The Leader as a Facilitator of Learning at Work

A study of learning-oriented leadership in two industrial firms

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This thesis concerns the leader as a facilitator of learning at work. More specifically, the aim of the study is to increase knowledge about leadership in relation to co-workers’ learning and development at the workplace. The focus is on the leaders’ notions of learning-oriented leadership, their actions in daily work and on the factors that may enable and constrain learning-oriented leadership.

The theoretical framework is structured around a review and analysis of three leadership research traditions: studies of effective leadership, studies of managerial work, and critical studies of leadership.

The research reported in the thesis is based on an interactive research approach comprising case studies of two industrial firms. The main empirical data have been collected in interviews with leaders. In addition, the empirical material includes observations of leaders and studies of documents.

The results indicate that the leaders view learning and the development of their co-workers as important issues and that they use a number of different activities to facilitate learning. Based on the degree of formalization these activities can be characterized as planned, partially planned and spontaneous. When working with the co-workers’ learning the leaders alternate between acting as supporters, educators and confronters. Furthermore, learning-oriented leadership is influenced by factors such as the co-workers’ attitudes and motivation, the leaders' views of learning and development, the presence of learning issues on the organizational agenda and the design of the organizations’ production systems.

To conclude, the leaders in both companies can be seen as facilitators of learning. However, their leadership is mainly performance-oriented and focused on adaptive learning. There are traces of development-oriented leadership as well, but these patterns are not as apparent. For instance, the facilitation of critical reflection associated with developmental learning is not very common for the leaders in either of the cases.

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