The Goal Equivalence Model and Communication for Worker Participation

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1. Introduction

For survival companies have to be competitive. For our discussion we define two strategies for obtaining competitiveness. Strategy P (productivity) focuses on productivity without interest in work-life quality, while strategy F (fair) has a focus on trying to obtain competitiveness through synergies between working life quality (WLQ) and production quality (PQ). Strategy F has got increased concern lately from the literature about sustainable development with the three cornerstones environmental, social and economic sustainability. Good WLQ globally is a part of a sustainable future.

Which strategy that will be most successful is, of course, depending on governmental support in different forms such as legislation, economic support for working life improvements or economic support to victims of bad WLQ.

What are the possible synergies between WLQ and PQ? If management (employer) and workers (employees) have a common understanding of such synergies and a good communication, then the possibilities for finding good strategy F goals and ways to obtain them ought to be strengthened.

This paper summarizes a method first sketched by Akselsson (1993) and aimed at improving communication and participation for strategy F. It is founded on theories about relations between elements of the model, but has not been tested in practice in a scientific way. However, some pilot tests have been made in companies and when teaching union representatives, managers and students at university levels. The scientific base for the relations building up the model is not quoted in this abstract due to lack of space.

The name, Goal Equivalence Model, rests on the fact that in building up the model in a certain setting you get the same content in the model either you start with WLQ and ask how it can affect PQ or you start with PQ and ask how to get WLQ with the strategy F thinking.

The purpose of the model is to make employees and managers reflect on the interplay between production and working environment and to build up and support a common view – a systems perspective – between management and employees. The basics of the model, as shown in Figure 1, give a much simplified picture of reality. However, a discussion about the gaps between the model and the perceived reality could further amplify a common understanding between management and employees.

2. Building a site-specific GEM model

The model has been used in different ways. One way is that a group fill in the boxes of the framework in Figure 1 with content they see as relevant for their organisation. A facilitator may suggest complementing elements (factors, mediators, tools) from her or his experience for the group to consider. The production quality (PQ) factors are characterizing organisational or business performance and could be some of: profit, productivity, quality, delivery reliability, flexibility, process safety or others. For the working life quality (WLQ) the factors could be: occupational safety and health, physical environment, psychosocial environment, job satisfaction, employment security, compensation, and promotion policy.

Then the question could be asked about what mediators, positive or negative for PQ factors, could the WLQ factors affect. Motivation, engagement, knowledge, skill, competence, and responsibility are examples of positive (P) mediators. High turn-over rate, recruitment problems, sick absence, sick presence and early retirement are examples of negative (N) mediators.

The box in the middle contains dual acting tools (D-tools) influencing both PQ and WLQ. Tool candidates are e.g. the management system, work organisation, leadership, employee participation, man-machine interfaces, culture and continuous improvement.

An important part in the method is the discussion on the strengths of the relations between the elements. The facilitator, familiar with the scientific literature may have an important role in that discussion.

The three broader arrows in the figure indicate a circular process, which could be seen as a spiral if a quality dimension in the z-direction quantifying PQ and WLQ is added. The D-tools could put positive energy
to the circular process. The spiral could, of course, lead to either continuous improvement or continuous deterioration of both WLQ and PQ. As the context in reality is changing all the time a continuous improvement process is necessary to avoid deterioration.

In accordance with one of the ideas behind the hourglass model for participation (Johansson, 2004) the discussion on the GEM model could first be done in fellow groups, e.g. in a management group and in employee groups before a discussion in a mixed group. In this way the employees could be empowered for real participation in strategy discussions.

3. Discussion

In filling in the boxes in the GEM framework with factors, mediators and tools and connecting them with interactions theoretical, often well documented one-to-one-relations are used. However, in real settings interactions are often non-linear, dynamic and context dependent and delayed. Furthermore, the interactions are often not one to one-relations. E.g. a WLQ factor could act on more than one mediator and one mediator could be acted on by several WLQ factors. Thus we have a complex system. But the GEM exercise should contribute to a better understanding on important factors, mediators and tools to work on, i.e. to getting a more informed participation and a more informed human resources management.

Since interactions could have additive effects and even synergetic effects, efforts should be devoted on improving many factors, tools and mediators simultaneously. In the literature there is support for the efficiency of working on many WLQ factors and D-tools simultaneously, see e.g. Lau and May (1998).

Contradictory results on effects of participation schemes on working life quality and production quality are found in the literature, but there are also evidence for positive results. GEM exercises should help in achieving informed participation and informed management that would enhance the positive effects of participation.

References

