

# Stress as offence to self - Illegitimate stressors or legitimate management?

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NATIONAL RESEARCH CENTRE  
FOR THE WORKING ENVIRONMENT

# Empirical material

- Better Psychosocial Work Environment: a study of workplace interventions (BEST/VIPS)
- Four industrial companies
  - *Printshop*
  - *Catering*
  - *Transportmaterials*
  - *Machinefactory*
- Two year pre/post intervention study
- Combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods

# Quantitative results

- *Printshop* and *Catering*: low scores on most psychosocial dimensions
- Low scores on outcome parameters such as health, stress and job satisfaction
- Surprisingly high scores on the dimensions:
  - "Demands for hiding emotions"
  - "Emotional demands"
- High levels of emotional demands in administration department in *Transportmaterials*

# Illegitimate behavior

Verbal attacks by colleagues or leaders,  
not mobbing, but a raw but caring tone...

Example from emigrant worker in *Catering*:

*It is a bit tough here, especially the chefs. When you are new, you are a bit shocked, and you get sad, but they are actually sweet, it is black humor, irony. We never use irony, in the beginning you cry a little, but then it becomes normal, and when you ask, they say that it is just for fun*

# Illegitimate stressors

Inconsiderate acts or lack of acting

Example from *Printshop*:

*There are many small moments of irritation that never get solved. For example there is a problem with spilling of oil. It has been a problem since the factory was built. It is still not solved and that is irritating. It's a daily moment of irritation.*

*[The CEO] listens but nothing happens, because he's not a technician. We could earn a lot more money if they listened*

# More illegitimate stressors

The conditions are conceived as illegitimate because the management seems contradictory. Example from *Catering*:

*We only have one oven and it is partly broken, it is so handicapped... 30 portions... but how can we make that with only one oven?... We have fewer and fewer kitchen tools, as a chef you can use your fantasy, but in the long run... The administrative people do not know the problems we deal with. Yes, one of them...*

# Illegitimate tasks

Irrelevant or meaningless tasks

Example from *Catering*:

*Nobody valued WCP. The procedures are only used when the company has to be assessed from the outside. We do not really know whether it is used or not. I don't think it has been used for a long time. It requires a lot of documentation, but it is not here. Meetings should discuss problems and news – every third week*

# Is the SOS perspective useful?

- Examples of illegitimate behavior and illegitimate stressors can be found in all case companies
- Illegitimate tasks are most prevalent in the companies that are parts of large corporations
- Findings correspond to quantitative analyses
- Interviews showed that employees were very intimidated by the conditions they were exposed to. This could explain the high emotional demands

# The *Printshop* case

- Merging of two print shops – new machinery
- Technical and economical crises
- Reorganization as independent subsidiary
- New director
- Personnel and cost cutting
- Strikes and lack of trust

# *Printshop* “offenses”

- Abolition of “social agreement”
- Bonus (compared to publisher)
- Accusations of soldiering
- Mistrust of collective/attempts to individualize
- Shifts and lunch break schedules
- Verbal attack by certain managers
- Lack of maintenance
- Unwarranted benchmarking

# Directors viewpoint

The new director was relatively clear on what he thought he had to do:

*There were a lot of old habits and so on and far too many people. There were some very expensive agreements and so on. So therefore I said that now we start with a clean slate - we tear all the old papers apart and we start from a new beginning. And we have to make new agreements on market terms.*

# Legitimate management?

- Substantial deficit
- Unclear cost structure (independent subsidiary)
- Problematic management (new director)
- Spoiled workers (benchmark)
- Expensive collective agreement
- Hostile shop stewards (one was fired)

# Is “illegitimate” appropriate?

- The concepts of “offence” and “illegitimacy” are useful in the analysis, but they indicate that the researcher sides up with workers
- Suggestion:
  - A conscious choice
  - Based on a general theory of justice
  - Grounded in employee statements/feelings
- Better words might be “dignity” and “recognition”