PROCESSES FOR UNDERSTANDING SUSTAINABILITY AS A GOAL AND PRACTICE

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Abstract

The concept of sustainability has become one of today's most widely used and controversial concepts. It is therefore important to develop activities within organizational context in order to increase co-workers understanding of the goals for more sustainable practice. To produce goods and services, e.g. that is to meet our needs and still remain within the limits of the carrying capacity of nature and the ecological integrity and contributes to society's well-being, is a big challenge for all organizations. One way to start to deal with the problem and define sustainability at the operational level is to discuss goals and meaning of them in groups. While discussing we shape our understanding of the meaning of the goals and this in turn even shapes our understanding of assignment in whole. Most importantly do this collective learning even shape our understanding of responsibilities in working towards more sustainable practise. This paper aims to study how co-workers through collective learning processes and discussions together can create more sustainable practice.

1. Introduction

The concept of sustainability has become one of today's most widely used and controversial concepts. Brundtland Commission definition of sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs is very famous. But there are several definitions of sustainability.

Definitions of sustainability vary and focus on different things, but it is undoubtedly common model for sustainable development based on three, partly overlapping, definitions: the ecological system, the economic system and the socio-cultural system. In this model, the integration of the core of these aspects is of importance for achieving sustainable development (Park, Allaby, 2016).

It is therefore important to develop this systemic point of intersection for the development of location or activity in the right direction. To produce goods and services which meet our needs and remain within the limits of the carrying capacity of nature and the ecological integrity and contributes to society's well-being. This can also be seen as a basis for national environmental policy. As for tourism or

hospitality industry and durability, the World Tourism Organization UNWTO (UNWTO Annual Report 2014, 2015) described the development of sustainable tourism as something that should take into account the current and future economic, social and environmental influences and that should satisfy visitors, industry, the environment and the operators' needs. There are other definitions which take into account reduced substance leakage to the ecosystem, secure employment conditions, reduced noise and impacts on animal and plant life, less waste, proliferation of roam and reduced crime.

In this study, sustainability can be seen as a goal for any organization to strive for. In order to understand the assignment and responsibilities it carries there is a need of learning process. Collective learning can be seen as a process, which can activate other processes important for understanding the meaning of assignment and sustainability as a goal in organizational context.

2. Sustainability and responsibility as concepts and goals

Sustainability is a well-used term, appearing almost daily in the media and increasingly in everyday conversation, often as something to strive for. Moving towards a more sustainable way of living will inevitably require some radical changes in attitudes, values and behaviour (Hahn et al., 2014; Gullikson, Holmgren, 2015). And perhaps the best way to strive for sustainability is through organizational change initiative (Appelbaum et al., 2016a). During the last decades, it is undoubtedly so that environmental problems, e.g. pollution, deforestation and desertification have become real to us.

The environmental threats are consequences from the exploitation of Nature. Those threats together with structural changes in manufacturing and production of goods and services, i.e. how we live and consume, shows that we still have environmental challenges a head of us (Hahn et al., 2014; Gullikson, Holmgren, 2015; Thurén, 2015).

There have been discussions about the definition of sustainable development (Dobson, 2008; Rambaud, Richard, 2015; Appelbaum et al., 2016a), about how to interpret the concept in organisations and companies (Hahn et al., 2014; Appelbaum et al., 2016b). Also, research about how companies can create measures in order to get facts for decisions has been conducted. For instance, the Triple-Bottom-Line (TBL), created by Elkington in the 1990s is nowadays a well-known concept that many organizations use (Slaper, Hall, 2011).

According to A. Naess (1995), the essential ideas informing an environmental worldview can be broadly shared without prescribing or predetermining ultimate premises, or specific interpretations and actions. We are in need of plural interpretations and actions appropriate to local cultures and conditions – echoing the ecological principle of diversity in unity. Paradoxically an environmental worldview yields many different views of the same thing, and the same view of many different things.

It is obvious that the result from the Brundtland Commission created challenges for countries and corporations. Corporate managers and other leaders in organizations have to make decisions in their companies and organization with economic, environmental and social considerations, which is to some extent paradoxical and difficult (Hahn et al., 2014).

Responsibility is a word and a concept that is increasingly being mentioned in our society. It is pointed out how important it is, in any organizational context, to develop co-workers into responsible actors. In the scientific sense, the concept of responsibility is first and foremost a philosophical question. Philosophy and responsibility are interconnected on the one hand in the general question of what responsibility possibly is and on the other side of the normative question: what responsibility should be? (Kernell, 2002).

"Responsibility is so integral part of human relationship that in its various meanings and shadings it serves as a synonym for almost every important political word" (Wildavsky, 1986, p. 1).

Responsibility is one of the major political concepts alongside freedom, equality and solidarity, etc. that are easily to use but the more precise meaning often remain vague. (Wildavsky, 1986) In practice meets the talk of responsibility often an approach that has been called Sunday concept. This means that everyone uses the word only in rhetorical sense as referring to responsibilities seems generally acceptable and it causes no harm. M. Bovens (1998) points out, however, that responsibility is a real concept that is even known by everyone. It is hard to imagine that anyone would deny or ignore their responsibility or deliberately behave irresponsibly. At the same time the term is used as a spiritual or emergency solution, e.g. with in the party and government programs. In fact, responsibility as a concept is understood in many ways and used for many different purposes: responsibility changes depending on the time, venue and speakers (Bovens, 1998). As a legal term the concept of responsibility is describing personal or financial penalties. In law and political science implies responsibilities consequences of

an act or not acting. A person who commits a crime must take her responsibility through paying fines or imprisonment. She is forced to face the consequences of her action. The law has been developed from the basic idea that one is free by choosing action alternatives, because otherwise it would be just as meaningless to ask people to be accountable as it is to punish machines (Mackie, 1990; Permer, Permer, 1994). In political science are the terms political responsibility and civic responsibility presented. To take active responsibility is an opportunity to free us from being held responsible/accountable.

Be assigned responsibility, to be accountable, does not automatically result taking or acting responsibly. An assigned responsibility is a passive form of responsibility. Taking responsibility is an active action, based on the subject's own free will? To be liable, however is based on future requirements. But to be held responsible for an act, must include that the actor have understood the responsibilities that the task/mission contains. Additionally must the one who is held accountable had had the opportunity and own the ability to perform the task. The responsibility is a complicated concept, according to R. Ingarden (1970, 1983); it commits us to study its different dimensions together.

J.R. Lucas (1995) claims that, before we can form us a clear idea of what the real responsibility includes, we must also take into account the circumstances in which we are not responsible.

3. Understanding the assignment and responsibilities

There is a certain dynamic between individuals, groups and organizations. Broadly speaking, responsibility in any organizational context can be described as a relationship between the commissioner and the actor. Relations of responsibility constitute the arena where both the exaction and the assumption of responsibility can take place. Responsibility/accountability is a crucial question in all organizations working towards sustainability. Issues of accountability consequently have a direct relationship to professional development in organizations. An essential part of the organization's assignment is to assume responsibility. Different actors can understand both, the assignment and the responsibility, in different ways. This can be described in terms of the understanding of assignment and responsibility. The actors' understanding and interpretation of the assignment is significant for the way in which they assume responsibility for fulfilling what they are commissioned to do. The understanding includes

the cognitive and psychological processes and shows in turn how the assumption of responsibility can be shaped (Abrahamsson, Andersen, 2005; Oxenswärdh, 2011).

When the understanding of responsibility describes what happens to the professionals and in turn leads to heightened competence, the concept of responsibility can also be viewed as a pedagogical concept. The understanding of assignment and responsibility can thus be regarded as a learning process, which is in turn essential for active assumption of responsibility. This learning process is deemed to be an important part of the organization staff's competence development and professional development. These processes of understanding can be seen as a part of process of Collective learning (Oxenswärdh, 2011).

Process of understanding one's responsibility is, however, a more unexplored concept – unlike understanding the mission - and it has to do with operator's own approach in question the nature of the professional obligation to consider themselves obliged on assignment.

To illustrate the difference between the terms, it would be quite possible finding cases where assignments understanding of a co-worker is high, i.e. it is a clear picture of the tasks they believe the decision maker expects be implemented. Despite this understanding, responsibility taking can be low, i.e. a number of different – e.g. moral /ethical/cultural – causes, may hamper actors accountability to really carry out the assignment. One way to express the distinction between mission understanding and the responsibility of understanding is to assume that the former rests on the legal and the latter on legitimate grounds. Concepts of legality and legitimacy disclose relations' between justice and morality. Legality focuses on social actions in a formal sense and is sanctioned by the state, e.g. by orders and rules of law. Legitimacy is more unspoken value system that has nothing to do with the formal legal system but in stead rests on ethical foundations (Bertilsson, 1987; Oxenswärdh, 2011). At the core of mission understanding exists seemingly even understanding of responsibility. Responsibility understanding is formed in the core of actor's competences. Thus, it is further emphasized that actors' responsibilities also include understanding of the approach to change and development.

4. Collective learning

Organizational learning is more complex and dynamic than a mere magnification of individual learning.

The level of complexity increases tremendously in the change from a single individual to a large collection of diverse individuals. Issues of motivation and reward, for instance, which are an integral part of human learning, become doubly complicated within organizations.

Although the meaning of the term "learning" remains essentially the same as in the individual case, the learning process is fundamentally different at the organizational level. A model of organizational learning has to resolve the dilemma of imparting intelligence and learning capabilities to a nonhuman entity without anthropomorphizing it. What do we mean by organizational learning? In the early stages of an organization's existence, organizational learning is often synonymous with individual learning because the organization consists of a small group of people and has minimal structure. As an organization grows, however, a distinction between individual and organizational learning emerges, and a system for capturing the learning of its individual members evolves.

C. Argyris and D.A. Schön (1978) posed one of the main dilemmas shared by all who tackle this issue: There is something paradoxical here. Organizations are not merely collections of individuals, yet there are no organizations without such collections. Similarly, organizational learning is not merely individual learning, yet organizations learn only through the experience and actions of individuals.

Collective, collaborative and collegial learning are terms often used in the context of joint learning processes. J. Ohlsson (2008) describes learning as a social process when the individual change their way of thinking about something. Collaborative learning in turn can be considered as a form of joint learning, as a special type of phenomenon, where the starting point is that all learning is based in social activities, but with the collaborative learning processes is meant something beyond the social. Collaborative learning is a situation in which at least two people learn something together (Bruffee, 1993; Dillenbourg, 1999). Collaborative learning activities can include collaborative writing, group projects, joint problem solving, debates, study teams, and other activities. The approach is closely related to cooperative learning, which is the instructional use of small groups so that individuals work together to maximize their own and each other's learning (Johnson et al., 2008). The difference between collaborative and collective learning is still vague. But according to O. Granberg and J. Ohlsson (ed., 2016) this difference can consist of that in collaborative learning there is group of individuals trying to learn something together but without to specify or clarify

the social context. In collective learning however it is decisive to try to achieve a common understanding.

Collegial learning however, often used when schools and teachers are discussed, is related to the concept of collaborative learning. Collegial learning can be seen as a combination term for various forms of professional development where colleagues through structured cooperation acquire knowledge from a broad concept of knowledge, which also contains abilities and skills. In general it is emphasized that peer learning or collegial learning is a method by which a more experienced person helps a less experienced to absorb specific knowledge. Useful methods for peer learning are among others, learning study, lesson study and auscultation with feedback and peer tutoring. The importance of the joint learning synergistic effect is often highlighted in the descriptions of the collective learning (Wilhelmson, 1998; Döös et al., 2001; Döös, Wilhelmson, 2011).

Synergy means that collective processes based on interaction and communication, leads to the new common beliefs that had not been possible for individuals to come up with on their own (Granberg, 1996; Ohlsson, 1996; Wilhelmson, 1998; Döös, Wilhelmson, 2005; Granberg, Ohlsson, 2005).

L. Wilhelmson (1998) also draws attention to the importance of symmetry between the participants in a dialogue. Symmetry means that all participants' observations and opinions are given the same weight in the conversation, and to recognize each other's experiences as valid. An asymmetric situation means a situation where power positions and opinions consolidation and an evaluative approach prevent an open and common search for new opportunities. Symmetrical relationships can thus be seen as favourable to collective learning.

J. Habermas (1996) argues that inter-subjective founded collective agreement will not occur from the fact that someone has been manipulated or forced to a particular approach, but requires certain symmetry between the participants. J. Ohlsson (1996) has developed the concept of collective learning and created a model of the relationship between individual and collaborative learning, which can be used to illustrate the collective learning. J. Ohlsson (1996) notes, that the collective learning shapes how the individual perceive their practical work and thereby shape the collective learning individual experience potential. It is important for the collective learning that the experiences described in the collective so that the community can jointly problematize and reflect on the experience (Dixon, 1994; Granberg, 1996; Ohlsson, 1996; Wilhelmson, 1998; Larsson, 2004).

J. Ohlsson (1996) points out the learning dynamic character and the on-going co-constructing of borders for example, the permissible and the impermissible, is something, which can be perceived as a condition for learning processes. There is a critical, emancipatory dimension of awareness rising of these unconscious conditions for learning. If the individual is unaware of its potential and limitations, the individual cannot respond fully to promote learning.

The actors' understanding and interpretation of the change in thinking is significant for the way in which they assume change for fulfilling what they are commissioned to do. The understanding includes the cognitive and psychological processes and shows in turn how the assumption of change can be shaped (Reeve, 2009).

When the understanding of change describes what happens to the professionals and in turn leads to heightened competence, the concept of change can also be viewed as a pedagogical concept (Lindensjö, Lundgren, 2002; Scherp, 1998; Ohlsson (ed.), 2004; Alexandersson, 1994). The understanding of assignment and change of thinking can thus be regarded as a learning process, which is in turn essential for active assumption of collective learning. This learning process is deemed to be an important part of the organization staff's competence development and professional development (Ellström, 2011; Madsén (ed.), 1994; Ohlsson, Stedt, 2003; Ohlsson (ed.), 2004; Goodson, 2005).

D.A. Schön (1995) integrates values and beliefs in a theory on learning. According to D.A. Schön cognition cannot be separated from values and beliefs, nor can cognition and action. Importance of by illuminating the relationship between learning and action, that is, between thinking and doing by D.A. Schön (1995) sheds light on the nature of the changes that an innovative project must seek to provoke. Changes in so called theories-in-use that often are tacit, remain implicit and go unnoticed. In order to challenge them, they need to be brought to the surface: people will have to be made aware of their tacit rationalities, and be tempted to reconsider them. A second relevant aspect of D.A. Schön's insights is that, even though theories-in-use play a role in the actions of various actors in a similar way, they differ in terms of contents depending on professional training and experience, social background, upbringing and so on.

Because of their intrinsic and fundamental divergence, the theories-in-use that people from different professional and cultural backgrounds hold, will influence the possibility for them to learn collectively.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The understanding of the goals for assignment and especially those towards sustainability has attained a greater role in organizations today. Even more important, if possible, however, is the understanding of the responsibility embedded in the assignment. This understanding of responsibility may be viewed as a path, as a process to the active assumption of responsibility that is demanded of all the actors in organization working towards more sustainable solutions. Changes in professional competence do not take place without initiative.

Reflection on the assignment engenders a better ability to assess reality, which in turn shapes a qualitative aspect of professional know-how.

This shows a need to specialize by refining the language and to develop tools with which to handle the work better. The difficulties for managers and leaders and the need for changes in attitudes and values in general in our way of living generate the necessity of learning. Perhaps the best way to do it is, as Appelbaum et al. (2016a, 2016b) suggest, through organizational change initiative and collective learning processes. Hence, the purpose of this paper, which was to discuss collective learning in organizational context as a tool for deeper understanding of sustainability as a concept and a goal.

Any planned, directed change by individuals or collectives is built on learning. Learning can be defined more generally as the process of acquiring knowledge, skills, norms, values, or understanding through experience, imitation, observation, modelling, practice, or study; by being taught; or as a result of collaboration. This learning process activates several other processes: processes of understanding the assignment and its responsibilities.

Being able to develop one's professional competence to match the practical needs is probably a viable path to learning where the motivation is greatest among professionals. In this light, the organizational and collective competence development measures alone are not sufficient. Highlighting and being able to discuss, reflect, and learn more about the profession-specific areas, both individually and collectively, is of great significance for professional development. Based on this reasoning, the learning process provides the professionals with their knowledge and sharpens their tools. Organizations can thus be continuously improved through the professionals' own power. This process as a model for enhancing aspects of the professionals' competence can become an important part of their development, where professionals themselves shape and continuously revise their know-how in their work by relying

on their own and their colleagues' competence and professionalism.

Responsibility issues are a part of the ethical competence in organization and a vital part in the work towards sustainable organization. Without ethical discussions at a deeper level, professionals deceive themselves and can deceive their customers. This leads to ethical stances being taken on unethical grounds.

The balance between freedom on the one hand and responsibility on the other is upset, and the result is an organization like a stage with a nicely designed set but with a play that does not affect anyone. Organization development towards more sustainable activities can be regarded as a force whereby the diversity, through reflection and dialogue, results in new solutions that can be beneficial to everyone. Responsibility of the mission thus becomes a matter of debate among the professionals. Discussions intend to jointly interpret the responsibilities that the task contains.

As the road to the mission and responsibility of understanding and accountability can be seen as a learning process, both in individually and collectively, emphasized the psychological and pedagogical dimension of the concepts of responsibility and sustainability. Regarding to mission and responsibility understanding, these can be seen as formed by learning processes. Factual knowledge base uses the familiarity of knowledge that in turn helps to shape and create understanding of the mission and the responsibility, towards sustainability. In summary, mission and responsibility understanding, are both processes formed by individual and collective learning. The process starts as an individual learning process. Subsequently, involved group reflections together with their own reflections create a collective learning. If co-workers are given a possibility to clarify and discuss concept of sustainability in collective, it also activates other processes of understanding their assignment and it's responsibilities.

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