INTERVENTION IN MULTI-CULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS -PREVENTION OF ACCIDENTS AS POLITICAL CHANGE PROCESSES

METTE DYHRBERG M.SC. DOCTORAL RESEARCHER
phone: + 45 45 25 60 54 E-mail: md@its.dtu.dk

ANNETTE KAMP ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
phone: + 45 45 25 60 36 E-mail: ak@its.dtu.dk

CHRISTIAN KOCH ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
phone: + 45 45 25 60 36 E-mail: ck@its.dtu.dk

Department of Technology and Social Sciences, Technical University of Denmark, building 322, DK-2800 Lyngby, Denmark. Fax: + 45 45 88 20 14

ABSTRACT

The point of departure for this contribution is the disappointing status of the Danish work environment regulation and accident prevention. The number of reported accidents at work is maintained at a high level. One explanation is the lack of common intervention methods in Danish workplaces and the contribution of ongoing work with such a method, including political, cultural and structural elements.

A selective study of literature within safety culture, corporate culture and organisational theory has shown that the safety culture approach can benefit from the organisational culture approaches of Alvesson and Geertz and organisational theory dealing with political processes (Pettigrew, Knights). The implicit models of organisation and man within mainstream safety culture approaches seems to be too rationalistic compared with the day to day life of organisations. The concept of a multicultural organisation thus aims at encompassing the multitude of actor positions within an organisation with a possible influence on the preventive work. The planning of the intervention is furthermore not made once in the beginning but should rather be anticipated as an ongoing negotiation. Central elements of the intervention can be, and should be, changed in order to achieve forms of prevention.

A case study of a manufacturing enterprise, is used to demonstrate the benefits of these additional approaches. It is shown how different sets of meaning assigned to accidents -cultures- are in conflict and that the accident analysing process leads to the domination of one of them; the "faulty human behaviour" perception, thus subjugating the workers view. Hence an intervention method aiming at the prevention of accidents must build on an understanding of an organisation as a Multi-cultural Organisation, on change processes as political processes, and where the needed change has to be negotiated and reshaped in order to build the necessary alliances.

1.   INTRODUCTION

Despite twenty years of enforcement, the Danish work environment act of 1977 has failed in reducing accidents at work, despite its ambitious outline and empowerment of a number of institutions. A number of factors can certainly explain this disappointing status. One explanation of the maintained level of accidents is the lack of clustered intervention methods adapted to Danish workplaces. When several other Scandinavian countries during the seventies and eighties developed intervention methods and a accident prevention environment, Denmark turned its effort in the direction of the holistic understanding of prevention at work, and a tendency to give prevention of accidents, analysis of accidents, and learning from accidents a lower priority.

This contribution describes some ongoing work aimed at compensating for the lack of systematic work at prevention of accidents. A central objective is to develop a method for prevention, based on an understanding of organizations, also Danish organizations, as having multicultural features and being characterized by conflicting values, interests and strategies of individuals and groups, but also as exercising a certain amount of collaboration across cultures. In this view on organisations we have taken inspiration from recent research in organizational culture. It is mainly the basic concepts of "culture" and ", that should work as basis for the intervention method that is presented here.

The contribution opens with a few remarks on the basic concept of "
outlines and discusses safety culture concepts as a point of departure for a presentation of some stepping stones for a multicultural understanding of organizations and accidents. This is followed by a presentation of some of the elements of a synthesis. A case is presented and discussed. The case shows how multi cultures are mobilized when accidents occur and how they are interpreted by the different cultures. Finally we discuss some preconditions for intervention methods.

2.   ORGANISATIONAL CULTURES IN DENMARK

Before presenting our discussion on organisational cultures and the relation to accidents we would like briefly to make a couple of basic remarks on the discussion of "culture". The intention of these remarks is solely to sketch a position in the culture debate and to sketch our contextual position ie. the context of Danish organisations and society: Despite the harmonious reputation of Denmark and of the Danish labour market (Hofstede 1980, Ferner et al 1992, Mcloughlin 1988, Sandberg 1993 a.o.), most organisations and organisational cultures in Denmark is characterized by a long history of conflict and compromise, pretty much in line with the developments in most Western-European regions. In the public debate within the country however, Denmark as such is frequently characterized as a monocultural society (one language, one democracy, one church etc.) haunted by external intruders. This picture is misleading on a number of points, and particularly in terms of understanding the organisational cultures, where conflicts of interests mostly are following quite other demarcation lines. A brief description of the developments of organisations and organisational cultures in Denmark can start by noting that industrialization came late and the industry is dominated by small and medium sized enterprises, with relatively few large enterprises compared with other industrialized countries (Abildgård 1997). The late industrialization led to a long period of coexistence of agrarian and industrial life forms and cultures (Højrup 1984,1990). This is prevailing although in an asymmetric fashion with industrial cultures in a dominating position. Moreover the industrializing led to the same configuration of asymmetric power and interest groups -generally speaking- as in other countries. The dissolution of the traditional "one man power" situation in the enterprise has developed into a 'multi-position power' situation (Koch 1997). Most Danish organisations are thus characterized by a number of actors with limited power within and outside the organisation in question. Unionization is close to 95% and results in the frequent role of shop stewards as actors in the enterprise coalitions that develop the enterprise and enhance the collaboration across cultures (different set of meanings and values, central symbols etc). This active role of the shopstewards at the enterprise level and the corporativistic frame of industrial relations (Ferner 1992) are two central elements when discussing Danish specifics. On the other hand the dominant view here is that Danish organizations mainly are convergent with general developments, and are thus characterized by conflicting values, interests and strategies and as multicultural.

3. THE CONCEPT OF SAFETY CULTURE

In the conventional approaches to safety culture it is assumed that management can impose a certain safety culture in the organization in the form of a safety policy and objectives and consistent sets of rules and norms (which is parallel to the corporate culture tradition, Peters and Waterman (1982)). The implicit models of organisation and man within mainstream safety culture approaches seem to be over-rationalistic compared with day to day life of organisations. A simplistic model of mans behaviour, and too abbreviated an understanding of the total set of goals and means in action in an organisation and rather simple change management models flaws the safety culture approaches. A typical representative of these approaches is IAEA (1991),

"Safety culture has two general components. The first is the necessary framework within an organization and is the responsibility of the management hierarchy. The second is the attitude of staff at all levels in responding to and benefiting from the framework" (IAEA op. cit p.).

This indicates that the most central objectives of safety culture efforts are to develop rules for peoples' behaviour and make certain that people follow the rules. To achieve this certainty, management will have to adopt a questioning attitude, a rigorous and prudent approach and to communicate consciously. These three things are all aspects of an effective safety culture and contributes to a high level of safety according to the IAEA approach to safety culture.

However it has been argued that culture is developed over a long period and is based on fundamental values, which are not easily changed. This position is taken by Schein (1985) and scholars of Schein, who regard culture as an integrating mechanism for the organization - a consensus creating glue, that on the one hand gives internal stability, and on the other hand contributes to adaptation to the external environment. This functionalistic view on culture defines culture as a collective phenomenon based on harmony. Consequently conflict and subcultures are not issues within this research tradition.

In contrast to these two approaches Alvesson (1993, 1995), taking departure in Geertz' (1973) cultural anthropology, regards culture as a cohesive system of meanings and symbols, in terms of which social interaction takes place. In his understanding an organization consist of several different cultures, conflict and ambiguity is subsequently important issues. This means that the organization is considered as multi-cultural.

Further inspiration can be taken from the industrial sociologists Hildebrandt &Seltz (1989) who introduce the concept of the "Social Constitution of the Company". This concept describes the concerted informal norms and principles in the company which influence employees' behaviour and attitudes. These norms are developed through a historical process of conflicts and conflict-solving activities, and they shape the conceptions of problems and solutions (Clausen and Olsén 1994). The central motor in changing and preserving the social constitution are the political processes at company level. The understanding of the political processes as central motors in change and stability of the organisation is central for organisational theory studies like Pettigrew (1985) and Knights (1994).

By linking Alvessons culture concept with Pettigrew and Knights political process view and Hildebrandt & Seltz' concept of change and stability we have developed a view on the organization as multi-cultural where interventions must be based on the acknowledgement of political processes.

4. A POSSIBLE SYNTHESIS?

The juxtaposition of Alvesson with Pettigrew, Knights and Hildebrandt reveals some contradictions in the understandings of the organisation. All are open to the existence of conflicting value-systems and cultures in the organisation. But Hildebrandt seems to agree with the contention that the political processes in the enterprise lead to a rather deeply rooted social compromise across the organisation as such. Hildebrandt thus describes how top level managers have a calculated concern for the workers point of view, which is possible because the managers through a long history in the organisation know the workers' position. This common understanding is not necessarily shared by other organisational groups, but it is dominant. Hildebrandt thus describes a situation where the organisational cultures partly merge into one. Alvesson on the other hand, maintain an openness to the issue of "numbers" of cultures and their relationship and

status. This is in his view an empirical question and it is certainly not enough to point at the classical contradiction between labour and capital. Pettigrew and Knights is more or less in the same position.

Another but fruitful contradiction is the static and dynamic sides of the cultures. Pettigrew and Hildebrandt regards political processes as a motor for developing new norms and values. Culture is in this respect not stable, but under continuous pressure and redevelopment. Changing the organisation is a political process (Pettigrew 1985, Knights& Murray 1994). The political processes question existing set of meanings, and generate alliances around new elements of meanings and values, as well as new elements of structures. These may be stabilized or vanish after a period of time. These processes contribute, according to Pettigrew and Knights, to a common culture as well as to more particular (sub) cultures. Alvesson, on the other hand is content with describing and analysing the features of the cultures partly disregarding the issue of how its is developed and maintained. The static and dynamic sides of the cultures is in this way illuminated.

A synthesis thus have to emphasize the importance of political processes as the driving force for maintaining and developing the cultures of the organisation. The processes can lead to the development of several cultures in an organisation, but it is likely that a cooperative situation is established that might have a considerable "depth". This co-operation does not necessarily lead to a hegemony, where one culture is dominating the rest.

5.   AN EXAMPLE OF THE MULTI CULTURE APPROACH.

The example is taken from a case study on a medium-sized Danish paper production factory (Kamp 1996, 1997). The enterprise, which has a history going back to 1874, was in the eighties still characterized by bureaucratic leadership and minimal technological development. However, during recent years modernization of technology was taking place and new management concepts, focussing on human resources, was introduced. Today, pockets of bureaucratic philosophy still exists, and as no revolutions are absolute, you can find shortcomings and contradictions in organization, planning and technology.

The enterprise has a high rate of accidents, some serious. The accidents primarily take place in interaction with the machinery (cuttings, crushing or falls). The single cases of accidents are carefully investigated by the safety committee, but no radical change in rate and pattern of accidents has been observed.

The different groups of the employees and managers have very different meaning assigned to safety and accident prevention: The safety department, who conducted the investigation of accidents and produced the monthly statistics, based their work on a rather rational conception of safety and human behaviour. A general question which they posed was: "What was that man doing there, no one was supposed ever to enter that dangerous spot". They found it impossible to foresee all possible ways to evoke an accident, and reacted to new incidents by making new rules, order installation of technical barriers and by highlighting the accident numbers. Their interviews with the operators did not lead them far, as they basically accused the operators of doing what they were supposed not to do. Accordingly, when they introduced a registration of 'near miss accidents' they found that the operators were reluctant to cooperate. The operators looked at this new routine as a kind of self-exposure, which put them on trial.

The operators considered safety and risks as a question of their mastering of the complex interaction between them and the machines. Typical statements were: "You cannot work here if you are afraid of being hurt, what is important is to be experienced and to respect the machines in order to avoid accidents". The job actually demanded a constant negotiation between safety and productivity. Asked about how to prevent accidents, they were not able to explain why a particular accident happened. However, discussing problems in a wider context the operators pointed to problems of isolated working posts, frequent production problems stemming from the quality of the raw material, and the warm and humid climate which contributed to distraction of the operator.

Top senior management had basically the understanding that the accident rates were too high, compared to other factories belonging to the concern. In their opinion improvements could best be obtained by introducing safety inspections in the departments, lead by the production management. Here they used an example from other paper producing companies. However, this issue was never really pursued by top management; firstly, because many other strategical problems were pressing, secondly, because this control-oriented strategy was in contradiction to other concurrent initiatives, which supported the development of

new roles and attitudes of the middle managers, in agreement with the new management concept. So the middle managers found themselves in a contradictory position and left the task of inspection to the safety representatives. They, on their part, were constantly complaining of the difficulties in at the same time being 'a policeman' and a representative of their colleagues.

Summarizing this example illustrates the coexistence of at least two set of meanings assigned to accidents and their prevention. Where mastering is a central concept in the operators meaning system, the safety department is preoccupied with rational distinction between safe and unsafe behaviour, and simple means (stick or carrot) to make the operators behave accordingly. The interplay between different layers of management and the safety department and operators respectively underlines the political and conflictive aspects of the process. The question of inspection and control is a political controversy in the company and it has implication for the way it is pursued. When explanations for accidents are sought the operators view are excluded and the human behaviour view obtains priority.

6.   INTERVENTION METHODS BASED ON LEARNING

The first intervention method presented here is developed in Finland and is called TUTTAVA (Secure and productive work routines). A project on a shipyard showed that poor attention, the workplace arrangements, neglecting the regulations and lack or use of wrong type of protection were the most frequent causes for accidents at the yard. This suggests that some modifications of the safety culture coordinated with changes in the social structures could bring the number of accidents down. A way to do this is to give the employees and the leaders an experience of the benefits of safe actions through motivation, and thereby they will learn to act safely, when this is combined with actual changes in, e.g., tidiness at the workplace. TUTTAVA is based on positive feedback, where the result from the weekly check of the tidy-standard at the workplace will be shown to everybody. This should be an encouragement for doing it better next week. In this way a modification of the safety culture will be obtained. [Arbejdstilsynet, Saari, 1994]

A second intervention method is ERFO developed in Sweden. The basis for this method is that the actors should find the factors that can result in accidents and suggest measures for prevention. In this way the knowledge increases and the behaviour changes. ERFO is based on questionnaires and group discussions. The questionnaires are made from the descriptions of accidents and incidents. The responses from the questionnaires will be summarised in a computer and the results presented to the participants in the group. These decide what they think is important to discuss in the group. After this the group will hold a meeting where they have discussions about the problems and solutions. The group elaborate the recommendations to improvements and table the proposals to the management.   The group discussions are the most important in the process. It is here that the individual gets a deeper and "better" interpretation of the calculated risks and safety. Hereby the method is producing alterations in the safety culture by learning. After a time, where the improvements are incorporated, the process is restarted. [Sundström-Frisk, 1996a]

Common to the two methods is that the political aspects of the intervention processes are downplayed in their "official version". The practices of the consultants using the methods reveal that elements of the understanding is actually mobilized (Sundström Frisk 1997). Alliances are built through the participation of different relevant groups in ERFO, in different phases of ERFO. It remains a development task in this project to possibly merge change management, organisational theories, political process approaches, and elements of these two methods into an intervention method that can be tested in Denmark. One example of a design issue in this context is how to incorporate an understanding of the role of planning of the intervention. The planning is, according to political process approaches, not made once in the beginning but should rather be anticipated as ongoing negotiations, where central elements in the intervention can be, and should be, changed in order to achieve forms of prevention.

7.   CONCLUSIONS

An intervention method for prevention of accidents must build *first* on an understanding of an organization as a multi-cultural organization. As the case showed, different sets of meaning and values are mobilized when accidents are occurring. Change processes are political processes. The needed change has to be negotiated and reshaped in order to build the necessary coalition and new elements of meaning. This goes

for intervention methods aiming at preventing accidents as well. The concept of a multi-cultural organization aims at encompassing the multitude of actor positions within an organization with possible influence on the prevention work. The planning of the intervention is furthermore not made once in the beginning but should rather be anticipated as ongoing negotiations, where central elements in the intervention can be, and should be, changed in order to achieve forms of prevention.

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