as a kindergarten teacher. The first big change in leadership arrangements took place at the end of the 1980s when leaders of day care settings started simultaneously lead family day care centres and day care. Later, during the 1990s, the smallest day care units, for example small day care centres, were merged with bigger ones. This was the beginning of the use of multiunit organisations, in other words distributed organisations, in day care. The term distributed organisation refers to an organisation where a single leader leads at least two day care units (see e.g. Vartiainen, Kokko, & Hakonen, 2004). In such an organisation, the day care units are situated physically apart and may offer different kinds of day care services (day care in centres, family day care at private homes and open day care).

At the same time, the work role and the tasks of the day care centre leaders has changed: in the study by Nivala (1999) only about 30% of day care leaders worked solely as administrators with no kindergarten teaching duties. This can be compared to the percentage of leaders (72%) who today simultaneously lead both day care centres and family day care (Alila & Parrila, 2007). In other words, during the course of a decade the propositions been have revoked: whereas earlier most of the leaders led one day care centre and also had duties with children, today most of them focus wholly on leadership and run several units. Although one reason for these changes is the economical recession in Finland in the early 1990's (Parrila, 2005), I am of the opinion that the changes how leadership and professionalism are seen also affected and gave space to these organisational changes in day care settings.

Theoretical framework

As there are different ways to group leadership theories, there are different labels for the organisational theories and eras. According to Yukl (2002), one way to organise the major leadership theories and approaches is to

consider whether the leadership effectiveness includes characteristics of the leader, characteristics of the followers or characteristics of the situation. Most often the focus has been on leaders' characteristics. In the same way Hatch (1997) has gathered several approaches to organisations into four main categories: classical, modern, symbolic-interpretive and postmodern view to organisations.

At different times different theories or approaches to organisations and leadership have been more or less dominant regarding the organisational and leadership structure as that has been favoured. A postmodern organisation is seen as an organisation, where, for example, trust, low hierarchy and democracy are central. An opposite model is a modern organisation with a more formal structure and having the emphasis on hierarchical relationships, especially between the leader and the followers. (Clegg, 1990.) These aspects give a clue about the expectations of the leaders and the employees in different times. In addition, the emphasis on distributed leadership has increased along with the views of a postmodern organisation (e.g. Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). However, the change from a modern organisation to a postmodern organisation has some challenges. According to Collinson (2005, 1436), for example the notions of "the leader" and "the follower" are deeply embedded identities and there is a need to examine these identities. It is also necessary to keep in mind that at the same time there is the coexistence of multiple theories concerning organisations and leadership (Yukl, 2002). There is not a clear cut division between the different eras.

For the determination of leadership these changes and different views underpin the researchers to have a broader view when leadership is studied. There are critical views on how the research and literature has too much focused on leaders (Yukl, 2002). It can be said that there are two perspectives in the research: leader-centered and follower-centered (e.g. Shamir, 2007). The latest research and literature have increased the interest of the relationship between the leader and the followers and especially how the followers as a group shape what is seen as effective and good leadership for a group. A good leader is someone who fits well with the prototypical properties of the group. (Hogg, 2005.) This article is conducted without adherence to a specific organisational or leadership theory. The basic idea of the original research was to research how the new organisational structure affects leadership but also being open for the other possible elements

affecting it. In addition, one fundamental assumption was that it is not just the leader who determines his/her leadership.

Objectives and methods of the study

As pointed out earlier, there is a lack of studies focusing on followers and in Finland there is an overall lack of early childhood leadership studies. This research tried to cover these two shortcomings and did not just focus on the leaders and on their work but also emphasised the followers as participants of the leadership and researched their work as well.

In the present case study an ethnographic approach was taken. Two distributed organisations in different municipalities participated in this study. One organisation comprised four and the other five day care units. Both organisations included different kinds of day care units: day care centres, family day care and open day care. The total number of employees in these organisations consisted of two leaders and 48 staff members.

The data were collected during 2003–2006 using various sources: observation, group and individual interviews and a qualitative questionnaire. Observation (60 hours) was done in each unit and in different staff meetings. Almost all the staff members were able to take part in the group interviews, in addition to which there were nine individual interviews. In these interviews there were four themes: day care work, leadership, working in a distributed organisation, and co-operation between the units. Observation was focused on how leadership was carried out and on what kind of co-operation there was between different units. The two leaders were interviewed both individually and together. The themes of their interviews followed the ones with the staff members. The questionnaire was aimed only for the staff. In all 29 (62%) persons answered it. The questionnaire was formed in a qualitative design with open ended questions focusing on the same themes as used in the interviews.

The data were analysed using data-driven content analysis (e.g. Bos & Tarnai, 1999). The data were reduced according to the interview themes and sub and main categories were developed. This article uses the interviews of the two leaders and the staff members as the primary data.

Findings

As the organisational structure, which was the focus of this research, was very topical at the time when the research was done, there was also some discussion going on in the local papers. The spirit of the discussion was lightly against these distributed organisations. Also previous research show cases where, for example, merging family day care with day care centres had been problematic because of the lack of full consideration what it had meant in practice (Parrila, 2005).

However, my research verified that in addition to the new organisational structure, there were other elements which affected leadership and how it was carried out. These other elements were even more meaningful in determining the leadership. For example, the employees did not see the new organisational structure taking the time and energy of their leader. In addition to the physical structure of the organisation, the other identified elements determining leadership in this study were *leadership structure and culture of the community and the municipality, units and groups* and *individuals*. These elements are introduced in the following chapters. I will first focus on the physical structure because the change in the organisational and leadership structure directly affected and formed the physical structure of the organisation.

Physical structure of the organisation

According to Hatch (1997) one element of the physical structure of an organisation is the buildings and their location. It is more and more common that organisations operate in more than one location. As mentioned earlier, in the Finnish context the geographical location of a day care setting is not anymore one building but several buildings. My case organisations varied a bit concerning their physical structures: The units of the other organisation were located quite close to each other, the longest distance being about 1 kilometre. In the other one, the units were spread more: the longest distance between two units was about 3 kilometres, and the distance from the leader's office varied from less than 1 kilometre to about 2 kilometres. It can be said that the units of the first organisation were in the same neighbourhood, but the units of the latter one were in different areas of the town.

The employees mentioned several times that the physical structure of their organisation effected how the leadership was carried out and what the possibilities for carrying out the leadership were. The physical structure was related to such practical themes as the possibilities for face to face contacts between the leader and the staff, the leader's possibilities to take part in the daily activities of the units and how aware the leader was about the work done in the units. It can be concluded that the physical structure determined the interaction between the leader and the personnel.

> "(…) We talk about how hard it is, but it makes me feel that we just complain. It is difficult to use the right words, when she [the leader] does not see the real life situations (…) It is totally different to tell about the work while peacefully having a cup of coffee. (…)" (An employee)

Reforming the practical interaction meant that the leaders needed new ways how to arrange meetings and other contacts with the staff. These two leaders had arranged the staff meetings in different ways: in the first one the meetings were separately in each unit and in the other one all units sent their representative to a common staff meeting. Both leaders had arguments for these arrangements: the other one wanted to concentrate on each unit at a time and the other one wanted more to create a spirit of a community among the different units. The leaders also needed new practical tools for the interaction: the ways how to communicate and share information were more and more via email and phone.

At the end of the day, the most significant theme due to the physical structure was the presence or absence of the leader in her units: the leaders could not use the leadership tools they had had when leading one unit and the employees could not expect the same as from a traditional leader of one unit. As the leaders said they needed to learn not being aware of everything what was going on. The employees needed, as they had done, learn to work more independently as individuals and especially as teams. According to Parrila (2007) one problem in moving to the direction of new organisational forms has been that leaders have tried to lead using old tools suitable for traditional ways of organising leadership and units in new contexts.

In spite of the need that everyone should learn new ways and tools to carry out their work, the meaningful role of the leader should be remembered. In distributed leadership the basic idea is not to decrease the role of the leader but to reconsider the role, duties and tasks of the leader. (Spillane, 2006.)

Leadership structure and culture of the community and the municipality

The two case organisations of the study were from two different municipalities[2]. In the first one there were day care service administrators at the municipality level. In the other one day care centre leaders more collegially shared common responsibilities although there had also been consideration whether they needed a middle manager. The middle manager level at the municipalities was different partly due to the size of the municipality. Nevertheless, both of the leaders emphasised that all in all the work of all the leaders at the day care services had changed in the recent years. In Finland, during the last two decades decentralisation in administration has increased and day care centre leaders have more power in the decision making than earlier (Hujala, Karila, Nivala, & Puroila, 1998). In the review of the Finnish dissertations focusing on school leadership, Alava, Halttunen and Risku (2012) also emphasise the importance and effects of the municipality as principals' operating environment.

The leader of the other case organisation had a long work career and had experienced the change at the middle manager level. Earlier also in this municipality, the day care centre leaders had lead early childhood education more collegially having large responsibilities at the municipality level. The leader mentioned in one of the interviews that today she could focus on the units of her own more than earlier because she was not anymore so involved on the general early childhood development work at the municipality level. Now there were other leaders at the municipality level doing that work.

What was evident and did not depend on the municipality was that both the leaders and the personnel underlined how much the middle management and the municipality affected the work of the leaders. This view was even more underpinned in the opinions of the staff members.

> "There is so much that is expected from the leaders. They need to do several reports and be members in different work groups. Sometimes

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2   In Finland, at the time when the data were collected there were about 430 municipalities. It is at the municipality level where the decisions how to arrange day care services are made: day care services should be arranged in a way what is seen the most appropriate as far it covers the need of day care services in the municipality (Law of Children's Day Care 36/1973). This means that the municipalities also form that kind of organisations that are seen appropriate.

> I feel that in too many. These work groups take time and you can't prioritise the issues of your own units." (An employee)

This view of a heavy workload coming from the municipality level was also supported by the questionnaire answered by the employees. I asked in the questionnaire what work duties took the most of the leader's time. Only a few of the given answers did not relate to different kinds of administration duties. The employees used expressions like *administration*, *paper work*, *meetings* and *computer* for the most time-consuming tasks and mostly these were connected to the work 'out-side' the day care centre.

Hujala (2004) has same kind of findings: there is a contradiction between the demands from the higher administration and in the implementation of everyday work. For Hujala this contradiction should result in clarifying the mission of childcare and at the same time the tasks and duties of day care leaders. The leaders in my study expected that when new vacancies to middle management were planned at the municipality level, it should be assessed how these vacancies could support the leaders of day care centres.

Units and groups

Expectations which employees have towards their leaders is a topic not researched a lot, and in the same way the role of the followers in determining leadership has been underestimated. According to Shamir (2007), the newer leadership theories more than the previous ones focusing on leaders' skill, personality and behaviour emphasise the role of the followers. However, there is a major lack of research which investigates not just the relationship between the leader and an individual follower but focuses on the relationship between the leader and the followers as a group. Although the leader-member exchange theory (LMX-theory) is seen as a theory which emphasises the role of the employees, it also merely focuses on the relationship between the individuals (Howell & Shamir, 2005).

Hogg (2005) and van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg and Giessner (2007) emphasise that people sum up their views as individuals also as members of a group. The more important is the membership in a group, the more important is the effect of the group on, for example, how an individual understands leadership. This notion has also increased research focusing on

the relationships among the employees, for example, in their team member relationships (Cole, Schaninger, & Harris, 2002). In an organisation where the units and groups are situated apart, it is highly important to understand the role of a group. The leaders in my research had realised it and argued that they needed to see and meet both the individual and the groups – this meant, for example, having personal discussions both with the individuals and teams. Also the employees sometimes in their interviews expressed that they had discussed the role of the leader and the expectations they had. Sometimes in an individual interview, the interviewee used the pronoun *we* instead of *I* when describing her views.

There were also other and in this research more important elements besides the effect of a group on its members which determined leadership at the unit and group level. Particularly two aspects are to be mentioned: the type of the day care service of the unit and the life cycle of the unit.

Especially the leaders discussed the meaning of the type of the day care unit. As said, both of the leaders led day care centres, family day care and open day care activities. One reason why they felt having a need to carry out different kind of leadership was the educational background of the employees in the units, and another one was that the core idea of the mission of the services.

> "In family day care the employees want to discuss more individual families, children... directly issues related to education and pedagogy. They want more support in these issues." (A leader)

The other element determining leadership was the life cycle of the unit. The first years of the new unit were very crucial and the leaders had paid more attention to the new units, and also the employees needed more from the leadership. Also the employees saw the beginning of the new unit as a time when leadership was needed. Both of the leaders had seen different units facing same kind of development processes. There were different kinds of issues where the leader was needed at the beginning of the new unit more than during the years later. Nevertheless, quite often after a couple of years' time there were also such conflicts among the employees that the leader was needed to solve them. It is urgent to remember that the first years are not the only years when leadership is needed.

> "Yes, I know the leader is satisfied with us, but it is important that every now and then the leader remembers to say how good we are and how well you have done your work. You know, something very concrete." (An employee)

Individuals

At different times different views are more or less dominant, and at the same time there are several views about leadership present (e.g. Morgan, 1998). It is understandable that employees from different age groups are used to different leadership styles and have different expectations towards leadership. One aspect which divides views on leadership whether a leader can manage leadership alone or whether he should share it (Yukl, 2002).

Employees in my research realised that different individuals had different expectations towards the leaders. In general, the employees took more responsibility over their units and work. However, some employees were more independent than the others.

> "Someone expects to get a new potty just today and after waiting for a week complains that she does not have it yet. But someone goes and buys it by herself. So, it is really what we expect from the leader." (An employee)

In both organisations the leader had changed during the last couple of years. Especially in that organisation where this change had happened very recently, actually during the research, the discussion focusing on different styles in leadership was present in the interviews. For many employees the new leader and the change in the leadership position made it visible how different leaders had different styles and manners in leading their organisation. Also the leader who came to this organisation after the leader who had worked there for around two decades, saw that the personnel had to get used to her way of leading. She said that it would take a couple of years to instill some of the core issues she considered significant in her work. In other words, it was evident that the leaders had their own personal styles in leading their organisations.

"It also depends on the leaders. I remember when Anna [the former leader] was here, I more often called her if I wanted to have a day off. With this new one, we first discuss here at the unit if we can have a day off and then inform the leader." (An employee)

Of course it is not just what the employees expect from their leader and leadership, but it is also significant to understand what is expected from the employees. However, it seems, based on the leadership and organisational theories, that the expectations towards the employees are dependent on how leadership and organisations are seen (e.g. Shamir, 2007; Clegg, 1990). When individuals and their effect on leadership are discussed, we are also close to the concept of organisational citizenship behaviour. This concept was introduced by Organ (1997). If this concept is seen as employees doing something extra that is not strictly included in their work roles, it may be that in today's organisations part of this "extra" is related to leadership practices.

Conclusion

The starting point of my research was a major change in organising leadership in day care units and at the same time a change in the traditional way of organising day care units. I as a researcher assumed that this change affected not just the work of the leader but also the work of all the staff members in these organisations. Naturally the core question was to ask how this new kind of an organisational structure affected leadership and the work of the employees.

At the end of the day, the new organisational structure as such was not the major element determining leadership. The leaders had to arrange their work in new ways and also needed to reflect on their role, duties and responsibilities as leaders. Thus, there were other elements which determined leadership more than the organisational structure.

The new insight in this study is the notion of significance of the role of the followers in determining leadership. Emphasising their role rises from different sources. First, the role of the followers is more highlighted in the newer leadership theories. (Shamir, 2007.) When earlier leadership was seen as "a one man's show" it is today characterised being distributed among all the members in an organisation (Spillane, 2006). This new

way of seeing leadership also calls followers to determine leadership, and this call invites them to be part of leadership discussions and to be one of the definers. Secondly, newer organisational theories intertwined with leadership theories underline the same things and pay attention to the involvement of the employees in many issues in a work organisation (Clegg, 1990). Thirdly, there is more and more literature and research which sees followers as an independent group worth to be researched on its own (Cole et al., 2002). One aspect is to consider how powerful the group cohesion and attitudes towards individual members in shaping the views of leadership are (van Knippenberg et al., 2007). In sum, the role of the followers is not any more invisible, for example, in leadership. In many figures describing the relationship between the leader and the follower, there is an arrow pointing from the leader towards the follower, but there is and should also be an arrow pointing from the follower towards the leader.

These other elements affecting leadership – task environment, administration, units, and individuals – should be considered when the work of the early childhood leaders meets changes and when the work of the leaders is evaluated. Especially in a change situation we are quite often not able to have an enough broad view and can't see how widely the change affects (Leavitt, 1965). In other words, it can be said that perhaps we can't see all the issues affecting and determining a certain issue. According to this research these other issues which at the beginning are not seen as being important may finally turn out to be the most important issues. Like in this case, the public discussion easily blamed the new organisational structure negatively affecting leadership because it was a visible change. However, it was not the whole truth for how the leadership was carried out and what determined this carrying out. For the practice, these findings recommend to have a broad view when evaluating and developing leadership practices especially in a situation of change.

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