

## Leaders' learning orientation and the HCM-turn in call centres

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Research on call centres is increasingly concerned with high levels of work intensification and unveils deep-seated contradictions in this new form of service organizations. The current debate opposes management interests in rationalization and technologies of efficiency and control to employee wellbeing and the quality of the customer service. Based on a single-case study, this paper advances a differentiated view of management focusing on the mediating role of operational management in striking a balance between structural requirements and people issues. Learning orientation is identified as a significant leadership quality that promotes reflexivity in the ongoing processes of interpretation and meaning creation enhancing the human dimension in the production of service. Learning orientation will be related to high-commitment management (HCM) as a way to reconcile the logics of efficiency and customization. Arguably, a learning orientation impacts not only at shop floor level, but also on the upper organization, through upward feedback, providing potentially valuable knowledge to the organizational strategic decision making.

## **1. Assessing the human factor in the new service orientation**

Call centres are among the fastest expanding employment and business areas in Europe (Kinnie et al. 2000; Deery and Kinnie 2004). They assume a dominant position in the new service-economy in the OECD countries (Russell 2008) as they represent a promising prospective of enhanced customer service within a rationalization philosophy. Technology is fundamental in the production and delivery of service in call centres (Taylor et al. 2002; Deery and Kinnie 2004). Work tasks result from linking information and communication technologies, i.e. electronic telephony, complex databases, automatic call distribution and monitoring (Batt and Moynihan 2002). The automation of the service exchange is completed by standardized procedures for the interaction with customers subjecting the service delivery to a technical rationality, which limits the human agency necessary to navigate the complex socio-technical work milieu and satisfy customer needs (Gnaur 2010). Pursuing a double logic of bureaucratic efficiency and customer orientation, call centre jobs involve specific challenges related to the cost efficiency / service quality dilemma. These are increasingly visible due to increased customer exposure in terms of quantity of calls beyond opening hours and geographical limitations (Korczynski 2002).

### **1.1 Providing organizational flexibility**

Call centres are viewed as the embodiment of organizational flexibility versus market deregulations as they adapt swiftly to market demands while protecting core practices and evolving new strategies to increase revenue (Arzbächer et al. 2002). Meanwhile, the stability-flexibility dilemma is reflected internally by a schism between rationalization, viewed as standardized procedures and performance, and flexibility, which is left to the employees to support by investing themselves in flexible ways. Relying on the human factor, internal flexibility has thus been aimed at by pursuing 'soft' measures to supplement the 'hard' measurement and control (Frenkel et al. 1999) in order to imbue within employees the desired attitudes and behaviors, the motivation and willingness to invest themselves qualitatively in the job while still hitting the targets. High-commitment management (HCM) can be described as "a form of management which is aimed at eliciting a commitment so that

behavior is primarily self-regulated rather than controlled by sanctions and pressures external to the individual, and relations within the organization are based on high levels of trust" (Wood 1996). Focusing on recruitment, training, job design and co-involvement in order to encourage discretionary effort, HCM is inherently appealing to the efficiency/ quality debate as it allows for a mix of methods to elicit employee commitment while controlling their behavior (Hutchinson et al. 2000). Practices such as "fun and surveillance" are explicit attempts to adopt a HCM-approach, although they have but a soothing effect on the strictly controlled work environment as they serve to "offset the worst features of call centre working" (Kinnie et al. 2000, p.982). They may therefore fail to reconcile the flexibility-rationalization dilemma, which is pushed on to employees assuming the character of 'sacrificial HR' (Wallace et al. 2000). Hereby, the efficiency and service excellency dilemma is solved at the cost of employee exhaustion, burnout and high turnover rates, which rather than being a major organizational problem (Taylor and Bain 1999), becomes a means of maintaining flexibility by the constant renewal of the force work (Arzbächer et al. 2002).

Deery et al. (1999, 2002) have stressed the significance of team leader support to employees' wellbeing. In her study on middle managers' subjectivity in their improvised ways of meeting employee needs, Houlihan (2001, 2006) identifies the active role of operational management in mediating and reconciling work contradictions to relieve employee stress through supportive, relational management strategies while operating within highly restrictive contexts and systems' intransigence. Being the meeting point between employees, customers and the upper organization, middle managers are expected to guard company interests, although deprived of organizational influence on the strategy decision process, which results in the paradox of call centres being over-managed, i.e. over-controlled, yet lacking strategic leadership (2006 p.167).

Capitalizing on the critical role of call centre managers in constructing flexibility, this paper looks into how a learning orientation can support both short term and long term organizational objectives. The research question is: *How might a learning orientation, as a leadership quality, facilitate the creation of meaning and shared vision in relation to call centre work and how might this impact on organizational learning and change?* The investigation is based on leading theory

within call centre related research and a selected corpus of data from a single case study in a major Danish call center. The general theoretical discussion of central issues in call centre service organization (1., 1.1) is viewed in a learning perspective (1.2, 1.3). This theoretical framework serves to introduce the field data, which is part of an action ethnographic research project (2), and concerns an interventionistic element that is described (2.1) and discussed (2.1.1). The theoretical and the empirical discussions form the basis for a joint discussion suggesting model for learning orientation as an integrated part of call centre organizations (3). The conclusion (4) briefly summarises the findings.

## **1.2 Learning orientation in organizations**

A learning perspective is generally associated with long-term outcomes regarding the firm's investment in gaining the knowledge that it is lacking (Lindley and Wheeler 2000). This stands in contrast to call centres' short term focus on productivity and efficiency and their reputation for cursory induction training and scarce prospects for continuous training. The lack of formalized learning opportunities in the workplace makes it difficult for employees to use their experiential knowledge to improve organizational performance, which reduces the firm's ability to identify and utilize the knowledge that it is lacking (Houlihan 2000). To act competitively, modern organizations need to facilitate learning for all their staff and build feedback loops to contribute to continuous strategy formation and improvement in the light of experience (Lähteenmäki et al. 2001). The learning dimension appears critical to the configuration of HCM insofar as it represents a resource-based HR-strategy, i.e. one that capitalizes on shared learning for obtaining an inimitable integrated mix of competences and processes to ensure organizational competitiveness (Pralahad & Hammel, 1990). In call centres, the need for strategic human resource management such as HCM is related to the change and adapting capacities earlier identified as instrumental to constructing flexibility, but also to creating awareness through feedback loops of the knowledge generated at floor level, which is critical as coming from the meeting point between organization and customers.

Learning orientation (henceforth LO) is here defined as a sustained focus on the learning potential of the work and is expressed

by the effort to give rise to organizational values and practices to guide learning processes of creating, sharing and utilizing knowledge and skills (Nevis et al. 1995). LO makes part of the discourse of organizational learning, which has been defined as "the capacity or processes within an organization to maintain or improve performance based on experience" (p.73). LO agrees with the three main values associated with learning in organizations (Senge 1990, 1992), 1) commitment to learning expressed in the value assigned to learning activities regarding the firms performance over time; 2) open-mindedness or the firms' ability to continually question and revise its routines, assumptions and beliefs; 3) shared vision of what the organization is trying to achieve, which creates commitment and purpose among the members. LO partakes of the learning discourse integrating organization and work through work structuring processes and workforce development as a strategic reply to the knowledge society and global competition.

### **1.3 Two logics of production and learning**

Learning is an integrated aspect of working life as human activity (Engeström 1987) as a way to respond to work demands. The result is work-related learning of varying quality ranging from adaptive learning of routine actions based on individuals' adapting to predetermined conditions, to developmental learning focusing on creativity and expansion of problem solving frameworks and relying on individuals' reflective and critical thinking capacities (Ellström 2001). This corresponds to the single-loop versus double-loop learning which aim at either corrective or reflective strategies associated respectively with short and long term organizational interests (Argyris and Schon 1987). Addressing issues of learning in organizations, Ellström (2006a) expands his argument by identifying two logics of activity, the logic of production reflected in the need to respond to demands of efficiency and rationalization through effective action and production ensuring predictability and security; and the logic of development which builds on developmental learning and innovative thinking in order to survive in a changing market environment and to advance alternative business strategies. Ellström argues for the necessity to create space for and combine both types of learning. This line of reasoning can be applied to organizational performance. According to achievement orientation theory (Ames

and Archer 1988), a distinction is made between a performance goal orientation and a learning goal orientation. Research on sales performance (Paparoidamis 2005) suggests that employees with a performance goal orientation will focus on the outcomes as the proof of their effectiveness comparing their achievements with expectancy levels. A learning orientation to goal achievement on the other hand, provides workers with self-regulating strategies and knowledge to respond more accurately to selling situations, which leads to superior performance (VandeWalle and Cummings 1997). The two orientations to goal achievement are not mutually exclusive but can both co-exist.

## **2. Researching the field of practice**

The present study involves data coming from three action learning cycles with middle managers facilitated by the researcher within the framework of an 'action ethnography' (Eden and Huxham 2006), which combines interventions with flexible strategies for collecting and analyzing qualitative data. This approach is informed by the interpretive tradition concerned with participants' point of view through immersion in specific activities and the joint creation of knowledge by researcher and participants. Based on a constructive epistemology which suggests that it is impossible for the researcher to stay detached from participants' perspectives while inquiring into their experiences of learning and implementation (Guba & Lincoln 1989), the interpretivist stance stresses researcher's subjectivity in the meaning creation. An interpretive inquiry into individuals' attitudes to learning in the context of their world of work has been deemed an appropriate methodology based on what has been termed a responsive constructivist approach (p.38): responsive because participation and interaction have been used to partake of the cultural context together with members of the organization; constructivist because knowledge is seen as inseparable from meaning in relation to particular context and therefore jointly constructed.

### **2.1 Towards a learning orientation through Action Learning**

Our findings confirm previous research (Houlihan 2000, Belt et al. 2002) in assessing learning in the researched call centre as adaptive, i.e. restricted to initial basic training followed up by various product updates and procedures. The prevailing approach is

single-loop, corrective learning to attend to problems without inquiring into their causes. There is a sharp insistence on things “not open for discussion” e.g. standard procedures, work routines and performance evaluation, leaving only a limited scope for employees and their leaders to improvise within a strict work rationality optimistically referred to as “freedom within responsibility”. The initial step in the action research project was to create a space for inquiry about work and learning in the form of Action Learning.

Action Learning (AL) was developed by R. Revans (1982) as learning from and with peers by solving real life problems based on commitment to learning by challenging existent knowledge through group processes of reflexive questioning. AL requires the implementation of gathered insights into action and reflecting on the reciprocal effect of action and learning. The aim of AL is to enhance double-loop learning and critical reflection to detect inadequacies and investigate personal, group or organizational norms and assumptions (O’Neil & Marsick 2007).

Two AL groups were established. The first one with 6-9 team leaders (TL1) and their unit manager (UM1) met regularly once a month for half a year with most members present each time and newly appointed leaders joining in. At UM1’s suggestion, the theme of this AL cycle (AL1) was job satisfaction. Each member then identified a personal issue to present in the AL-forum. The second, AL2 cycle started at the suggestion of the UM2 with the declared aim to create a learning culture in the workplace. The TL2s embarked readily on this project but was to be disappointed as AL2 was disrupted by repeated postponements and cursory termination due to productivity pressures. AL2 data will thus not be part of this study.

### 2.1.1 Reflective problem solving

That job satisfaction was an issue in AL1 emerged through the various problems TL1’s brought to the forum such as being overwhelmed by operational issues; being subjected to intensified requirements from the upper organization in terms of high productivity targets, shifting needs to regulate staffing, manage dissatisfied subordinates, help them adapt to ongoing changes and make them deliver accelerating quantitative targets alongside espoused customer values. Palpable challenges included dealing with various forms of resistance and creating a positive climate to

elicit a performance spirit. Challenges often involved the mediation and interpretation of the informative and operative properties of technology reflecting a technical rationality not easily compatible with user needs. Various system inconsistencies and a perceived dissonance with the human logic in a customer oriented business provoked employee protests and affected performance. These issues were not framed as AL-problems, but were recurrently alluded to in the processing of more palpable issues such as employee dissatisfaction, high absenteeism and low performance. This might be related to the presence of the UM, who upheld a normative grip on TL1's critical reflection. Thus, UM1 managed to qualify two efficiency related issues as AL-problems to be examined collectively, relative to absenteeism and low performance: 1) "Which concrete management practices can change the absenteeism rates in the short run to amend the present critical situation?", and 2) "How can we abolish low performance in a way that it incites even our high-performers?" The proposed solutions involved reflective thinking but remained mainly within the single-loop mental framework blocked for critical questioning by the normative expectations contained in the problem formulations.

The issues raised by the TL1s reflected less manageable challenges such as employee resistance – "How do I make the crossed arms open? – and TL1s' critical role as mediators – "How can I create meaning and a sense of direction for my employees in a simple and manageable way in everyday work?". These sessions stimulated critical reflection among the members, who unveiled legitimate causes for dissatisfaction especially among the old employee generation who honored high quality customer service. Regarding TL1's mediating function, the group reflected on the significance of informal contact with the employees and the need of slack time during the working day for casual interaction thus identifying a way to enhance employee affective commitment. Successive meetings had the TL1s report on their respective experimentations with creating slack time and interacting informally with employees and the significance of a qualitative relationship in providing employee commitment in order to influence their perception of the work and the organization. AL1 was appreciated as an opportunity to reflect on practice and learn by solving problems with peers:



“AL has taught me to view problems from different angles. I have learned from the experiences and ideas of my colleagues. I have learnt that a problem can be solved in several ways and that my idea is not always the best.”  
(TL evaluation)

“I can see on myself and my colleagues that we have developed: we have learnt to learn from one another. We have been open about things in way that could not have happened through the usual leader-oriented activities.”  
(TL evaluation)

“AL has markedly accelerated our team building and I have no doubt that AL has contributed to creating the fundament for a most cooperative team.” (UM evaluation)

In AL1, the need to initiate a learning orientation in the TL1-group became visible as a viable way to process common challenges and create new knowledge from shared experiences and actions, and as a supplement to performance-oriented competitive climate among TL1s and their employees causing mutual suspicion and isolationism. It did not though unravel fundamental problems related to basic tensions and contradictions in call centre work. The presence of UM1 acknowledged the need for developmental learning, but may have inhibited critical reflection and double loop learning as UM1 maintained the discourse of freedom within responsibility, which left unfulfilled the desire to ‘pull the envelope’ expressed in the group.

### **3. The scope of leaders' learning orientation**

The performance set-up in call centres has an espoused focus on service quality, yet it rewards quantitative goals reflected in the performance indicators used to measure employee performance. This opens the option for considering the viability of a LO to assist team leaders process job-inherent contradictions and integrate reflexive practices in the workplace to promote self-regulating strategies among their staff with regard to challenging and often conflicting job requirements. The present study shows that in lack of an organizational structure for learning, team leaders seize opportunities for becoming learning oriented by embarking upon initiatives for joint investigation, critical reflection and active experimentation, such as

action learning. Arguably, LO will affect both the operational and the strategic aspects of leadership. The first is related to the mediation of organizational requirements in meaningful ways to the employees; the other - to supplying critical knowledge with regard to the production of service into feedback loops to the upper organization. Involving active investigation of work practices and employees concerns, as exemplified earlier, LO might enhance high-quality relationships in the workplace and open up for more participatory ways to create, distribute and utilize knowledge, guided as it were by the values associated with a learning culture, i.e. commitment to learning, shared vision and open-mindedness. For this, LO will have to be sustained by consistent learning practices in the workplace, such as action learning and other types of developmental learning, which can withstand productivity pressures being recognized as a valuable strategic component.

As illustrated in fig.1, the strategic role of LO in call centres addresses both goal achievement and challenges specific to this type of service organizations. Learning becomes a means to process and respond to challenging job demands related to the double logic of call centres, efficiency and customization, and a way to recuperate the human dimension, which is critical to the production of service.

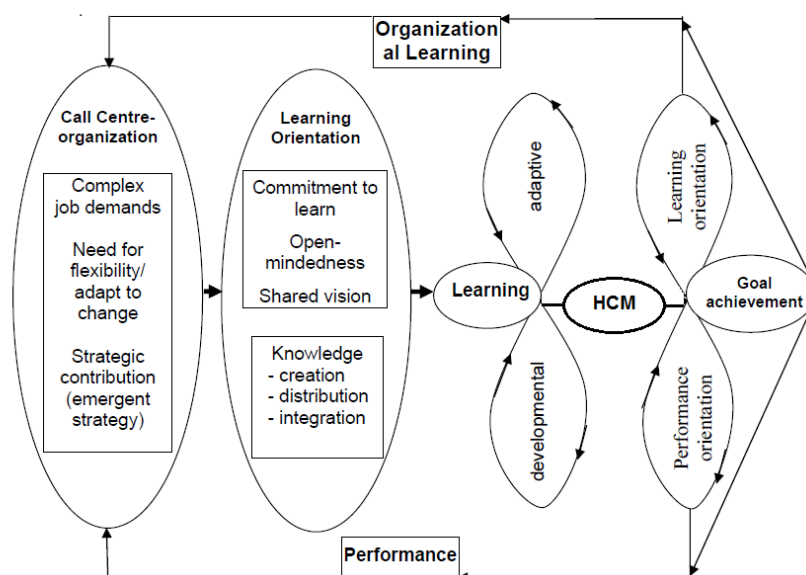


Fig. 1: Model for strategic learning orientation in call centres

LO provides team leaders with a space for reflection to assist them in mediating between technical rationality and human expectations and balance structural demands for efficiency with the quality of customer service. The AL sessions provided such a space and was valued by participants. The AL-participants might have been limited in their power to implement the learning outcomes. Nevertheless, the dialogic, critical reflection and collaborative problem solving skills employed in the AL-setting have expanded their view on call center work and provided them with an enlarged base for future action. Similarly, with the presence of UM and the external researcher, learning has come on the agenda of the top management towards the value of feedback from frontline managers. --

Attention to the human resources is critical in carrying out the alignment against the strategic objective of service quality especially when there is extensive customer presence, as predicted by the volume of call centre service production. An external concern with service quality and customer satisfaction must reflect in the internal priority given to human centered qualitative practices regarding customers, employees and managers. LO alleviates the lack of structural deficiencies to nurture the human aspect in call centre service, subdued as it is by technological rationality and efficiency demands. By providing a climate of inquiry and an invitation to joint meaning creation and shared vision, leaders' LO serves the ongoing process of internal re-organizing promoting the construction of flexibility in call centres, that can meet changing demands. Flexibility is enhanced by the evolving of new knowledge to respond to current needs. As represented in fig.1, LO pertains to the strategic decision to employ HCM to reconcile the double logic of service, i.e. efficiency and customization, by integrating adaptive and developmental learning. Similarly, the performance goal orientation is balanced by a learning oriented goal achievement making space for human agency.

LO envisages integrative aspects of work and learning in the form of productive reflection at work (Ellström 2006a). Although not yet part of the organization's agenda, this practice demonstrates, in accordance with previous studies (Fenwick 2003), that more than being a matter of actual time allocation, isolated from working, leaders' LO may primarily be a matter of attitude, i.e. focus on learning *and* development, and of allowing employees to grasp learning op-

portunities in their daily tasks. This qualitative shift in the perception of time suggests a way out of the "tyranny of time" that puts an "unreasonable and unnecessary strain on the employees" (TL), by focusing on developing employee skills to deal with customers appropriately. LO arguably provides the internal flexibility call centres are in need of through the continual organizing of work mediated by middle managers as the translators of outer exigencies to organizational capabilities.

#### 4. Conclusion

Recognizing call centres as complex organisational systems subject to a dual logic of efficiency and customization reveals the need to consider a developmental logic versus productivity combining a performance and a learning orientation to goal achievement. Middle managers play a complex role in the service production in call centres in that they deliver efficiency demands while negotiating the human side of service, acting as mediators between structural exigencies and working realities.

LO has been identified as a potentially significant leadership quality in, firstly, promoting reflexivity among leaders themselves to guide their ongoing, multifaceted negotiations between efficiency demands and the quality of customer interaction. Secondly, learning-oriented leaders are likely to tie stronger bonds to their employees as they will be more responsive to their challenges and learning needs. LO can thus be connected to the development of HCM that may support the dual strategy of customization and efficiency. Finally, the upper organization may benefit from the contribution of learning orientated managers as providers of strategically critical knowledge derived at the meeting point between organization and customers.

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