

The Communication Competence of Leaders in a Knowledge-Based Organization

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Abstract

This study views leadership and knowledge management from the standpoint of communication competence. The question of the communication competence of leaders is not a new one, but nonetheless there has not been very much research directed to the area. On the contrary, leadership is often viewed as an inherent trait, rather than a set of competencies that can be developed. This paper describes how leadership can be viewed from a communication competence viewpoint. The purpose of the paper is to answer the question: what kind of communication competence is demanded from leaders in a knowledge-based organization?

In this study 11 leaders of a Finnish knowledge-based research and development (R&D) organization were interviewed. The data gathered in the interviews was analyzed using cross-case analysis. Opinions and experiences as to leadership and the communication competence of leaders vary considerably, but according to the interviewed leaders it plays a critical role in their work, especially when facing the challenges arising from a dynamic environment or when working in a knowledge-based organization. The preliminary analysis and results explain leadership and knowledge management from a communication competence viewpoint in the context of the knowledge-intensive and dynamic working life.

Keywords

knowledge-based organization, leadership, knowledge management, human interaction, communication, communication competence

Introduction

The study reported here is a part of a doctoral thesis concerning the communication competence of leaders and the effectiveness of its development in a knowledge-based organization. This study takes place in a Finnish research and development (R&D) organization where the leaders ($n = 20$) are taking the Special Degree of Leadership (johtamisen erikoisammattitutkinto, JET). This study concentrates on the development efforts within the Special Degree of Leadership.

The methods used in the overall research will follow a method-triangulation. The data will be gathered by using interviews, focus groups as well as questionnaires, and the sample will include the leaders ($n = 20$) as well as their subordinates ($n = 300$). The results reported in this paper are based on interviews of the first group of leaders ($n = 11$) taking the Special Degree of Leadership. This paper will attempt to find out how leaders themselves conceptualize their work and the communication competence it involves. The purpose of this paper is to answer the following research question:

What kind of communication competence is essential for leaders in a knowledge-based organization?

According to Lindlof & Taylor (2002, 170 - 173), interviews are particularly well suited to studying the broadly subjective realities of the social actor's experiences and his/her perspectives on certain issues, as well as for understanding the subject's conceptualizations of communication. In addition, interview is a 'systemic' approach for understanding the interaction of variables in a complex environment and can therefore be seen as rich and holistic with a strong potential for revealing complexity nested in a real context (Miles & Huberman 1994, 10). The interview as a method also enables the study of a new field of perspective and is suitable in cases where it is already known beforehand that the results will vary (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2000, 35). The communication competence point of view on leadership in a knowledge-based organization is seen as such a case. The qualitative research interview is also seen as a method which most research participants accept readily. This is also the case because most people like talking about their work but rarely have the opportunity to do so with interested outsiders (King 1994, 33 - 34).

The data was analyzed using a cross-case analysis because of the variability among the cases presented. This method of analysis made possible a more systematic comparison of the cases, even though the amount of data was small. The comparison was made in order to see what the sample of incidents (in this case interviews) could reveal in terms of factors that are present in all the cases, those that are present in some cases and not others, and those that are entirely absent. The analysis followed the principles of inductive analysis. Using this method, it is possible to derive a coherent and meaningful pattern from a small number of complex cases. (See Huberman & Miles 1994.)

This study and this paper aim to address several issues. First, this study presents a communication-based and, specifically, a communication competence-based view of leadership and knowledge management. To provide a foundation for this study, theoretical standpoints about knowledge-based organizations, leadership, communication and communication competence are reviewed. Second, the results of this study are discussed in the context of knowledge-based organization. Third and finally, the future of leadership and knowledge management studies and the communication competence view of them are discussed on the basis of the preliminary analysis and results.

Theoretical standpoints

Dynamic and knowledge-intensive working life

The challenges faced by organizations have become increasingly complex. First of all, the working environment has become global and more *dynamic*, and most of the organizations are faced with more uncertainty than ever before. This uncertainty comes from both external and internal sources. As a result, organizations are striving to become more flexible and more responsive to their surroundings. Therefore also individuals within the organizations have to be equipped to cope with an unpredictable working environment. This requires leadership capabilities adequate for directing organizations that are in constant flux and facing new challenges requiring new solutions every day. Still, too few scholars have taken this new

demand for flexibility into account in their models of leadership and also of knowledge management and human interaction. Thus, there is a need for a more dynamic model of leadership. (See Mannix & Peterson 2003, 4.)

Secondly, work itself has become more abstract and *knowledge-intensive*. The modern worker is increasingly required to possess more abstract skills and thinking; that is, skills that can be adapted to apply to a variety of situations; and he/she is also required to possess, use and synthesize more knowledge than ever before. Consequently, there is a pervasive need for deeper expertise in the organization.

The expression '*knowledge-based organization*' refers to organizations and firms where human capital is central in comparison with the use of material and economic capital, and most of the work is said to be of an intellectual nature. Furthermore, well-educated, qualified employees form a major part of the work force and such a company claims to produce qualified products or/and services. In addition, in the knowledge-based organization, the management of knowledge and organizational networks is central to efficiency and success. (See, for example, Alvesson 2000; Huotari, Hurme & Valkonen 2005; Järvenpää & Immonen 2003; Starbuck 1992.) Consequently knowledge, which is difficult to transfer outside the immediate context, becomes a major competitive advantage of organizations (Sveiby & Simons 2002, 424).

It is important to realize that knowledge is not a discrete object or a fixed asset. Rather, knowledge is a flow. However, information and knowledge do not flow by themselves, but are embedded in people. Information resources, technological tools, and policy standards constitute the technical infrastructure of information and knowledge management, but above this infrastructure, the generation and transformation of information in an organization are forged in the thoughts, feelings, and actions of individuals (Choo 1998, 260).

Sharing information and creating shared knowledge demands social interaction between human beings. The key to the success of an organization lies in its individual members; depending on their ability and willingness to share their expertise and information, and to network and work in innovative, co-operative and effective ways in different kinds of communication situations. To succeed in these processes of social interaction, the members of an organization and, in particular, its leaders need to be competent communicators. Leaders play the key role in helping an organization's members to cope with the challenges arising from a complex environment. They must also have the ability to create a working environment in which the organization's employees interact freely, effectively and appropriately with each other in order to share information and create shared knowledge. Thus, knowledge management and leadership are on the bottom line bringing the expertise in the organization together and securing the human interaction (see Rissanen 2004, 21).

A communication competence-based view of leadership and knowledge management

Leadership scholars agree that human interaction plays an important role in leadership. Nevertheless, the communication-based view of leadership does not receive satisfactory recognition. The terms *human interaction*, *communication* and *communication competence* are often not even mentioned in leadership models or mentioned only indirectly, e.g. as a leader's tools or as a separate element of the social traits and features of a leader. This neglect

of communication can be explained as something that arose from the history of the leadership studies, which have in the past fallen into one or the other of two dimensions (see Fairhurst 2001).

Historically, leadership theories have linked leadership either to particular traits or to distinct styles. Alternatively, the kind of leadership required has been considered as depending on the particular situation. Furthermore, the earlier studies often view the phenomenon at the system level instead of concentrating on the individual. This kind of macro-level analysis has been criticized by several scholars because it does not directly describe leadership behavior or specify the interaction processes which take place in particular concrete social contexts. Concentrating on the traits, styles or situation reduces communication to a technique, and does not offer understanding of the communication competence and skills underlying leadership behavior (Barge 1994a, 56; Cohen 2004, 178; Northouse 2004, 33).

These arguments are applicable in this study of leaders' communication competence in a knowledge-based organization. A real and deep understanding of organizational communication processes (here: leadership), can be achieved only by viewing the micro level, i.e. the individual level of the organization (Meyer 2002, 473). In this study, the emphasis is put on the individual leader and his/her human interaction processes and communication competence. It is also important to draw a distinction between the competence view and viewing leadership as a trait. Leadership is not a trait or a characteristic that resides in the leader. Rather, in this study leadership is seen as a process of managing the interdependencies that arise from doing the job. What leaders do is work; and what working leaders need to do is help others in their work (Barge 1994b, 107 - 108). Leadership is a transactional event that occurs between the leader and his/her members (Northouse 2004, 3). Thus, the leader affects and is affected by his/her followers.

This study is an attempt to capture the essence of the leadership phenomenon; going beyond the 'hierarchical' view of it as a means of controlling the subordinates. Leadership is seen not as a linear, one-way event but rather as an interactive event. Leadership is a relational activity, i.e. a communicational activity. As a matter of fact, leadership emerges in the process of interaction and is enacted through communication (Barge 1994a, 21). It follows that, from a communication competence viewpoint, leaders are made, not born. Almost anyone can develop the competencies and skills necessary for successful leadership. Leaders are developed through learning, experience, and developmental relationships, such as, for example, mentoring. (Hackman & Johnson 2004, 367.)

It is essential to view the competencies and abilities that are needed in the social interaction situations that arise when managing the work and leading the people doing the work. This study explores leadership from the standpoint of *communication competence* and in the working-life contexts of leaders. What then is the relationship between leadership and communication competence, i.e. how do they construct each other?

There are various definitions of the communication competence. Common to most of the definitions are the following elements: *knowledge*, *skills* and *motivation*. The value given to specific communication competencies is dependent on how *appropriate* and *effective* they are perceived to be in accomplishing the goals of the particular communication relationship or situation. (See, for example, Spitzberg & Dillard 2002; Wilson & Sabee 2003.) Competence

can be viewed as an evaluative judgment of the quality of a communication behavior. Therefore, it may be said that communication competence is knowledge of effective and appropriate communication behavior, together with the motivation and skills that enable one to interact in a communication situation in a way that the participants in the situation find efficient and appropriate.

In addition to this, the latest communication competence definitions add meta-cognitive skills and ethical principles (e.g. Valkonen 2003, 26). Communication competence therefore also includes the skills needed to predict, plan, control and evaluate one's communication behavior, and knowing enough to be guided by such ethical principles as will ensure that the other participants in the communication situation are not hurt, as well as that one's relationship with them is not put at risk.

Leaders work in many different kinds of communication situations with their subordinates, peers, superiors and customers both in face-to-face situations as well as through different kinds of information communication technologies. Although their task is to organize people in collective action to achieve organizational goals, they must at the same time strive to adopt appropriate and effective behaviors as well as responsible and competent communication practices (Barge 1994a, 253). Communication is the principal means leaders use to achieve goals; and communication, and thus leadership, is dependent on the communication competencies of the leader (Flauto 1999, 13). In other words, we increase our leadership competence as we increase our communication competence.

Prior studies and writings in the field of leadership communication such as Hackman and Johnson (2004) and Barge (1994a) define the communication skills and competence of leaders. The previous research indicates that there is a strong relationship between the leadership and communication. For example Flauto's (1999) study of the relationship between communication and leadership, and between the communication competence and different kinds of leadership models (e.g. transactional and transformational leadership; LMX -model) was conducted measuring leadership performance using an integrated measure based on several leadership and communication competence measurements. The studies carried out showed that, for example, transformational leadership is tightly linked to communication competence. Nonetheless, there have so far been only a few attempts to make a detailed study of the human interaction situations to be found in knowledge-intensive working life when defining the communication competence of leaders. What kind of knowledge and skills are essential for a leader in order to be effective in the present-day working life?

Research project

This study takes place in a Finnish research and development (R&D) organization where the leaders are taking the Special Degree of Leadership. The goal of the study is to find out what kind of communication competence is essential for leaders in a knowledge-based organization, and how do the development efforts within the Special Degree of Leadership affect the communication competence of the leaders and the interaction processes of the organization. The participants of this study include both the leaders (n= 20) as well as their subordinates (n = 300). The data will be gathered using interviews, focus groups and questionnaires. The results reported in this paper are based on interviews of 11 leaders.

The organizational activities in the R&D organization in case include research, development and customer services. The educational level of the organizational employees ranges from basic education to the highest academic degrees (e.g. PhDs). The leaders interviewed work in different kinds of management tasks and positions in the organization. All of the interviewed leaders were of Finnish nationality. Six of the leaders were women, five were men. The age of the interviewed leaders ranged from 30 to 59 years. They had working experience in management functions ranging from six months to over 20 years. Four of the leaders had worked only in the organization in question. The years they had worked for the organization in question ranged from less than one year to more than 10 years. The interviews were conducted before the beginning of the leadership development program. The leaders were asked to describe their work tasks and the interaction situations arising in these tasks.

With the regard to the cross-case analysis, there were three steps in the analysis of the data: data reduction, data display, and conclusion-drawing and verification. The data was first coded and categorized so that the conclusions could be reasonably drawn and verified. Second, the data was displayed in different matrices that illustrated the findings derived from the data. Third and finally, initial thought about patterns discerned in and explanations suggested for the findings were developed and constantly verified by checking the data and forming new matrices. The process was, however, not linear or simple, but formed an interactive and cyclical process. (See Huberman & Miles 1994, 429.) For use in this article, the excerpts and quotations taken from the interviews were translated into English from the Finnish language.

Preliminary results

General conclusions on communication and communication competence

The preliminary results emphasize the significance of communication in the work of leaders in present-day working life. However, the opinions and experiences of the interviewed leaders about communication competence varied across the cases greatly. Nine of the leaders conceptualized leadership as a competence which could be developed. Two of the interviewed leaders thought of it more as an inherent trait. It was seen in a variety of ways, e.g. as different kinds of interaction and group leading skills, knowledge of how to communicate and as self-esteem. It was also debated whether a leader's communication differs from other kinds of communication.

There was a difference in how the leaders perceived their subordinates and the communication, and the interaction situations in which they were with them. In most cases the leader's communication was seen as a dialogue, not a monologue.

They expect me to say something and they listen to me. [--] Partly it is a kind of dialogue but on the other hand I have to know, while they know the thing and the project better, to ask what they suggest that we should do etc. (Leader 1)

The leaders interviewed did not want to lead by giving orders but by guiding. Nevertheless, planning and decision-making was seen in some of the cases as best carried out alone without

employees. In some cases the subordinates were seen as equal colleagues, in others as followers.

When the strategies are being worked out there is a lot of planning to do. But even that you cannot do very much alone. It is a kind of communication, communication in both directions. (Leader 5)

In all cases leadership and communication were found to be challenging. Different leaders mentioned different challenges, but certain common features could be abstracted. The communication challenges according to the leaders' opinions and experiences have been gathered together and are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Leaders' opinions and experiences about the communicational challenges in a dynamic and knowledge-based organization

Response themes	Causes	Effect on leadership and leader's communication competence
Dynamic working environment	Changes in the working environment and in the organization	Rapid decision making and communication of decisions; correction of quickly-made decisions Informing people about the changes Constant information sharing Creation of an open atmosphere by not hiding issues Effective and goal-oriented group leading
Insecurity	Competition for job vacancies and work tasks; colleagues are seen as competitors; tasks, information and knowledge are not shared easily	Creating an open and trusting atmosphere Supporting and inspiring for information sharing and collaborative knowledge creation Managing conflicts Listening and taking care of the employees' well-being Showing empathy
Spread of expertise	Subordinates spread all over the organization and leaders don't know their own employees personally; nonetheless leaders responsible for networking and linking employees and customers together	Taking care to establish and maintain communicative relationships in the external and internal networks of the organization Using effective and appropriate communication practices and channels
Critically thinking subordinates	Subordinates at the same time colleagues; work independent and taken personally as opposed to assigned work; feedback	Mentoring the expertise Offering support and guidance to employees who need this in carrying out their tasks Arranging to get feedback on the way work is assigned

	is taken personally; decisions are being questioned; innovativeness threatened	<p>Aiming feedback to the personal needs of an employee</p> <p>Negotiating with subordinates the decisions to be taken</p> <p>Taking subordinates into consideration in the decision-making process</p> <p>Supporting new ideas and solutions</p>
Education divide	<p>Employees include both highly educated experts and those with only a basic level of education; the structure and culture of the organization spread along two dimensions; work tasks are being taken in various different ways</p>	<p>Communicating with both groups</p> <p>Motivating both groups</p>

Dynamic working life and insecurity

The analysis shows that the communication competence of leaders is essential when facing challenges arising from transformation of the working environment. This supports the view that all managers need to be able to deal with ambiguity. All of the leaders interviewed found changes in the environment or in the organization, or the uncertainty arising from such changes, challenging. It was found that challenges could be resolved by, for example, communicating and creating trust, supporting the employees and showing empathy. Communication competence was frequently defined through these challenges.

You know that we have had notice negotiations in this house. In stressful situations of this kind you must be careful to communicate sensitively and in the right way. It is also, how could I say it, supporting. You should support your subordinates in these situations. (Leader 9)

Spread of expertise

The leaders also found the organizational structure challenging. There is strong evidence that individualized expertise and knowledge spread throughout the organization will set communicational challenges for the leaders. The leaders interviewed work in the same building with their subordinates, but they might work in different areas of expertise, in different units or on the other side of the building (cf. matrix organization). The leaders interviewed found it challenging to manage the knowledge and human capital that they had to gather together for use in different kinds of projects.

I have more contact persons in this house than I would have in some other different kind of organization. In some more typical organization, such as an industrial establishment which has a very clear and straightforward organization structure, my role would be to demand staff with whom I would negotiate, for example, for implementing some change. But now I have lots of contacts in this house. (Leader 3)

In addition, according to the opinions and experiences of the leaders interviewed, jobs, projects and knowledge are not easily shared, but kept internalized in the organization in case. This also creates a challenge, especially when the leaders' task is seen to support the atmosphere of creating and sharing knowledge and learning.

The supervisor cannot tell everything to his/her employees, but he/she needs to know what kind of information could be beneficial and what it is that an employee needs to know. (Leader 11)

It is also important for that you not only give information, but can also receive something [in return]. It is a kind of communication. (Leader 4)

Even though it was found challenging, the leaders saw their task as being to create an open, trustful and inspiring atmosphere.

[Communication] plays a remarkable role, because everyone always feel that they don't receive enough information or they don't know [something]. Of course I am not responsible for all of these things, but if someone feels the need to talk, I have to, in that situation, be ready to talk. (Leader 4)

All together, you have to create a positive atmosphere so that people are open and trust each other and then, that it is nice to be at work. So that the atmosphere can be positive. (Leader 1)

The structure of the organization also seems to influence to the use of the communication channels. Some of the leaders tried to avoid using communication technology. Walking around and face-to-face contacts were seen to be important when networking.

I try to avoid using email or similar, because I am still not so well-known to others [subordinates]. I prefer face-to-face [contacting, communication]. But sometimes you have to send email. (Leader 3)

However, some of leaders also found it important to keep in touch with the employees and especially with the customers through email, telephone and video conferencing.

Critically thinking subordinates

One experience that was common to all the cases examined involved working with critically-minded subordinates. For some, critically thinking subordinates were a great challenge. One leader said that a work-force comprised of substantial expertise was a positive thing, which relieves the leader of some of his/her responsibility: the leader can relax in the knowledge that the work would be properly performed. Experts were also found to take the work more personally. This was seen as being a challenge e.g. to persuasion and negotiation skills and also to the provision of feedback. One of the leaders conceptualized the challenge arisen from critical-thinking subordinates the following way:

These people are quite highly educated and they know their value. In a way, it is challenging that they don't accept that what we decide [--] in this culture everything is

questioned. [--] And even when we decide something, people don't act according to it, because, in their opinion, it doesn't make any sense. So, in some way, in this kind of expertise organization, since we have so many researchers, it is quite a big challenge to get the people to see and realize that it makes sense in the big picture, even though it seems stupid for their own situations. (Leader 1)

Education divide

The leaders interviewed also emphasized that an organization of experts involves other people than only highly-educated researchers. Communicating with both groups was mentioned as a special communication challenge.

Communication is really a bottleneck on the road to success. [- -] It is communication or the totality of communication skills that are the gap. In this kind of organization, where you have on the one hand, over-critical researchers and on the other, some people with a rather basic education, we are faced with a special challenge. How can we reach out to both these groups? (Leader 10)

Conclusion

In qualitative research, a study is valid if it truly examines the topic which it claims to have examined. Thus, the validity is a matter of whether a researcher's interpretations and conclusions emerging from an interview are valid (King 1994, 32 - 33). In this paper, the preliminary results provide answers to the research question. The validity was ascertained by asking interviewees to describe their conceptualizations more closely when interviewing, and through comparison with the findings of similar studies and theoretical standpoints, as well as by actively seeking contradictions in the data during analysis. For the reader, the interpretation process was clarified using quotations from the interviews.

To sum up the preliminary analysis and results show that the meaning of the communication competence of leaders in a knowledge-based organization is not only evident from a study of the literature, but also appears in the opinions and experiences of leaders. In general, the results support the earlier findings that communication competence takes on an important role in particular when an individual has to work to the limits of his/her expertise (Kostiainen 2003, 117). The preliminary results show that the communication competence of leaders is essential, especially when facing challenges arising from the transformation of the working environment and the uncertainty of the work. Thus, leaders' communicational qualifications seem to be especially important when the expertise and the knowledge are individualized and spread throughout the organization, and when working and communicating with critically-minded subordinates. The dualistic character of the organization and the education divide are also challenges for leaders' communication. In addition, the results support the view that leaders' communication skills play a crucial role in knowledge-sharing and in building and maintaining an organizational culture of learning (e.g. Crawford & Strohkirch 2004).

Even though working life changes, the communication skills associated with hierarchical views of leadership are unlikely to become redundant. The traditional leadership competencies such as delegation, goal-setting, feedback, conflict management, planning,

motivation and building commitment will always remain important and essential in order to lead in a successful way (See Barge 1994b, 105.). However, there is a need for understanding leadership communication in the dynamic and knowledge-intensive working life of today. There is a need to understand what communication competencies are required for the development of leader-member exchange relationship and for other human interaction relationships, where information is shared and shared knowledge created. Perhaps the old, traditional communication competence areas of leaders should take on new dimensions when we view leadership horizontally; and perhaps we also need the addition of new competencies. Perhaps there is also a need for a re-conceptualization and deeper explication of the epistemological grounds of the concepts 'leadership', 'knowledge management' and 'communication competence'.

In this article, one view of leadership communication, namely the communication competence view, was put forward. This study is a case study of one knowledge-based organization and therefore broad conclusions cannot be reached. However, even though the number of participants was small, it was sufficient to provide a picture of the phenomenon. The preliminary analysis and results offer guidelines for future research and provide new avenues for leadership. In addition, the communication competence view in explaining leadership offers guidelines for the development of leadership and organizational communication practices, and also, in a broader view, the role of communication and human interaction in working life.

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