Top managers' leadership of blue-collar workers in food production

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THE WORK IN CONTEXT

The production of goods in Europe employs many blue-collar workers. The strong international competition and high hygiene requirements in food production leads to an organisational pressure to perform while maintaining safe and healthy work.

In this paper, we present preliminary findings on how six slaughterhouse factory managers (FMs) handle occupational safety and health (OSH) while adapting their leadership to modern factory conditions. The FMs describe the change in leadership as a balancing act to make money in a globalised highly competitive and ever-changing market, while also ensuring good, safe and healthy work conditions.

KEYWORDS

Blue-collar work, sustainable leadership, slaughterhouse

A brief outline of the work carried out

This paper is based on an ongoing embedded single-case study (Yin, 2018) of six Danish slaughterhouses. We interviewed six slaughterhouse factory managers (FMs), and used 'open coding' to conduct an explorative inductive analysis (Brinkmann and Tanggaard, 2010; Saunders et al., 2016; Yin, 2018) on how the FMs manage health and safety.

The importance of leaders' commitment to the occupational safety and health (OSH) of workers has previously been established (Murphy et al., 2014), so has the dynamic nature of leadership (Ipsen et al., 2018). This paper uses the term 'sustainable leadership' to describe the leaders' combination of focus on the OSH of the workers while also considering organisational performance (Hallinger and Suriyankietkaew, 2018; Laura, 2017).

Findings/solutions

Most blue-collar work in slaughterhouses happens on production lines in contrast to the proposed idea of the machine-centered 'factories of the future' (Kleiner, 2006). The organisations use piece rates as a 'production enhancing system'. The FMs describe that global competition and the political situation strongly influences the prices of meat, the cuts of meat that are the most profitable, how many pigs they slaughter, and thereby how many workers the slaughterhouses need. At the onset of the project, representatives from the organisation described the slaughterhouses as roughly doing the same work in the same way. The FMs, however, described that the location, age and size of the factories influenced the tasks they do, as well as their use of technologies and tools. The design and structure of the larger facilities makes it possible to adapt not only to production needs, but also to current OSH requirements. Therefore, the potential for creating flexible, safe and healthy work differ. All of the FMs agree that the retention of blue-collar workers depends on the introduction of aids, robots, and on organisationally enforcing safety.

All of the FMs are former blue-collar workers at slaughterhouses. Several of them described that there has been a change in leadership roles. One of the FMs described that only a few 'old-fashioned' head butchers remain in the organisation, having *"[…] 3 kilowatt in the shoulders and no light in the bulb, and who at any rate should yell very loudly [laughs shortly]. And that was quite natural."* The workers previously perceived the leaders as wanting to suck the strength out of them. The FMs describe a gradual change, that demands general organisational leadership training and a steadfast attitude towards, for example, reducing injuries *"[….] it counts well in the statistics that we decrease that part. It also counts also well in the ethical statistics. […] As a firm, dammit, we have a responsibility to insure that our employees return home whole… No pieces should be missing"*. The FMs intention was that the workers should feel assured in their OSH, and they should be able to carry their grandchildren after having retired.

The FMs describe the need to focus on OSH – reduction of sickness absence etc. – while still focusing on performing as a balancing act. They seek to handle this dilemma by trying to establish mutual trust and empathy between themselves and the blue-collar workers – so the workers understand that the firm needs their labour and loyalty. The FMs expect this to lead to an organisational culture where considerations toward safety and health are incorporated into the need to make a profit.

Impact

This paper shows how FMs attempt to create safe and healthy work while creating a productive and profitable business. The FMs aim to adapt the design of the work system to the challenges of their socio-organisational context. As the blue-collar work is changing, so is the leadership of it. Our preliminary findings point towards social, organisational, individual, and historic factors that influence this change in leadership. We see this described balancing act as an attempt to work towards the sustainable leadership of blue-collar work.

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