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A Manager's Truth Telling Dilemma: A Case of two finnish managers

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INTRODUCTION

A big change has occurred in the assumptions underlying organizational performance and effectiveness in the last ten years. In 1980ies big organizational size and unending growth were supposed to be the keys to success. Currently these assumptions has been called into question. Rapid and unexpected changes in organizational environment has led to a different set of assumptions. One of these assumptions is that downsizing and decline as well as growth are also natural phases in organizational development (Cameron 1994, 190). The downsizing of an organization usually turns the life-long employment of organizational members into an untypical and occasional direction. This means from an individual's point of view that a so-called certain job more and more seldom is guaranteed. Among those who lose their jobs are also groups which earlier were thought to be safe such as managers, specialists and white-collar workers (e.g. Cameron 1994, Kanter 1989, Tichy & Devanna 1990).

Changes increase the various kind of demands put on the managers of organizations, which demands seem to have more and more contradictions and complexes between them. In the changing situation, flexibility and vitality are sought, very often through the reductions in personnel. When the development of organizations changes from growth to ungrowth, the management encounters settings of questions which deviate from earlier ones. The matters connected with the reductions in personnel are in this kind of a situation one of the most difficult challenges the management meets. The management is

responsible for the reductions, which may be based on several different strategies (Cameron 1994, Greenhalgh et al. 1988). In this kind of situation the manager meets questions to which there is not necessarily the right or the wrong answer, and thus there are also ethical problems involved in the situation. E.g. Hosmer (1987, 314-315) thinks that a difficult ethical problem connected with management is a situation involving negative consequences to individuals without them being able to affect the situation in some way. The ethical aspect of the problem becomes still more crucial if the situation has opposite consequences to parties. One of the parties draws advantage from the solution made whereas it is disadvantageous to another party. The manager has to make the difficult reduction decisions, and her/his managerial skill has an essential affect on what kind of a shape the situation finally takes. The manner in which the organization handles the procedure, influences, besides the persons to be terminated, the personnel which stays in the organization. The organization's reputation as a fair organization may also be a significant competitive advantage in the long run (Kanter & Seggerman 1986, 17).

THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to describe the interaction situation between a manager and a person to be terminated. This interaction situation means the termination discussion between the parties. This interaction situation is examined as an experience of a manager. This situation is supposed to be one of the most demanding a manager meets during his career and that is why it is in my interest in this study. The interaction situation concerning termination is connected with the reductions in personnel related to the downsizing of an organization and a manager's experience is studied through the stories the managers have told themselves to me. The research task implementing the purpose of the study is to carry out an empirical study through which the interaction situation described by the managers is studied. Kilpatrick et al. (1991, 49) identify three groups connected with the reduction of personnel: 1. those to be terminated, 2. those who will 'survive' and 3. those who will keep their jobs, meaning "terminators" who carry through the terminations in practice and who mostly belong to middle or upper management. In the focus of this study are these "terminators". The aim of the study is to find something which is crucial in the managers' stories concerning the interaction situation, and in that way to form a description and a conceptualization of it. It can be thought that the description to be

developed is by nature of such kind which may be even generally known but poorly realized (Alasuutari 1994, 207). The study can be characterized to belong to the field of so-called qualitative research (e.g. Gummesson 1991, Tesch 1990). Although it is problematic to define unambiguously qualitative research, the crucial thing about it can be considered to be that the attempt is not to explain social phenomena, especially human behaviour, on the basis of common laws of causality. The concept of meaning becomes the central matter, and the aim is to study the interaction situation through managers' stories, through meanings and interpretations given to them. The concept of understanding can be used to describe the description and interpreting of the situation which I, as a researcher, have done in this study.

As it can be supposed that the situation may include ethical problematic, the interaction situation is tried to be understood from the ethical perspective. Therefore, the research is limited, on the basis of the purpose of the study, to the field of descriptive ethics which means that the description in this respect is neutral by nature. Saarinen (1985, 414) defines the ethics to be a division of philosophy, including studies on the nature, origin and the field of the good and the bad, the right and the wrong, the justice and other concepts related to these ideas. The concepts ethics and morals are very close to each other. The morals are in general understood to be the actual way of thinking and acting of the society, a community or an individual, whereas the ethics is understood to be a research of morals. The concept morals philosophy is in general used in the same sense as the concept ethics. (See e.g. Turunen et al. 1995, 123 - 124). According to Takala (1993, 4), the adjective concepts moral and ethical have several different meanings within different linguistic areas. These concepts can also be understood as synonyms to each other. In this study I have used the concepts to compensate each other, in order to avoid repeating them. In the field of management research this study is limited to managerial behaviour which in this context is scrutinized through the manager's own words. This means that the focus is in a manager's way to express verbally his thinking and feelings of experiences. That is why the study has, besides the ethical perspective, the socio-psychological perspective, too.

METHODS

The purpose of this study is to describe and understand the verbal expressions that an individual uses of his experience.

Understanding in this context means studying the phenomenon "inside". This involves that I try to go deeply into the subject. For instance deep interviews can be used in order to become deeply acquainted and understand the everyday life of the interviewees (e.g. Kortteinen 1982, 295). In this study I have used the concept deep interview, and from the viewpoint of the approach and research task of this study it is well-founded to use the data collection method in question because it makes it possible for the person under examination to tell as freely and openly as possible about the target phenomenon (interaction situation). Adapted from Hirsjärvi & Hurme (1985, 31 - 32), deep interview has in this study been defined as a method where an individual can express his thoughts as widely and deeply as possible in a verbal form which is the natural way for a human being to express himself.

There are two managers to be interviewed, and when selecting them my aim was to find two managers of a different type and with different experiences from reductions in order to get as many-sided and rich picture as possible (cf. e.g. Holstein & Gubrium 1995, 26). The names Pekka and Martti K. are used of the interviewees which names each of them has given for himself. There were two conscious selection criteria on the basis of which the interviewees differ from each other. First, the aim was to choose two differing persons as regards the experience from the reductions in personnel, one of the interviewees with a long experience in several firms, whereas the other only had short experience from the subject and his experience is limited to one firm in a merging situation. It was assumed that the experience was significant as regards the manager's ideas and insights (cf. Cox & Kramer 1995, 170). The interviewees also differ from each other as for their position in the organization; one of them is working as a managing director and the other belongs to middle management. It was estimated that the difference in the position would also have impact on the managers' ideas. The interviewees also differ from each other with respect to where they have geographically carried out the reductions. One of them has got his experiences from a big city whereas the other's experiences are from country towns. This difference was not, however, an outcome of a deliberate selection but became apparent accidentally in the course of the research. The common thing for the interviewees is that the personnel they have reduced has a position of a superior in a firm, in this case in the bank.

Both managers were interviewed once in May 1996. Both

interviewees willingly agreed to an interview. Discussion with Pekka took 65 minutes and with Martti K. 70 minutes. For both interviews, a peaceful place was reserved; with Pekka the dialogue was conducted in his home and with Martti K. in the conference room at his working place. The interviews were recorded for which a permission was obtained from both managers at the beginning of the interview, and the conversation in the tapes was transcribed by myself word by word (cf. Hirsjärvi & Hurme 1985, 109). By using recording I wanted to make sure that the data and the atmosphere of the interview situation would be stored as precisely as possible. In addition to that, recording offered me the possibility to concentrate on the conversation instead of making notes. The tapes of the interview were transcribed immediately after the interviews which was made as quickly as possible, and in addition to that, I made immediately after the interviews a reflection of the interview and of the impression I had got from it into the research log.

RESULTS

The interaction situation told by the interviewed managers seem to involve tensions. These tensions concern the truthfulness of the arguments given to the persons to be terminated and this becomes significant issue in the managers' stories, in other words the way how the managers explain and argue the termination in the situation where a person is told that he/she will be dismissed. Martti K.: "I have told quite straight that the situation is that your mode of action does not suit the future culture of the bank."

Martti K.: "Let's say that it is told allaround the firm that there are economic and productional backgrounds, and then it is told that so and so many jobs will remain and then that the mode of action of this firm will be so and so."

Pekka: "And I told everybody that everything has been really fine with you but this ranking system has to be set and so on."

In the descriptions of the interviewed managers come up so-called formal arguments which are told to those who will be terminated and by means of which the termination is explained and justified in the discussion with the person in question. These formal arguments for the decision-making are connected with the legislation and with the official goals of the firm. The situation becomes morally problematic when it is questioned whether the person to be terminated ought to be told the truthful

reason or whether it ought to be padded out, and if padding out seems to be necessary, the reason why ought to be told.

Pekka: "It is not just that you quit people but it is a much wider question and ... and it ought to be done as worthily of a human being as possible. As it is, so ... I felt that I expressly, in quotation marks, was telling lies in those situations. There were such clear cases that the person already had shown symptoms of burn-out or, let's say, that he was unskilled or lazy or ... the time had in a way already passed a certain bank manager. I told them, too, that you have had a very meritorious, good career and that you have done your job just finely and so on - these words did not cost anything to me. In quotation marks to lie to them ... about the facts, that you have really been a good bank manager and, and ... if this could give some consolation to them."

Martti K.: "As you very well understand, you are a good fellow, you are skilled, competent, but the situation is so that you are not able to do the job there with the clients, you have good theoretical background. In other words, I have told directly what the criterion for the selection has been, the reason why another person was chosen. And I have also started from the point that I have told the people that when they are looking for another job or something like that, I shall also say the same words if they want that I tell the same things than to that person."

Martti K.: "Well, you cannot help telling such softening things. Like if we in some other job can use you we certainly shall contact you. I have tried to avoid that and in general I have stressed that I do not promise anything about future, that is I do not want to lie."

It appears from the interviewees' descriptions that in some cases it is possible to tell "softening lies" to the people who are to be terminated. In other words, the managers' explanation which has been experienced to be truthful can be padded out to a certain degree and hence the good points and merits of the person to be terminated are brought up more markedly in relation to such arguments which are understood to be truthful but in fact are negative, like lack of professional skill or maladjustment to changed circumstances. The matter becomes moral by nature if the words intentionally are meant to lead the person to be dismissed astray (Bok 1981, 24). Bok (ibid., 33) defines as a lie such an intentionally deceitful message which has been expressed in a verbal form. Also Howard (1992, 5) defines that premeditation and verbal expression belong to lying. According

to Bok's and Howard's definitions there is premeditation in the verbal explanations given by the interviewed managers to the persons to be dismissed. But how do the managers justify their deeds? Pekka for instance says that "Who cares, but if it helps people then so what, it is true, there have been some cases like this and, well, they have been happy and relieved, I envy them". And then he describes his experience with words "These angelic lies that you have been a damned good bank manager, although you were not, and as it does not pay me anything if something is left to people, the end result is anyway the same, you have been dismissed. So if you can do it in a softer way, why not". Martti K. for his part says that "Well, when this kind of discussion starts it usually begins with the statement that you are worse than somebody else, told somehow more beautifully, that somebody else is a better alternative when thinking of future." The different kind of excuses given by the interviewed managers for their embellishments may be considered to belong to such a group presented by Bok (1981, 104) where excuses present some moral reason for the lying and where the reason is explained to make embellishing permissible in certain circumstances. Most people are looking for reasons when they get into difficult situations, and in these situations they try to convince themselves and others that untruth is justified. Bok (ibid., 105 - 116) argues that the reasons which people use when they are defending untruth and affirming their action to others and themselves can be grouped as follows. Reasons may be given in order to avoid damage and to bring benefit, to promote truthfulness, in which cases there is always the thought connected with the reasons given that they correct or prevent certain untruthfulness or that they contribute to the pleading of benefits. In addition to this, the reasons may be linked with the fact that an individual argues that he is lying in order to cover the truth. The reasons described by the interviewed managers are, adapting Bok's grouping, in connection with the desire of avoiding damage, and therefore embellishment is considered to be acceptable since when using it, a more serious damage can be avoided. This more serious damage means to managers that the person to be dismissed shall not be "hit" more than what is necessary. In other words, the dismissal as such is already a difficult experience for the person to be terminated therefore the interaction ought to be made as "pleasant" as possible. The more serious damage is in the managers' opinions connected with the threat that an individual may break down because of the termination with embellishment this threat may be diminished. Pekka, for example, states that "I have felt that everything seemed like white lies in that situation, the most important thing

was that the person in question can keep himself together and stick out the situation." Or Martti K. describes the situation by saying that "I always have a bad feeling when I know that a person in a way loses his whole world, at least for a moment". Except that to the reasons given by the interviewed managers can be given the purpose of avoiding damages, they are also connected with altruistic features, and the altruism means to the interviewed managers that they are acting for the best of another human being, in this case for the person to be dismissed (cf. Saarinen 1994, 242), and the idea is to support and protect the individual. In the altruism shown by the managers are features of the so-called golden rule of ethics which can be expressed e.g. in the positive form "treat other people in the same way as you wish they would treat you" (e.g. Velasquez 1982, 66), or in the negative form "do not deal with other people in a way which you would not wish to be used with you" (e.g. Bok 1981, 125). This means the idea of reciprocity and that the interviewed managers make their imbellishments justified since they also put themselves, besides their own position, into the position of those persons who are the objects of the imbellishment. According to Airaksinen (1987, 118) altruism can be considered a demanding standpoint which requires sacrifices, and the price which the managers pay for it is a deed against truthfulness. The issue concerning the dilemma about truthfulness and altruism experienced by the interviewed managers is interesting, and the especially interesting thing is what may be in the background of the question. Why does the manager soften his explanations and act untruthfully? Altruism is one explanation and it seems that the managers think altruistically in the situation in question but as an only explanation it is "loose".

One problem in altruism is that the distinction between it and its opposite, the egoism, is not easy or self-evident (cf. Saarinen 1994, 242). Egoism is in ethics understood as a discipline according to which an individual protects his own interests and rights, and for instance according to psychological egoism it is natural that an individual strives for his own good (Airaksinen 1987, 118 - 119). Ethical egoism for its part starts from the thought that it is in an individual's own interest to act in a way which takes into account other people's interests (Saarinen 1994, 249). Do the manager's "softening" arguments only start from an altruistic motive or do they also involve egoism?

When the interaction in the dismissal situation is studied, as the starting point can be taken that an individual himself chooses the way how he behaves himself in an interactive situation, i.e. his behaviour can be understood to be intentional. For this

choice are meaningful the goals which the individual is striving for with his action, and the individual forms, on the basis of his earlier experiences, rules which guide him in his behaviour. These rules are called cognitive schemas or expectations and are linked with his goals of behaviour and way of action. (See Infante et al. 1990, 187 - 188, O'Hair et al. 1995, 57 - 58.). These schemas can be considered to be mental models by means of which an individual makes things significant and understandable, in other words, the individual develops schemas which help him to understand how things function or foresee how they ought to function. Schemas can be grouped in different ways when it is possible to differentiate e.g. the schemas related to roles and situations. The schemas related to roles mean expectations which are connected with a certain role and through that also with the behaviour of the actor, e.g. of the manager in his role. The schemas connected with situations for their part show how a certain situation or event is estimated to proceed. (E.g. O'Hair et al. 1995, 58.) In the termination interaction situation this means that the manager giving notice may have or has some kind of a schema about how the termination discussion as a whole, for instance, proceeds and what kind of roles the parties of the discussion may have in that situation. The manager's schema of the termination may be "developed" or "undeveloped", depending on whether it is based on previous subjective experience or there is no experience, in which case the schema could be called developed or undeveloped (cf. Vuori 1995, 68 - 69).

Of the interviewed managers Pekka is the one who carries out terminations for the first time in connection with downsizing. He has little experience of them whereas the other interviewee, Martti K., has a lot of experience from several years. Pekka's schema can in this respect be considered "less developed" and it is therefore more difficult for him to foresee how the interaction situation will proceed. Martti K. for his part has experience of many kinds of terminations carried out in connection with downsizing and his schema in this respect is wider, or, "more developed". In other words, he has acquired insight and understanding of all that the interaction situation may bring forth and what kind of action model and role in different kinds of situations may prove to be purposeful. As also Martti K. himself states "It was in the beginning such rash action" and "It was lack of experience and fear, fear of the situation". When the manager gets more experience his schema of the situation becomes more precise and he in a way learns to control the situation on the basis of the feedback which experience gives

him. When the schema is "undeveloped", in other words there is no experience or it is only insignificant, the actor is unsure and this uncertainty causes fear of what may happen and how the manager himself ought to control the situation in such a way that proper termination would be carried out.

In other words: What is the connecting factor to this fear? At least the fear is connected with the control of the situation, i.e. the manager is afraid of that as a consequence of the termination the person to be terminated "loses his head" or "collapses" and the situation in a way slips out of hands outside a "normal" interactive situation. The manager more or less fears that he loses the control of the situation and thus the situation might in a way "escape" to such an area which he perhaps does not control. In this kind of situation a manager who has only little experience "softens" the arguments more, and in this sense imbellishment describes the way in which he tries to keep the situation in control. Littlejohn (1996, 275 - 276) examines in his work dealing with human communication the way how to manage a conflict. Although he starts from the assumption that people develop their own "theories" to control the conflict he presents, however, with Sillars (1986) as his support, three main groups into which the "theories" developed by people as a rule can be placed. These groups are the avoiding of conflict, competitive behaviour and behaviour aiming at cooperation. The avoiding of conflicts refers, among other things, to indirect information where it is a question of behaviour where the person is afraid of being truthful, and the "softened" reasonings given to the person to be terminated can be seen to represent this group. The imbellishment or "softened" reasonings which can be understood to be indirect communication thus function as a strategy through which the possibility of a conflict connected with the interaction situation can be avoided. The important thing is how far the manager has been able to develop the schema regarding the situation around the interaction situation because it has to be known how the manager meets the situation and what kind of arguments he gives the person to be terminated.

Seen from the ethical point of view it can be argued that imbellishment which has been described to be altruistic also occurs in ethical egoism in the sense that through imbellishment it is attempted to control, except for the managing of the person to be terminated, also the person's own fears and managing in the situation, and this imbellishment becomes emphasized if the schema of the situation is "undeveloped", because by

imbellishing the manager can try to keep the situation within the framework of normal polite interaction. The schema develops when the manager gets new experiences of the interaction situations of terminations, and then the importance of imbellishment as a means to control the situation diminishes and the manager tries to give the arguments to the person to be terminated more directly and he moves, following Sillars' (1986) grouping to the strategy which emphasizes more cooperation and through that direct meeting of an eventual conflict of the control of a conflict. Then it could be said that he has learnt, on the basis of the feedback from the experience, to control the situation to a growing degree which means development in the level of the manager's professional skill as far as terminations are concerned, as well as possibilities to think over the termination discussion beforehand.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to describe the interaction situation between a manager and a person to be terminated. This interaction situation meant the termination discussion between the parties and it was examined as an experience of a manager through the stories the case managers told to me. The face to face interaction situation seemed to be very demanding for the manager and it involved tensions and contradictions. These tensions can be described as a truth-telling dilemma of a manager. This means that the manager has a tendency to tell "softening" stories to persons to be terminated in order to control the interaction situation and to keep it as "normal" as possible. The managers give altruistic reasons for their "softening" stories in the situation but it seems, however, that there is ethical egoism, too, included in the situation. The manager more or less fears that he loses the control of the situation and thus the situation might in a way "escape" to such an area which he perhaps does not control. Telling "softening" stories can be interpreted to be an indirect communication strategy and through this strategy the manager attempts to control his own fears in the situation. According to the interviews I made in this study the level of a manager's schema of the interaction situation seems to be important for the use of the indirect communication strategy. I argue on the basis of the results if the manager gets experience of the situation and his schema develops, his communication strategy shifts to the direction of a direct communication strategy. This direct strategy means that it is easier for the manager to meet the difficult face to face situation directly without explanations and

thus "softening" stories are less needed by him. This argument means that in the situation where reductions in personnel related to organizational downsizing are planned there should be orientative training for the managers ("terminators"). Through the training the manager's schema can be developed and he can decide on the basis of the more developed schema what the ethically sound communication strategy in the interaction situation is.

According to the purpose of the study, my attempt was to describe the interaction situation in the way the managers tell about it through their stories. The study was inductive in nature and I tried to understand the situation as holistically as possible. Following this line of thought, the purpose was to describe and to understand the phenomenon, not to explain it causally, which gives a good reason to choose a qualitative approach as a method. The starting point was that the phenomenon under examination and the chosen methodological approach correspond to each other. Methodological approach in a study is not as such reliable or unreliable but the reliability is determined in relation to the target phenomenon of the study and the purpose which has been set (e.g. Perttula 1995, 40). Since the qualitative approach is analogous to the purpose of the study, the chosen approach can in this respect be considered to be right one and reliable, and also the basic solutions of the study to be coherent as regards the goal and the method. Defining the study to examine a manager who is a "terminator" and further his experiences is one perspective to the problem field concerning reductions in personnel. Here the idea is that the study is not pursuing an "objective" truth of the target phenomenon but trying to bring forth a certain viewpoint of a matter. The thought is accepted according to which there are several truths and perspectives, and different individuals have their own experiences of the subject and in this sense their own truth (cf. Tynjälä 1991, 388). In this study I have interpreted and conceptualized the experiences of managers and the description and the conceptualization can be called a "local theory". Then the aim is not to make wider generalizations but only to make the target phenomenon, such as the actors have experienced and described it, contextually understandable (cf. Alasuutari 1994, 209). On the other hand, we can also think that the conceptualization created during the study may have even more general explanatory value, although this was not aimed at in the study. How widely the interpretation given can be generalized, that is the question which every reader may weigh in his mind by comparing the interpretation with his own experiences and in

that way to consider the possibilities to apply the results to other issues than the context studied here (ibid., also Tynjälä 1991, 390).

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