

# **Discussion of theoretical assumption in the BEST Project**

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## **1. Basic problems to be addressed in the BEST Project**

The psycho-social working environment (PSWE) has received attention from various corners. At a societal level attention have been attached to social exclusion, stress and sick leave related to poor working conditions. Several unions are carrying out projects, which are examining the psycho-social working environment in their area, with the intent to come up with suggestions and demands in relation to the organisation, content and management of work. In many workplaces the unhealthy consequences of work have received attention; not stress the least.

Many research studies of psycho-social working environment have been conducted, and an extensive knowledge has been produced in relation to which factors characterise a good or bad psycho-social working environment. The surveys conducted by The National Institute of Working Environment in Denmark (e.g. Burr et al. 2002) have covered a series of factors with relation to psycho-social working environment, as well as qualitative studies has contributed to our knowledge.

Work is changing its characteristics. This goes for both traditional areas as manufacturing and care, as for 'newer' areas as knowledge work. Employees have other expectations from work and the organisation of work is changing, too, and new demands in relation to the technical and social skills of the employees are made. We assume that these changes are not inherently to be seen as enriching or strainous. There is a series of intermediary factors that influences whether the work gets better or worse. One of these factors is the ability of the workplace to deal with the psycho-social working environment.

However, the theme of psycho-social working environment is – like many other organisational themes - characterised by a discrepancy between knowledge and action. There is a lack of mediation between general research based knowledge of for example the demand-control correlation and how that unfolds in a practical context. How should a

workplace achieve a favourable balance between demand and control? (see Griffiths 1999, too). Despite our fairly extensive knowledge on psycho-social working environment it is not uncommon that interventions to improve psycho-social working environment is far from successful, although the picture is quite mixed. Where, why and how interventions succeed is unclear and differing experiences prevail. Systematic studies of *how and why the intervention for better psycho-social working environment succeed* are needed, and that question is the basic question of the BEST project.

The research group is coming together from various research traditions. While some bears the tradition of quantitative data research methods, others bear the tradition of qualitative data research methods. While some bear the tradition of working life, others bear the tradition of organizational theory. This multiple traditions call for a need to clarify some theoretical basic assumptions, in order to develop a common ground to build up the concrete research. This paper aims to formulate the theoretical platform for the research. How do we basically understand the firm? How do we understand firms' way of understanding PSWE? How do we understand firms' rationality behind setting PSWE on the agenda? These questions will be raised in the first part of the paper.

Further more, how do we, as a research community, analyze barriers of setting PSWE on firms' agenda? And what do we beforehand know about firms' different approaches to PSWE? These questions will be raised on the next part of this paper.

Finally, we have some assumptions of the processes leading to successful interventions. We believe that more elements have to be 'moving' ongoing in order to secure a successful interventions process. This is discusses finally in this paper.

Indeed, we need to translate the theoretically level into the analytical and operationally level. This will be done in others of the papers presented at the seminar.

To sum up, we have a series of theoretical assumptions in relation to our basic question; and the aim of this paper is to introduce these assumptions. So far our theoretical work has been preliminary, and focused on 1) our understanding of the company, 2) our

assumptions on why organizational processes intending to improve psycho-social working environment often fail, 3) the importance of the fundamental conception of psycho-social working environment held within the workplace, and 4) which organizational parameters that need to be 'put into work' to make the process succeed.

The theories presented in this paper aim at providing a framework for the orientation horizon of the BEST project. These theories are described at a general level, which means that steps will be taken later to derive from the theoretical level an operational one. A range of 'intermediate theories' will therefore be emerging that are more specifically attuned to the analysis of PSWE in the BEST project cases.

Our choice of theory is influenced by organizations studies and by theories stemming from working life research. From organizations studies we draw inspiration and insights into the importance of culture, power, hierarchy, and institutions. From working life and working environment research we get the importance of job demand, control, and influence, qualifications and competence, plus strains.

#### *The working life tradition*

The Scandinavian working life tradition has been situated in the tension between the sociological 'skills and control'-tradition with Anglo-Saxon roots (Braverman 1974, Thompson 1983, among others), a German sociological 'qualifications and systemic rationalisation'-tradition (from Kern & Schumann 1973 and onwards), and finally a particular Scandinavian attention to 'participation and protection' (e.g. Karasek & Theorell 1989, cf. Sørensen 1998). This tradition has gotten a interventionist twist in the Swedish-Norwegian LOM-tradition (Gustavsen 1992), while we in Denmark has been more preoccupied with the relations between the society at large and the 'construction' of work.

Lately, however, several theoretical contributions have been filled into the gap between society and the organising of work. There has been an interest in 'the social constitution of work' (from Hildebrandt & Selz 1989; used by Olsén & Clausen 1994), learning (Argyris & Schön 1996; Hasle & Langaas Jensen), organizational culture (Schein 1992 and Alvesson 2002; Dyhrberg 2004), political process (Dawson 1994; Kamp 2000) and communities of

practice (Lave & Wenger 1991). Also actor network theory has been approached (Latour 1999 and Law 1999), as well practice (Nicolini et al. 2003) on the one hand and neo-institutional (sociological) theory (Scott 1995) on the other hand.

## **2. Theoretical assumptions; the project in general**

First of all, however, we need to stress that the BEST project divides the theoretical work between two levels. The first level is common to the entire project, and informs our basic conception of what might seriously affect performance and success. This is the level we set out in this presentation. The second level covers the sector-specific theories, i.e. the sectors within which our empirical work takes place: 1) care provision; 2) industrial work; and 3) unrestricted knowledge-related work. The sector-specific theories are not presented here.

### **2.1 'The BEST theory of the firm'**

As you know it is not possible and not fruitful, to develop a comprehensive theory of the firm, it is more correct to say: perspectives of the firm. In the following section, however, we present perspectives of the firm in the meaning of setting the scene for the discussion of the context for the BEST research. This will provide, we intend, a framework for the discussion of methods, analysis and possible recommendations following from the research programme.

#### *The company as an open system*

In the field of institutional theory construction (Scott & Christensen 95b), firms are considered as entities embedded in social institutions. That is to say that firms affect and are affected by a range of social structures be they power relations, regulations, norms, expectations, market conditions etc. The perception is that firms are open systems which, by means of certain strategies, adaptive initiatives and bargaining interact with society at large and, as such, influence society (Oliver 1991). The leading perspective here is that firms develop within the parameters or constraints set by social institutions, and that firms must adapt to the expectations and requirements of their institutional environment.

Institutions are not simply a question of formal policies and regulations; institutions rest also on social norms and cultures. The institutional environment of the psycho-social climate could therefore be said to consist not only of regulations (legislation) but also of social and cultural perceptions of the psycho-social climate as such, along with ideals about what 'the good psycho-social climate' is in essence.

Following from this conception, it should go without saying that the wider social context will affect the ways in which firms handle their 'psycho-social climate'. And that means in turn that their perception of and approach to a phenomenon such as the 'psycho-social climate' will rest on prevailing conceptions of the psycho-social climate entertained by society as a whole. Firms can not ignore public debates on the psycho-social climate, the focus of the unions on members' mental health, the array of courses offered by consultants in stress management, the regulatory system's requirements to implement systematic steps etc. All combine to add social pressure on firms to take the psycho-social climate seriously and act accordingly.

#### *The company as an economic system*

Like other aspects of the theory of the firm, institutional theory assumes that a firm's *raison d'être* is to generate as much financial profit as possible. The firm is therefore not simply an open system, it is an economic system, too. But *how* the firm succeeds in making a profit is subject to more intense enquiry. The perspective assumes the existence of constraints, frameworks, norms and ethics pertaining to the actions taken by firms to generate profit. Economic sociology looks explicitly at this issue area (Swedberg 2002). The BEST project takes as its basic assumption that firms are economic systems and therefore adopt economic approaches to the psycho-social environment. That said, it would be inaccurate to assume that economic performance is coherent and calculable, and it would also be inaccurate to conceive of every act performed by a firm in terms of classical economic rationality. Institutional theory helps inform sociology above and beyond a firm's economic concerns. It means asking how a firm generates coherence, meaning and constructs strategies that can ensure its survival economically and socially in society.

### *Shareholders and stakeholder perspectives*

When we refer to the firm as resting on economic interests, what we are referring to, of course, are the interests of the shareholders. Employees have an interest in the firm's continued existence, but do not share the concerns of the owners. Other stakeholders, such as NGOs, the public and the media, may have other concerns in relation to the firm. Although the firm acts as an economic system and therefore takes care of its shareholders' interests, it also needs to take its stakeholders into account (Carrol 96). Players associated with the psycho-social environment are represented as stakeholders, both in terms of internal employee interests and in the shape of the authorities and working environment professionals.

### *No one best way*

Firms do not relate to the psycho-social climate either in the same way or mechanically. Some resist putting the issue on the agenda for as long as possible. Others adopt a proactive stance. Some copy what other successful companies have done. Yet others try to get by with a minimum solution method. Some want to see 'the corpses on the table' before taking action; others approach the problem from a preventative direction. The explanation for this diversity provided by contingency theory is that there is 'no one best way' to deal with either this or other issues. On the contrary, there are many 'best ways'. What the individual firm understands as 'the best way' will depend on a range of factors.

### *So how do firms arrive at their own 'best way'?*

It is widely known that good intentions or formal decision-making procedures in themselves are not enough to ensure that a firm takes the psycho-social environment seriously. This we know thanks to countless case studies and theory that is critical to a perception of the firm as a rational system.

The bounded rationality thesis paved the way for a fundamental review of why firms do not act strictly rationally. We should therefore not assume that firms discover their own 'best ways' on the basis of goal-oriented thinking. What we can do, though, is to use the new theoretical approaches – which address issues concerning how decision-making takes place, how practices unfold, the role played by culture, power and institutions in the life of

the organization – to help us find concepts and understand how firms deal with the psycho-social climate. And these new approaches are, in the main, sociologically inspired theories.

We could follow Weick's (Weick 95) use of the term 'sensemaking' to fathom the underlying causes of the diverse approaches to the psycho-social environment adopted by different firms. According to Weick, social players interact on the basis of meaningful processes – what he calls 'sensemaking'. It means that a firm – or more precisely, players in a firm – generate meaning in the debate on the psycho-social environment in a manner consistent with the experiences of that particular firm. The firm's history and institutionalizing culture exert therefore a considerable impact on its approach to PSWE. Opportunities should present themselves in which the organization can choose to deal with the psycho-social environment. Such opportunities arise with regard to firms in Denmark in connection with the workplace assessments they are required to produce on a regular basis, or when either the workers or management report problems affecting the firm. The main point, however, is that a firm will decide to look at the psycho-social climate for many different reasons; there will also be many different ideas concerning both the problem's nature and its possible solution. The sensemaking process draws on social perceptions of the psycho-social climate, but necessarily within the framework of locally formed experiences.

The sensemaking perspective means that the culture and experience of the firm constitute the context within which action taken to improve the psycho-social climate takes shape. The culture and experiences of the firm are obviously not divorced from wider social processes, and are also influenced by constraints of the market, shareholders, stakeholders, legislation etc. But when devising which steps should be taken to change the psycho-social environment, a firm is more or less obliged to translate the wider social perception into its own contextual vernacular.

*How do companies work with psycho-social working environment?*

A rules-based approach would assume they do so because they have no choice but to comply with society's requirements as articulated in legislation. An economic-rational

approach would suggest that employee interests force them to do so. An institutional approach would highlight the firm's need to gain social approval in society at large as well as in the firm itself. The BEST project suggests that these and many other reasons are in action simultaneously. We propose that it is the multiplicity of reasons that spur firms to address the psycho-social climate. The reasons offered by a firm to spend resources on the working environment will influence significantly their approach to the question.

In his critique of the rational paradigm, March (March 1991) suggested alternative decision making rationalities, highlighting the possibility to describe logics of action. To cite some by way of example:

- **Imitation:** imitating the behaviour of others with whom one would like to be compared;
- **Convictions:** action is taken on the basis of more or less well-founded convictions;
- **Ideology:** action is taken on the basis of certain ideational orientations;
- **Belief in authorities:** action is taken on the basis of what are assumed to be the reliable recommendations of experts and/or authorities;
- **Anxiety:** action is taken to avoid unpleasant consequences;
- **Risk:** action is taken to reduce risk to a minimum;
- **Legitimacy:** efforts are directed at achieving social approval among those whose estimation of the firm is valued;
- **Legality:** efforts are directed at compliance with regulations, standards and rules inasmuch as it brings a sense of reassurance;
- **Appropriateness:** action is taken on the basis of what is considered appropriate to the situation.

More could be added. The point here is to give an appreciation of the fact that many reasons play out at the same time, and that there are therefore many different ways to tackle the psycho-social climate.

If, for instance, the goal is solely to achieve legitimacy *vis-à-vis* likely purchaser groups, it would be sensible for the firm to perform satisfaction polls to find out whether workers are content with their work. If the aim is to achieve a level of legality, it goes without saying

that formal procedures need to be in place in the firm to ensure compliance with existing laws and regulations. The culture of the firm, not least among the top management, will impact on how approaches to the psycho-social environment are formulated.

### *Plurality and power*

A firm is also a political system with its interest conflicts, special interests and, not least, differences in power and influence. Managements have tended to see their interests in a well-managed and engaged workforce, with low levels of absenteeism due to illness. Here, economic logic is combined with legitimacy concerns. Workers are interested in enriching but not too onerous jobs. Different professions may have political interests which diverge from those of other groups and the management – just as a dominant culture may harbour sub-cultures. It would therefore be reasonable to expect conflicts to break out within an organisation concerning how a problem should be defined and how it should be tackled. We should expect different groups in the firm to have different stakes invested in how the firm should address the psycho-social environment, including which issues require the most urgent attention. We should also expect disagreement between men and women, professional groups, leadership and workers and among different positions in the formal hierarchy.

### *Summary*

The general 'theory of the firm' in the BEST project is building on sociological theory that basically understands companies in a relational perspective. Both the relations between a company and its surroundings and the internal relations influence the studies of how psycho-social working environment is dealt with.

Relations to the surrounding world are important here, since the surroundings put up expectations to the company, and since the company mirrors itself in the surroundings. It is important that the company is perceived as legitimate. It is important, too, for the company to build an identity in relation to how it deals with the employees' psycho-social health. The relations to the surroundings are important, because the company is influenced by what happens around it, and relates to themes that are on the agenda of society.

Due to that, internal relations can't be separated from external relations; the internal relations are influenced by the outside world all the time. Nevertheless the internal relations can be said to be constituted of the culture and experience that the company itself develop. The local context is of importance of how the company in the particular case deals with the psycho-social working environment, and here we see the sensemaking perspective as central, as well as we operate with a multitude of rationales for working with psycho-social working environment.

### **3. More specific pieces of theory in the BEST project**

The theory of the firm as presented above serves as a general framework for the BEST project. It is very briefly described and need to be detailed in several aspects. In the following sections we step a little further into some of the elements of our general approach. The following sections mirror our common knowledge and agreements at this time and will be developed during the project period.

We find it fruitful to present three somewhat different elements, namely: 1) organizational processes when managing PSWE 2) the importance of the underlying approach to occupational health and 3) processes and interactions significant to the success in managing PSWE.

- 1) Organizational processes when managing PSWE bring up five concepts aiming to describe barriers and reasons why the effort fails.
- 2) The importance of the underlying approach describe four different ways of understanding the very nature of the problem, and their strengths and weakness due to managing PSWE
- 3) Processes and interactions significant to the success in managing PSWE describe a dynamic 'model' labelled as "an amoebae". It is suggested that the different elements in the amoebae have to establish interplay in the change processes.

#### ***3.1 Organizational processes when dealing with psycho-social working environment***

We would like now to turn our attention to the actual organizational processes involved in psycho-social climate-related efforts. We want to highlight here some of the obstacles likely to emerge when the psycho-social environment is on the cards. Now obstacles will

tend to contain at the same time notions as to how it can be surmounted; we therefore discuss this aspect in brief below as well.

Related to the discussion of bounded rationality James March (1991, 1988, 1997) has developed thoughts on how decisions are accomplished and how processes of decisions unfolds in organizations. Based on that we have formulated a series of assumptions of how organisational themes of decisions – in our case psycho-social working environment – often do not lead to sustainable solutions.

**Problem of the periphery:** *The term 'periphery' referee to general observations within organizational studies. It is observes that not all issues becomes central and relevant to the organizations. The organizations put attentions to some problems and ignore others. Some issues become central while others become peripheral. You can say that firms allocate attention to some issues and leave others unsolved. We find that PSWE often destiny to become a peripheral problem. What happens? The PSWE is on the agenda, but slips from view, pressed aside by other what are considered more urgent decisions and agendas. Maintaining a focus on the psycho-social environment as a key issue requires decision-makers either personally or through the offices of others to constantly ensure it remains high on the agenda. In other words, somebody in the organization must have good reason to keep the fires burning under the issue. Such a reason could derive from an awareness of an intolerable gab between reality and ideals; that a form of prestige/reward is associated with raising the issue; that somebody is officially designated to raise the subject; and innumerable other reasons.*

**Additional remarks on the periphery problem:**

All organizational processes are vulnerable, whether the process is conservational, is intended to change fundamental factors (reforms, cf. Brunson & Olsen) or to resolve problems which are generally considered peripheral. (Reference to peripheral problems presupposes a hierarchical perception of the overall problem structure. The main concern is to earn money and ensure the organization's legitimacy. These problems can be subdivided into a range of underlying problems, which in turn themselves can be subdivided... ad infinitum. While the different problems in the hierarchy are interconnected,

dealing with them requires them to be isolated, at least partly, from each other, so that they can receive sequential attention. In this disassociated hierarchy, not all problems will be considered equally important (which should be obvious with regard to general and secondary problems, but it also applies to problems at the 'same level'). How important a given problem is, relative to all the others, remains a matter of interpretation, about which there will seldom be complete concurrence, but at the same time seldom total divergence. The interesting point is that the psycho-social environment is often relegated to a place among the peripheral problems (including those for which the safety officer is responsible), together with the consequences this fact has on psycho-social climate work (and, by extension, other peripheral problems).

**The problem of complexity:** The psycho-social environment is acknowledged to be a problem, but as the nature of the problem remains unclear, it is difficult to raise it to the decision-making level. Even acting on the problem may be difficult because further problems will emerge, the cause and solution of which remain in the dark. To reduce the level of complexity, a conscious effort to describe the nature of the problems is a *sine qua non*.

**The problem of solution:** If the solutions to the problems are neither evident nor feasible, it will be difficult to accord decision-making status to issues concerning the psycho-social climate. The organization can not keep on discussing problems, without at some point discussing the solutions. It is therefore essential that interested parties have an opportunity to air possible solutions.

**Additional remarks on the complexity and solution problems:**

The complexity and solution problems, in a sense, are two sides of the same coin. The complexity problem could be described in terms of the 'bounded rationality' mentioned above (the point being that complexity derives from more than an unclear conception of the problem represented by the current state of the psycho-social environment in firms and companies etc.), while we could conceive of the solution problem as a key procedural approach in organizational processes: problems in an organization can only be understood and acknowledged as such when there exists a horizon of solutions which

can realistically be drawn on in relation to the problem. In practice, it means, inversely, that when a solution is associated with a given problem (for instance, people's complaints about a poor psycho-social climate), much time and energy are spent in putting the solution in place, even when the chosen solution from a different perspective (that of the researchers for instance) is considered inadequate to the purpose.

**Conflict of interests problem:** Latent interest conflicts and lack of clarity of diverging interests may explain quite satisfactorily why the psycho-social climate slips down the list of items requiring attention. In an intervention process many important issues require consideration. The process also provides an official and informal opportunity for divergent interests to lobby for their particular concerns. The result is that some groups win out over others, to the disadvantage of the process as a whole. To prevent the psycho-social climate disappearing off the radar screen, the process needs to include a procedure to specify the substance of disagreements as clearly as possible. It increases the likelihood of fair conflict treatment. But there may be power issues at stake, too, with stronger groups finding it easier to pursue their interests than less well endowed groups. This could again lead to questions about who can successfully place issues on a firm's agenda and as well as spurring considerations to devise measures to ensure that all relevant parties are equally involved.

**Diffusion thesis:** In the field of innovation theory (see Rogers, i.a.), it is said that the success of an innovation not only depends on its technological-economic rationality, but in large measure on who fronts the idea in the first place. The person's informal status, repute, power etc., play significantly in here. This could also apply to the psycho-social climate issue. The ability to maintain focus on the psycho-social climate as a matter of concern depends on the support of reliable and respected individuals. In strategic terms, it is therefore vital that the 'right type of people' claim ownership of the innovations.

**Additional remarks on the diffusion problem:**

A variant of this concerns the very real conundrum in Scandinavia to understand why useful solutions introduced by researchers to a few companies never propagated to other firms where they could have done a lot of good and provided a more optimal solution than otherwise available.

### *Summary*

These five concepts are descriptive as they describe some social dynamics. However, we will use them analytical when we investigate processes at workplaces that participate in the BEST project.

We will also be able to use them prescriptively, to formulate which challenges those members of the organisation that deal with psycho-social working environment, have to be aware of: It is important to maintain the theme of psycho-social working environment to avoid the problem of periphery; It is important to acknowledge complexity and at the same time to reduce it, to avoid the problem of complexity; It is important to imagine the desirable future to avoid the problem of solutions; It is important to address the conflicts of interests and acknowledge different interests – the problem of power can't be eradicated, only discursivated. It is important, too, to build legitimacy around the psycho-social working environment intervention, to make it appear reliable.

### **3.2. The importance of the underlying approach to occupational health**

Any intervention with the aim to improve the working environment, will take its point of departure in the perception of risk, which is held by the people who are responsible for planning, decision-making, and execution of the intervention. Risk perception is constituted from a combination of:

- knowledge and understanding of the professional approach to psycho-social working environment (PSWE) e.g. stress research,
- experience with problems that occurs in the daily work,
- ideas of what it is possible to do or to change and
- a knowledge of the political and legal frame for action.

It is thus necessary in any evaluation of an intervention to include the perception of risk, and following from this the approach to change that is carried by the involved parties.

A study done by Christiansen and Limborg (ref) evaluated interventions with the objective to improve the psycho-social environment carried out in 18 larger and well constituted companies and institutions. The evaluation showed that at least four different approaches to PSWE could be uncovered.

The four different approaches did not arise from a different professional understanding of PSWE but from the role and position in the companies that the holders of the approach represented.

#### *The Occupational health and safety approach*

This approach has its roots in the traditions and professional attitudes developed by safety reps. Safety officers and the Occupational Health Service professional who have been consulting the Safety committee. It's based on the concept and tradition of reducing exposures as the mean to improve Occupational health and safety. Occupational Health problems or conceived as a number of unwanted exposures of employees relating from the materials, the technology, the performance of work or the organisation of work. The strategies of improvement are to eliminate or to reduce the exposures to an acceptable level. Such an acceptable level is defined in order to establish a collective protection covering also the weakest groups. Prevention is favoured to cure, prevention is obtained through a sustainable limitation of exposures, thus providing an order of priority having the total elimination of exposures as the ultimate and the individual protection of the worker as the least achievable.

A wide ranging development of methodology has signified this approach. The variety and accessibility to methods and practical tools is vast. Especially has risk assessment and workplace assessment tools proved to be an important platform for implementing interventions through the priority and commitment, that these comprehensive methods are offering.

The point of departure of the Occupational Health and Safety Approach is the diseases, the illnesses and the accidents constituting the health risks of work. PSWE is therefore a difficult concept, given the fact that most exposures can form health risks both by being to

much or to little. Further it is obvious that any attempt to define a general limit of exposures will be irrelevant due to the differences in how exposures occur and relate to the work and to the individuals. Even more so is it a problem as some exposures in other conditions can be seen as positive conditions. This implies that a prevention strategy aimed only at reducing psycho-social exposures will fail to work.

The strong side to this approach is on the other hand the tradition and the methodology to access problems and to uncover causal relations between exposures and health.

### *The development approach*

This approach has its roots in the wide-spread and broad wave of management and organisation development theories and concepts. Most companies and public institutions have more than once launched a project with the aim to develop the organisation to become more flexible, improve management or to constitute an autonomous team structure (in some occasions it has turned to be the normal situation to undergo a change). Behind many of such changes lies a conceptual strategy for the change. The theoretical background for such concepts is taken from the human resource management theories. The focus is to rationalise the production through a higher utilisation of the competencies and commitment of the employees. Many of such strategies offer a possibility of increased participation, expansion of the job content and increased responsibility to the workplace. The theories and terminology developed through PSWE has therefore been integrated into the development project, especially in the phase of setting the goals for the coming changes.

The development approach is rooted in temporary development committees or in the human resource departments, who often are given the responsibility for change and development. Employees who from their positions are able to take the role as an internal consultant, whether formal or not are taken this approach. Many shop stewards have gone through training courses in development of the work and on this background taken an active role in development projects. In other cases this opportunity has proved to be rewarding for employees with an aim to do more than just work.

As already mentioned you will see many development projects specify that the objectives besides improved productivity are to improve the PSWE. It is on the other hand rare that the point of departure is a conception or any analysis of occurring problems and health risks related to the PSWE. Low commitment or high absenteeism can be argued as a problem, but causes behind such symptoms will rarely be scrutinised. The development approach has developed a self-evident argument, that development as such will improve the PSWE.

The Strength of this approach is its ability to implement changes and to change the course of direction of a company or an institution. The inclusion of PSWE might be superficial but it is by all means put on the agenda.

#### *The production approach*

This approach is rooted in the "line management" the production manager, the foremen and the employees. Its underlying motive is to facilitate the production process as much as possible, and strengthen to possibility to perform "a good job". It has become universally recognised by contemporary management that a poor working environment is an obstacle to do a good performance of work. Both in the sense of the practical problems related to absence, cost to workers compensation and in relation to achieving a good public image and to comply with regulations and other demands from authorities. A poor PSWE certainly proves itself to be an obstacle for good performance and to create hindrances for development of human resources and rationalisation of organisation and structures. The production management has therefore in some companies integrated PSWE as an important production parameter. The core argument is that a satisfied workforce will provide the best performance and demonstrate low absence and turn over. Likewise are many employees in surveys expressing that a poor PSWE should not only be seen as a health risk, but just as much as a condition that prevents them from the ability to "do a good job" and to develop their capabilities further.

The production approach is including PSWE with the aim to isolate concrete factors that one are able to control and regulate. Whether they are based upon sound scientifically proved causality or they are taken from a development concept is not what is important.

What matters is that it is possible to monitor and to adjust these factors. This implies that there is no intension of applying a comprehensive understanding of PSWE. The focus is upon problems that are obstructing production, whereas other health problems even though they are scientifically documented will be anticipated as necessary and unavoidable circumstances. (Health problems related to shift work is an example of this). Regular satisfaction measures, including parameters like support from relevant manager, overall job satisfaction and access to education and training are a commonly used tool to include PSWE as a controllable production factor. The monitoring is most often performed through "employee consultations", but also in some cases as regular performed surveys based upon questionnaires.

The strength of this approach is the high motivation that comes from being integrated in the core activities, performed by as well managers as employees.

#### *The well-being approach*

This approach is introduced to workplaces through a large number of consultants offering activities that can improve workers health, satisfaction and corporate spirit in general. It is rooted in the conception of work health promotion in the sense that the workplace is seen as an ideal social frame for improving the individual workers ability to look after his or hers own health. As well as the ability to address groups at risk in order to change their behaviour in the direction of a healthier lifestyle (stop smoking, loose weight, exercise) etc. Within the companies this approach will be imbedded in the human resource department, among internal "well-being" consultants or among "volunteers" from the staff. The aim is to address the individual and to offer as many possibilities as possible for the staff to improve ones owns health condition. The WHP concept derives form public heath strategies, and is therefore basically focused upon the "large" public "life style diseases" such as lung cancer, hypertension, stress, obese etc. The understanding of causal relations between health problems and life and work conditions, are thus focussing upon the individual behaviour and attitude. In relation to PSWE is this understanding restricting the approach to initiatives which aim to influence the individual worker or groups of individuals to change behaviour and attitude towards conflicts, social demands and motivation for personal development and contribution to the organisation. Much in the same way employees are

encouraged to stop smoking, improve fitness etc. The approach fails when such activities are seen as the way out of problems that are rooted deeper in the organisation, the management or the division of work. The activities will be superficial and often neglected by the employees after the immediate period of interest has faded out. A good example is the large amount of stress coping strategies that are offered to employees. Whether or not they are effect full, they will only have a positive health effect on work related stress, if it also is possible to integrate the strategies in the way the work is organised and expand the decision latitude of the employee.

The strength of this approach is, besides the obvious pleasure of laughing, playing in the forest and exercising in the gym, that it offers a strong power of motivation from an individual point of view. As any employee regards his or hers own health as whole, not as divided between health at work and health at home.

### *Summary*

Its obvious that all four approaches has their strength and weaknesses, seen from the point of the intervention one should strive to integrate the good parts from all four. The objective of this research program is on the other hand not to plan the interventions, but to assess to what extend they have had an impact on the PSWE. The four approaches offer a theoretical frame to locate the active parties in the intervention and to discuss their motives and underlying risk perception. Further it offers the opportunity to focus upon the relation between the approaches and thus qualify the analysis of how the intervention projects are implemented on all levels in the organisations.

### **3.3. Processes and interactions that influence the success of the intervention**

It should be clear for the preceding part of the paper that there is no simple and direct route to improvement of PSWE. It is a complicated process which the key actors need to understand and to a sufficient level control. Some of the important elements in this process are discussed below.

Change processes (in BEST interventions) related to working life have been studied for a considerable number of years. The Hawthorne experiment was the early and most famous

example. In the seventies and eighties a Scandinavian tradition based on employee involvement and dialogue evolved. During the last years it has become clear that goodwill and dialogue skills are not sufficient to achieve in depth and lasting changes. A number of perspectives have been put on the change process in order to achieve a better understanding and also more successful intervention.

The first and a very important perspective is the theories about *power and political process*. From this point of view any decision and change in an organisation is a result of a political process in which actors with different interests and power positions get involved in a process with negotiations, coalitions, compromising and others, which end up in decisions. In order to achieve changes it is thus necessary to understand and participate in the political process. That is especially important in a case like the psychosocial work environment that is an unclear defined issue rarely with clear solutions and normally way down the bottom of the priority list for central decision makers.

It has also been pointed out though, that the political process understanding cannot explain all aspects of a change process. There are many other issues to consider. *Learning* has especially been emphasized with Argyris and Schön single and double loop learning as the most prominent ones. In the BEST context it is especially important with development of the problem understanding and program or change theory. As it can be expected that it in many cases can be necessary with double loop learning, as solution of psychosocial work environment problems may require new types of changes that are not tried in the organisation before.

Another important aspect is the *social dynamics*. Change processes involve personal relations and feelings. An often-mentioned aspect is resistance to change but many types of social dynamics between the involved individuals will inevitably appear. It is a process that cannot be understood solely as a manifestation of individual and group interests and participation in a power play. The unconscious level creates feelings which depending on the level of on one hand trust and security, and on the other hand anxiety and uncertainty can be very strong with large consequences for the process.

The *culture* of the organisation in which the changes unfold is created in a long historical process and is also of great importance. Understood as a system of meanings and interpretations, which people assign to events and artefacts, culture will have a decisive role in the way a meaning will be constructed on any work environment intervention.

The final important perspective to take into consideration is the *context* of the organisation. There will always at any given time be a number of items on the agenda in the organisation, and developments in the surrounding society – marked, political, system, media, and others will influence it. This context will necessarily form a framework for the intervention. If the economy is developing well the latitude for action is fairly large. If the political agenda is shifting in a public organisation again the latitude will be affected. So also with internal changes such as changes in top management, launching of new products or services, or restructuring of the organisation.

#### **4. The next steps**

So far we have presented a basic understanding of relevant aspects of the firms dealing with PSWE. The next step is to transform these basic assumptions into analytical and operational guidelines for the research. This transforming proposes guiding analysis of the processes of interventions taking by the firms involved in the BEST project. Basically, we suggest that

- Firms' ways of dealing with PSWE is to be understood as ongoing sensemaking processes. Various actors take part in the sensemaking process. The way firms make sense of PSWE is very important for the intervention processes. Sensemaking is influenced by strategic desire to become legitimate in society. Sensemaking is also influenced by employees desire to maintain a sound working place and of managers desire for an effective workforce.
- Power, legitimacy, ideology and various others dynamics plays significant roles for the intervention process.
- Keeping the PSWE central (not peripheral) in firms' agenda is crucial for the intervention. Having an idea of possible solution, having the ability to develop a sustainable understanding of PSWE and to reduce the complexity seems to be essential for the intervention.

- From empirical studies we observe four ways of making sense of PSWE and these observations of routes to improving PSWE is helping us in two ways. One is to help the researchers to understand which route the concrete firms choose to take. The other is to remind us to look for the importance of analysing firms' basic understanding as significant to the interventions' success, whether the concrete routes are the mentioned or some quite different.
- It is suggested that no single factor is important, instead more factors are suggested to be 'at work' simultaneously.

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