

# Resilience through the daily work of first line managers

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## THE WORK IN CONTEXT

Organisational resilience can be a source of competitiveness, enabling companies to respond and adapt to unexpected changes, ensuring that a company can thrive whilst dealing with the unexpected. The ability of first line managers (FLMs) to handle their daily work at the operational level in order to maintain a stable production output, while managing the many challenges in the complex industrial context, is key. The importance of how FLMs can handle their role has been confirmed by several researchers – and more research is needed. In this research, two manufacturing companies are participating as they wish to develop their FLMs' abilities to handle their role as an intermediate position between workers, technical support staff and upper management. The study aims to produce knowledge of how the daily work in the role of FLMs is enacted in the manufacturing context and how resilient action strategies can be developed for both performance and wellbeing. The study follows a collaborative approach in which two manufacturing companies are participating. After an initial workshop and ten in-depth interviews with FLMs the preliminary results indicate that the disturbances of daily work per se were expected by many of the interviewees. Difficulties involved were diminished by developed routines, although the information about those sometimes were difficult to find. Improvement opportunities regarded for example clarification of the role, better collaboration with support functions, more time to spend with operators interacting at shop floor level and expanding proactive action strategies.

## KEYWORDS

First line managers, action strategies, manufacturing industry

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## A brief outline of the work carried out

The daily work of first line managers is studied. The approach includes that theory and practices will evolve iteratively in exploring the work of the participating first line managers (FLMs). Activity analysis is used as a base for investigating the work, and intermittent analyses from data collection will be presented at recurrent workshops with company representatives and researchers participating. So far, one workshop and ten in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews have been conducted. Further data collection will include additional semi-structured interviews of FLMs, senior managers, support functions and subordinate employees. Also, observation of the workplace including mapping of actions in FLMs daily work and recorded personal diaries undertaken by FLMs are to be included. A questionnaire, targeting mainly shop-floor workers, regarding role and output expectations of FLMs are to be undertaken. Additionally, company documents will be used. The second phase of the research will involve developing ideas about how the repertoire of appropriate FLM's action strategies can be enhanced and trained in order to better maintain productivity and wellbeing among both FLMs and their subordinates.

### **Findings/solutions (the outcome)**

An initial finding was that the FLMs expressed that daily work happened often as expected including various disturbances. Several explanations for this were indicated. Standardisation of the manufacturing systems studied has created reasonably high stability in many situations. Moreover, there were often routines developed for unplanned events, and proactiveness by experienced FLMs added to that. However, the learning curve for the newly employed to master these skills was long. To better handle disturbances, indications were that often routines were in place but might be difficult to find, searching for appropriate documents was expressed as time consuming. Moreover, a clearer definition of 'who's in charge' was needed. There was thus a certain degree of inadequacy regarding the role of support functions and there was a need for a deeper clarification of what a FLM's role should comprise. FLMs experienced that support functions were not always sufficient. Additionally, the FLMs requested to spend more time fostering relationships with workers on the shop floor including developing and supporting their subordinates and they experienced too much time was spent in meetings or administrative duties. Expectations of how to better maintain a sustainable leadership and sharing knowledge and experience were also expressed by the FLMs, particularly learning from when things go well. There also seemed to be a difficulty in recruiting FLMs.

### **Impact**

The need for further research on how management practices are performed by FLMs and what their outcomes are have been expressed by several authors. This study aims to fill these knowledge gaps and develop both scientific and practice-orientated knowledge on how the daily work of FLMs is enacted and how it can be improved. Moreover, how FLMs can develop resilient action strategies – enhancing the ability to rapidly recover or respond when work is disrupted in a way that minimises loss or increases gain. Resilience can consequently act as a source of competitiveness. Apart from the direct influence in participating companies the results are to be communicated to practitioners through a handbook written together with the companies, scientific publications and teaching of engineering students.