HOW TO SURPASS IMPOSSIBLE TASKS IN WORK LIFE TRANSITION

Kirsti Launis, Finnish Institut of Occupational Health
Anna-Liisa Niemelä, University of Helsinki
Tarja Kantola, University of Helsinki

In the change process the workers feel motivated and satisfied, but they also experience significant stress, fatigue and feelings of incompetence related to the transitions. Most of the stress, fatigue and feelings of incompetence related to transitions at work seem to derive from tasks which, in spite of training programs, are experienced as *impossible double bindings* by the workers. Our ethnographic observations and interviews in four different organizations showed that impossible tasks were common, especially in situations of change. In our study, we have identified, documented and analyzed in detail the most salient *impossible tasks* in the various work activities in different types of change processes. Between May and August 1999 we have had five different interventions with five work units (in four organizations). In these processes the work units had first analysed the impossible tasks they had encountered. The analysis phase includes the near history of the work unit and its activity, and more real life data concerning the impossible task. The impossible task has then been overcome by systematic interventions in real life situations. The analysis and data has been sent to the planners and managers, and dialogues have been started with them. At the end of the projects, the work unit will evaluate *the results* they have obtained and *the development and learning process* they have gone through. In the analysis of the process we have used the theoretical tools of Cultural Historical Activity Theory.

1. Introduction

Managers, planners and change consultants often describe the change process at the work place as a well planned, well conducted and linear process. According to our three-year project "Work units between the old and the new way" even a successful change process does not function linearly in adapting new strategies or visions launched by the management or the planners. There are numerous contradictions and complicated situations to be solved locally. Many essential questions are intertwined in the transition process, e.g. the motives and the content of the change, how the change is implemented, and how is the change connected to the well-being of the workers and work units.

In the change process the workers feel motivated and satisfied, but they also experience significant stress, fatigue and feelings of incompetence related to the transitions. Most of the stress, fatigue and feelings of incompetence related to transitions at work seem to derive from tasks which, in spite of training programs, are experienced as *impossible double bindings* by the workers. Our ethnographic observations and interviews in four different organizations showed that impossible tasks were common, especially in situations of change. In such situations, the workers developed different kinds of individual and collective coping and learning mechanisms to overcome the difficulties. These mechanisms seemed to lead to frustration and fatigue, but also to new innovations.

These mechanisms were traditionally studied as 'individual (coping or learning) strategies' of the workers. In our study, we have identified, documented and analyzed in detail the most salient impossible tasks in the context of various work activities in different types of change processes. Using the concept *an impossible task,* we studied the transition situation as an issue of work place training, and as an issue of the well-being of workers in four organization in the midst of major transition.

2. Activity theory and Developmental Work Research

Activity theory and the cultural-historical approach have their roots in the theory and research of Vygotsky (1978) and Leontiev (1981). Research has tried to understand the influence of social practicies of human development. The activity concept has been important in the cultural-historical tradition because it provides a way to characterize the aspects of social practice that are believed to provide the conditions for psychological development. The concept of social practice, interpreted as activity, gives a possibility to focus on the dynamic between traditions for collective activity and the realization of collective activity in institutions through subject's actions. (Chaiklin & al. 1999).

Developmental Work Research is an application and further elaboration of the cultural-historical theory of activity (Engeström 1987). The key concepts are:

1. *Activity system* is the unit of analysis of mediated human behavior, which is seen as process mediated by culturally constructed, accumulated and shared artifacts, and other human beings and patterns of social interaction. An activity system is multi-voiced formations, participants of the activity represent different subjective orientations and point of view, mostly from different developmental layers of the activity. Activity systems are in constant movement and imbalance. Investigations in workplace reveals failures and disturbances as well as innovations. Behind these, one may detect emerging deeper level *contradictions* between the components of activity.

2. *Contradictions* in activity system evolve *historically*, and they can be understand by tracing their origin and development. This requires a developmental and historical strategy of research, based on the developmental analyses of the local practices.

3. Developmental work research is above all interested in change. Change is analyzed as cycles of qualitative reorganization in work. The process is interpreted as *the cycle of expansive learning.* (Engeström 1987; 1999)

3. The change process in four organizations

In our three-year study (1997-1999) we analyzed the changes in four organizations in the midst of changes. The organizations were a bank, health and social welfare services, a research laboratory, and the mail delivery of the postal services. During the first year we analyzed the starting point of the new model, the content of the new model, the vision or strategy (every organization had their own name for the new model) and the plans to implement the new model at the grass root level (Launis & al 1998a; Launis & al 1998b).

During the second year of the project we analyzed the implementation of the transformation in 11 work units (in four organization). A short summary of the disturbances in the implementation process:

1. The planned new models or visions launched by the management and planners were based on general trends like teams, networks and better client services, not on the analysis of the prevailing work or thinking models of the individual workers or the work units.

2. The new visions seemed very uncontradictory. In practice the new model and the process to establish it included many contradictory elements. There were no tools to analyse or handle these contradictions, and they caused much time pressure, haste and interpersonal conflicts.

3. The implementation of the new system was assumed to occur as a result of the individual training process, but in practice an important part of the implementation process turned out to be the local interpretations and constructions of the model or vision, there were no tools to accomplish this.

4. The worker or work unit had no time nor tools to analyze or plan the local models, to do the second stage work. (The first stage work is e.g. to give consultation to the client, and the second stage work is to analyse or plan new ways to consult the clients.)

5. The feedback was collected as figures or some quantitative methods. These methods did not bring out the problems, contradictions or innovations in the process.

The transition process at the work unit level seemed to be far from the implementation of the new vision or strategy. In order to carry out a successful transformation, the work units did not need training on general models of vision and strategies, ideal models of learning organizations, or normative advice and rules for developing teams or networks. What they did need, were methods to analyse their own activity, and tools for carrying out their own, special and contentual solutions arising from their own history, culture and prevailing state of affairs (Engeström & al. 1996).

4. Impossible situations and their interpretations

One essential finding was that when trying to carry out new plans or visions, the individual worker or work unit very often got into the situation where the new working model seemed to be impossible in everyday situations. Some disturbances were handled, but they crop up again and again. This kind of situations we called *impossible situations*. They arose for many different reasons. When describing these situations, the workers used expressions like: *"That's not possible", "That's quite impossible", "You can't do that in everyday work", "In practice, no way".*

"They (managers) tell us, that we have to sell new services even if the client only pays his/her bills, that you should grasp the situation. But in my everyday work situation, due to the haste, it is *quite impossible*." (bank worker 1998)

"I *can't do that, I can't* leave the clients, *I can't* finish my work day until all the clients have been taken care of. I could't stop my work at nine o'clock (9.00 pm) when my work day ends." (home helper 1998)

These kind of situations seemed to be some kind of repeated disturbances in the transformation process. When we asked the workers how they overcome the situations, the typical answers were:

"Oh, I try to do my best and do so much I can, but very often I feel that I am not good enough." (home helper 1998)
"All the time I work over my working hours" (home nurse 1998)
"In the evenings I am always so tired, I don't know how long I can stand this" (bank worker 1999)
"I do my work just like before, it is frustrating, but I have become numb to it" (home helper 1998)

It is very important both for the transformation process and the well-being of the workers *how the impossible situations are analysed and interpreted in the organization.* In Finland, the above described problems are related to the work ability problems of individual worker, especially to the great number of aging workers. The usual interpretation of the problems in the changing work life has been that because so many workers feel exhausted, the competence and the work ability of individual Finnish workers are insufficient. The main conclusions have been that we have to train individuals both physically and mentally. This would lead to mental and physical individual training programs instead of studying and analyzing the change process. The problem

lies also in the prevailing approach to work-related well-being (Mäkitalo & Launis 1998).

5. The analysis of impossible tasks

Impossible tasks and frustrating situations in public management has been described by Hargrove & Glidewell (1990), and paradoxes in organizational transformations by Quinn and Cameron (1988). The view in these impossibilities is somewhat different, but the idea is that individuals or organizations face situations or tasks which they find impossible to solve. Engeström (1988) says that people can't even define the problems although they eventually may overcome them. According to Engeström, the prevalence of impossible tasks creates a nagging atmosphere of insufficient mastery over what is happening. In our study, instead of analyzing the work ability or competence of individual workers, we analyzed problematic *situations* encountered by the workers and the work units.

We found four different types of impossible situations and tasks.
1) The client of the new vision did not respond to the clients encountered by the workers real life situations. The new challenges and the working model in the vision were impossible in practice.
2) The new model was very common and was based on networking idea, but there were no ideas concerning the new division of labour or new rules between the different work units.
3) The new teams faced new challenges and rules, e.g. multiskilled worker, but the routine arrangements and time pressure in the team prevented the system from functioning.
4) When the work units started to study, analyse and develop their work, they had no time nor tools to do it. The time needed for the second stage work was somewhere else in the organization, it was the task of the planners and managers.

6. Surpassing the impossible tasks

Between May and August 1999 we have had five different projects with five work units (in four organizations). In these processes the work unit had first analysed the impossible tasks they had encountered. The analysis phase includes also the near history of the work unit and its activity, and more real life data concerning the impossible task. The data have been analysed together with the researchers. The impossible task has then been overcome by systematic interventions in real life situations. The progress of the expansive learning cycle (learning meetings) was following:

1. Joint planning of the expansive process, discussions on their *impossible situations*
2. Recent history of the work process, sources of the *impossible situations*
3. Detailed studies (e.g. videos, client interviews) on their work situations in order to understand and analyze *the impossible tasks*
4. Planning changes to surpass *the impossible tasks* in the near future
5-8. Trying to change the work situations
9. Self-evaluation of the developed work models, tools, the learning process, and the work-related well-being
10. Discussions on how to initiate dialogue with the organization (constructing a network)

The impossible task has then been overcome by systematic interventions in real life situations. The analysis has been sent also to the planners and managers, and dialogues have been started with them. At the end of the projects, the work unit will evaluate *the results* they have obtained and *the development process* they have gone through.

7. References

Chaiklin, S., Hedegaard, M., Juul Jensen, U.. (eds.). (1999). Activity Theory and Social Practice.Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.

Engeström, Y. (1987). Learning by expanding: An activity-theoretical approach to developmental research. Helsinki: Orienta-Konsultit.

Engeström, Y. (1988). Reconstructing work as an object of research. The Quarterly Newsletter of the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition, vol. 10, Nr 1.

Engeström, Y. (1999). Innovative learning in work teams. In: Engeström, Y,. Miettinen, R., Punamäki, R. (eds.) Perspectives on Activity TheoryCambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hammer, M., Champy, J. (1993). Reengineering the corporation. A Manifesto for Business Revolution. New York: Harper.

Hargrove, E. & Glidewell, J. (1990). Impossible jobs in public management. University Press of Kansas.

Launis, K., Niemelä, A-L., Kantola, T. (1998a). Organizational change: from individual adaptation to collective creation. In: Vink, P., Koningsveld, E., Dhondt, S. (eds.) Human Factors in Organizational Design and Management. Elsvier Science B V. 189-193.

Launis, K., Kantola, T., Niemelä, A-L. (1998b). Organisations et unites de travail entre l'ancien et le nouveau: une approche selon la theorie de l'activite. Performances Humaines & Techniques. Decembre 1998. 34-38.

Leontiev, A. (1981). Problems of the development of the mind. Moscow: Progress.

Mäkitalo, J., Launis, K. (1998). The finnish work ability approach - a historical and conceptual analysis. Työterveyslääkäri (Finnish Journal for Occupational Physicians) 1/1998. 42-46.

Quinn, R., Cameron, K. (1988). Paradox and transformation. Toward a theory of change in organization and management. Cambridge: Ballinger Publishing Company.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). Mind in society. Cambridge: Harward University Press.