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**Creating development based on numbers**– three reading approaches for inspiration when working with the psychological WPA at AU

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You are holding the WPA report in your hand, and you know that the overall purpose of spending resources on developing a questionnaire, distributing it, reminding people to respond, collecting the responses and creating reports etc, is to use the numbers in the report as a basis for improving your work environment. But how do you do that in practice?

This is worth considering for several reasons: Reason No. 1: If you carry out satisfaction surveys and you do not follow up on them, this will lead to a lower level of satisfaction than before the survey (Storch et al, 2010).

Reason No. 2 is connected with the observer effect.The observer effect comes from the world of physics and was described by the German physicist and Nobel laureate Werner Heisenberg who was also one of the founders of quantum mechanics.The observer effect shows that it is not possible to measure or examine the world without changing it at the same time. For example, if you put a thermometer into a glass of water to measure the water’s temperature, you will not only measure the water’s temperature, you will also change the water’s temperature simply by putting the thermometer into the water. Internationally renowned experts on organisational development such as Diana Whitney and Amanda Trosten-Bloom believe that the same thing happens when we examine and ask questions in organisations (2003). Whitney and Trosten-Bloom claim that examination and change are simultaneous (2003) – or in other words: The questions we choose to ask and the focus we bring are of crucial importance as they affect the ‘temperature’ in the organisation.

When you want to use numbers, such as a WPA report for example, it is therefore important to be able to distinguish and choose between three different ways of reading the numbers. The three reading approaches are described below:

**Reading approach 1: The classic approach**

In Denmark, most people would probably identify the negative (lowest) results right away and automatically focus on them as ‘what needs to be dealt with’. The idea behind this approach is that once these areas have been improved, all will be fine.

This is directly based on industrial society’s logic: If you can identify the cogwheel which does not work, and lubricate or replace it, then the machine will start running again. This approach and logic work very well in relation to a survey such as the physical WPA. If most of the complaints describe draughts coming from the windows, this is the obvious thing to put at the top of the list of prioritised initiatives. But when we are dealing with social, living and dynamic systems – i.e. people in organisations – and we want to create development, value or well-being, it is a good idea to add two other reading approaches to this one.

In connection with the psychological WPA, the reading approach is important to keep in mind when dealing with unacceptable situations, which include bullying, violence, harassment etc. However, it is important to be aware of the way you then choose to work on these types of themes.

In AU’s WPA 2012, workload is an example of an area with a low score which the organisation would want to do something about. If you compare the overall AU figures for this area with the AU figures from 2009, you can see that almost twice as many report that they feel stressed.

**Reading approach 2: Low-hanging fruits**

Another reading approach is to read the reports and focus on the ‘low-hanging fruits’ – or in other words: Where would our efforts make the greatest difference?

The idea behind this approach acknowledges that the world is often more complicated than reading approach 1 acknowledges. That the fact that certain areas show negative results might be a symptom of something else. Therefore, you might not always get the greatest benefit out of focusing directly on the most negative results – you need take other things into consideration when planning which action to take. Maybe the areas with the most negative results are not the most important areas to act on in order to improve the psychological work environment.

In January 2013, the AU researchers in the research project ExBus published the anthology *Mobning gentænkt* (Bullying rethought), which contains interesting points, for example that it will not help to remove the bully from the class, because the pattern of bullying has become part of the culture of the class. Therefore, it feels ‘right’ to them – and therefore, they will reestablish the pattern. What would make the biggest difference would therefore be to work on the culture, and establish a better and stronger community where no one accepts bullying (Kofoed and Søndergaard, 2013).

A good example of applying reading approach 2 to AU’s overall WPA 2012 also points to the importance of working to establish a community. If you carry out a logistic regression analysis based on what boosts well-being the most and at the same time reduces stress, ‘being part of a social community’ appears as number three on the list. In other words, in many places, working to strengthen social communities would generate a much greater positive effect on well-being as well as on stress levels.

**Reading approach 3: Focus on what works best**

There is also a third option, which is to explore the areas that work best and find out which elements play a role in making these areas work. The logic behind this reading approach is that we can learn even more from our successes than from correcting our mistakes. The idea is based on Appreciative Inquiry, and this is a way of thinking which is spreading all over the world simply because it has a surprisingly big effect. This reading approach therefore focuses on the most positive results (highest scores).

One of the most classic and most used examples, which shows that we learn more from our successes than from our mistakes, was documented in a study at an American university in 1982. In connection with this study, groups of people bowled while they were being filmed. During the experiment, all groups got to see film clips to improve their game. The only difference is that one half of the groups got to see film clips of their mistakes and the situations where they did not succeed, while the other half got to see film clips of the situations where they did succeed, made strikes etc, and the difference speaks for itself: Everybody improved their game, but the people who learned by focusing on their successes improved twice as much as the others (OD Practitioner, 2000).

If you apply reading approach 3 to AU’s overall WPA 2012, employees’ relation to their work clearly stands out. The interest in your work, the desire to commit yourself to your work and the feeling of being competent at performing your tasks are important themes. These aspects are precisely the most important indicators of the level of well-being in the previously mentioned analysis as well. Reading approach 3 suggests that you should not just emphasise these aspects, but actively explore them in order to get inspired to handle some of the issues which are not that easy to deal with – or to boost a sense of meaning and strength which redefines the status of these issues.

It is important to note that this approach should be avoided if a high level of vulnerability or sensitivity exists, as it may be seen as a provocation or as a way of disregarding issues to be asked to focus on what works best. However, in other areas, this approach will undoubtedly be the approach which can contribute to well-being and development most effectively.

**NOTE:**

In conclusion, it is important to note that the three reading approaches do not exclude each other, but may supplement each other.

With the purpose of creating development in mind, it is also interesting to note that the three approaches each set the stage for different forms of action and initiatives.

**Literature:**

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