LEADERSHIP IN IMPROVEMENT OF AN ORGANISATION – A PERSPECTIVE OF DIGNITY BASED PRACTICES

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Purpose: Identifying the impact of dignity based leadership practices on organisational improvement according to the EFQM model.

Design/methodology/approach: The theoretical layer of the article was developed on the basis of literature review. Original research was carried out by means of a questionnaire, using the CAWI technique. It covered experts – assessors of the Polish Quality Award.

Findings: The study concluded that implementation of dignity based leadership practices promotes success in improving contemporary organisations.

Research limitations/implications: A limitation of the research conducted is the questionnaire as the adopted research method. Despite its many advantages, it makes it impossible to carry out a deeper analysis in terms of identifying the causes or wider context of the issues described. However, the opinions obtained should be considered valuable due to participation in the survey of experts referring to their experience in assessing organisations.

Practical implications: The conclusions highlight specific dignity based leadership practices identified from the research to foster success in improving contemporary organisations.

Originality/value: The literature review shows that the concept of dignity based management has not been explored in the context of the EFQM model. In this area, the study fills an existing research gap.

Keywords: leadership, dignity based management, EFQM model.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

The turbulent and unpredictable environment forces modern organisations to improve continuously. Various management models and concepts have emerged and are being implemented as an aid in the pursuit of excellence, both in management theory and practice. As M. Bugdol (Maciąg, Bugdol, Peter-Bombik, 2021) notes, continuous improvement characterises all contemporary pro-quality management concepts, which include Total Quality

Management (TQM), Lean Management or Kaizen, hence the concept of excellence and improvement is associated with quality. There is no doubt that one of the best known models focused on improvement is the EFQM Excellence Model. The model incorporates the principles of TQM, was developed by the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) and is considered to be a comprehensive self-assessment tool, the results of which allow the identification of areas that require improvement measures. It also forms the basis for both national and regional quality awards (Uygur, Sümerli, 2013). All that led to adoption of this model as the reference point for the research undertaken for this study. Literature review further reveals that, among a number of identified difficulties in the implementation of TQM and the EFQM model, some of the most significant ones relate to leadership issues (Soltani, Pei-Chun, Gharneh, 2005; Saizarbitiria, Casadesus, Marimon, 2011; Nenadal, 2020). This is because leaders have a special role in entities striving for improvement, and their actions are visible at all levels and in all parts of the enterprise (EFQM Model..., 2021). One can therefore speak of quality leadership, which encompasses the attitudes, behaviours and actions of leaders committed to improving a quality-oriented organisation.

Referring to total quality management, A. Blikle states that the reason why these practices are not as popular as they deserve to be 'does not lie in the complexity of procedures and tools, but in the difficulty of implementing partnership based leadership' (Blikle, 2018, p. 272). Such leadership model emerges from the concept of dignity based management, which addresses the issue of value-based leadership by pointing to a leader who manages in a way that is focused on people, their needs and the values they hold (Blikle, 2017). Managing employees based on the motive of self-dignity, triggers employee self-control and generates commitment to work (Kosewski, 2012; Sypniewska, 2016; Blikle, 2018). Thus, it is pointed out that 'if an organisation sets the quality of its product as a goal, one needs to start by linking work to the need for keeping dignity' (Kosewski, 2012, p. 41). Consequently, the concept of dignity based management can provide interesting clues in solving problems in the area of quality management and organisational improvement. The literature review undertaken has furthermore identified that the concept has not been explored in the context of the EFQM model. Identifying the impact of leadership based on dignity focused practices on organisational improvement according to the EFQM model - which is the aim of the following study - is therefore part of an existing research gap. For the purpose of this paper, the following research questions were posed:

1. What is the importance of particular dimensions of quality leadership in the process of improving contemporary organisations?
2. What are the most common leadership/leaders related difficulties in the context of organisational improvement?
3. What is the relevance of selected dignity based leadership practices to success in organisational improvement?

The research undertaken has helped to develop recommendations for researchers and practitioners concerned with leadership and quality in organisations.

2. Leadership in the EFQM Excellence Model

The EFQM Excellence Model is quite popular in Europe for assessing organisational performance in the context of improvement (Wisniewska, Grudowski, 2014). It consists of three components: excellence principles, assessment criteria and RADAR logic (Nenadal, 2020); its current version was developed in 2019. The solutions adopted in the EFQM Model 2020[1] are intended to help organisations respond to the challenges of the future, which arise, among other things, from the need to introduce a collaborative and participative leadership style, to include the benefits of managing employee diversity and to develop a culture based on value co-creation (EFQM Model..., 2021). Research suggests (e.g. Haffer, 2011; Martusewicz, 2017; Wisniewska, Grudowski, 2014) that implementation of the EFQM model can bring many benefits to organisations, with, as Arkadiusz Wierzbic (2019, p. 13) notes, the primary one being 'the long-term, sustainable success of the organisation expressed not only in money, but also in satisfaction with stakeholder relationships'.

The EFQM model approach to management proves that companies achieve the greatest effects when they focus on customers, employees and social impact through the use of leadership as a driving force for strategy formulation, people management, partnerships, resource and process management (Skrzypek, Grela, Piasecka, 2019). Leadership should therefore be seen as a key factor for achieving success in quality improvement (Roberts, 2004; Garg, Mishra, 2015; Martusewicz, Michaluk, 2017). Indeed, leaders in quality-oriented organisations should possess specific competencies, translating into action that inspires people to continuously improve. Leadership understood in this way can be described as qualitative leadership and considered in various dimensions. Marek Bugdol (2018) proposes five dimensions of quality based leadership: ethical, social, strategic, instrumental and operational. Bearing in mind that the EFQM model is used as a self-assessment tool in various quality awards, M. Bugdol, based on the examples of organisations that have participated in the Polish Quality Award (PNJ)[2] competition, identifies three key characteristics of leaders guiding companies towards quality success. These are: the ability to form good relationships with the environment, a high level of social skills, and a high level of knowledge of management concepts and methods.

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[1] Since the current version of the model was presented in October 2019, the following terms can be found in the literature: 'EFQM Model 2019', 'EFQM Model 2020', 'new EFQM Model'. This paper adopts the name: 'EFQM Model 2020'.

[2] The Polish Quality Award (PNJ) is a distinction given to organisations for implementing the philosophy of management through quality, i.e. Total Quality Management. The core of TQM are the premises and principles of excellence and improvement described by the classics of quality management. The award has been in operation since 1995. Evaluation of organisations entered in the competition is based on the assumptions of the EFQM Excellence Model and the resulting quality criteria; it is carried out by assessors on the basis of analysis of the application containing self-assessment of activities and visits to the enterprise. More details: Wiśniewska, Grudowski, 2014.

In summary, it must be assumed that factors relating to management commitment to improvement processes are essential for organisations striving for excellence.

3. Dignity based leadership practices and organisational improvement

Interpreting dignity as a moral value – exercised in interpersonal relationships – makes it possible to see the organisation as a place for denying or enhancing employee dignity (Zawadzki, 2018). Caring for another person's dignity requires accepting their identity and differences, recognising them as an integral human being, privileged to express their views, beliefs and be accepted (Hicks, 2016). Caring for dignity implies a willingness to help others meet their real needs for the development of humanity and ethical behaviour (Melé, 2014; after Zawadzki, 2018). Respect for dignity in an organisation should therefore be linked to creating a culture of integrity, treating employees as trustworthy and having the potential for independence, and appreciating (expressing recognition to) them (Zawadzki, 2018). Actions to ensure the well-being of others – including fulfillment of their talents, creativity, sense of responsibility and community development – should not be a selectable option, but an obligation for every employee, especially those in authority (Zawadzki, 2018).

A. Blikle (2018) points out that a 'TQM covered company' should create a friendly working environment, based on partnership, cooperation, trust and openness, in which motivation for work comes from dignity related motives. However, the same author emphasises that building such an environment is not easy due to the difficulties in implementing partnership based leadership, caused by the need to change employee mentality embedded in the organisational culture (Blikle, 2018). Adoption of dignity related practices by managers and exercise of values-based leadership accelerates the processes of changing staff mentality. However, one must bear in mind that consistent, continuous application of the concept of management based on values requires not only high functional managerial competence, but also high emotional intelligence and - above all - tremendous strength of character. This set of attributes creates an authentic leader, whose actions and proclaimed views demonstrate no contradiction, who acts on the basis of their professed positive values, shaping their personal goals in line with those of the organisation (Griffin, 2004; Urbany, 2005; after: Lewandowski, 2010). The leader's transparency gives them the moral right to require subordinates to adhere to the organisation's accepted values and influences effectiveness of their actions. This is because ethical attitudes of leaders related to genuine concern for the well-being of employees result in similar attitudes of subordinates towards colleagues (Kozminski, 2013), which creates an environment of community in the organisation that is conducive to improvement processes.

4. Own research methodology

Two research methods were used for the purposes of this study: literature review and survey. The paper covers a fragment of a broader study in which the research tool was a survey questionnaire consisting of 9 questions of a closed (5 questions) and open (4 questions) nature. The following academic publications were used in developing the questions for this paper:

- regarding the dimensions of leadership (Bugdol, 2018),
- regarding dignity based leadership practices relevant to achieving success in organisational improvement (Griffin, 2004; Hryniewicz, 2007; Lewandowski, 2010; Blikle, 2014, 2018).

The closed questions included a Likert scale. Open-ended questions asked experts about the difficulties of organisational improvement in relation to leadership.

Selection of the research sample was intentional. The subject of the survey was the assessors of the Polish Quality Award. The CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviews) technique was used - a link to the research questionnaire prepared using Google Forms Wizard was provided to the experts. The survey was conducted in the period of March-April 2024. A complete return of fully filled in questionnaires was obtained.

5. Discussion of own research results

Research sample

It was assumed that experts in the field of pro-quality organisational improvement, with knowledge of the EFQM model and practical experience in assessing the functioning or implementation of this model in organisations striving for excellence, would participate in the survey. It was assumed that the selection criteria were met by persons evaluating organisations applying for the Polish Quality Award (PNJ). The research questionnaire was therefore addressed to seven PNJ assessors who had performed this function in the past (4) or at the time of the survey (3)[3].

Dimensions of quality leadership and organisational improvement

The aim of the first question posed to the PNJ assessors was to diagnose importance of the various dimensions of quality leadership in the improvement process of contemporary organisations. In formulating this question, five dimensions of quality leadership were distinguished following M. Bugdol (2018):

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[3] In the past, the term 'juror' of the Polish Quality Award was used more commonly. Currently the name used is 'assessor'. The assessment of organisations submitted to the PNJ competition is currently carried out by three assessors only.

- ethical - related to competences necessary to create ethical values; it requires the ability to analyse values, search for their sources and find places with a clear deficit of values;

- social - manifested by the ability to create the social roles required by a particular management concept;

- strategic - resulting from the need to create a quality strategy and policy and set goals in the quality area;

- instrumental - involving familiarity with quality tools, the ability to use and communicate them to other employees;

- operational - manifested by the ability to implement quality systems and excellence model criteria.

The experts were asked to rate the importance of the leadership dimensions listed above on a scale of 1-5 (where 1 means: 'not important', 2 – 'not very important', 3 – 'moderately important', 4 – 'important', 5 – 'very important'). The option 'difficult to say' was also possible. The responses were as follows:

- ethical dimension: five experts indicated the answer: 'very important', two indicated 'important',

- social dimension - the experts evaluated this dimension identically to the ethical dimension: five experts indicated the answer: 'very important' and two – 'important',

- strategic dimension: all experts marked the answer: 'very important',

- instrumental dimension: four experts indicated the answer: 'very important', two – 'important', one expert marked the answer: 'difficult to say',

- operational dimension: five experts indicated the answer: 'very important', and two – 'important'.

According to the PNJ assessors surveyed, all dimensions of quality based leadership were important or very important in the process of organisational improvement, while it can be noted that the greatest importance was attributed by all experts to strategic leadership.

Difficulties in improving organisations in the context of leadership

The next question in the questionnaire was open-ended and concerned difficulties in improving the organisation in the context of leadership perceived as an assessment criterion in the EFQM model; it is worth noting that in the previous version of the EFQM model dating back to 2013, the leadership area was referred to as: 'leadership', while in the EFQM 2020 model it referred to as 'organisational culture and leadership'. The experts were asked to identify the three most frequently perceived difficulties in the above area that occurred in the organisations they assessed. Based on the answers received, one can conclude that the difficulties in improving the organisation were due to the following leadership behaviours:

- declarativeness of leaders in relation to actions taken,

- inability to unite subordinates and involve them in the organisation's goals, vision and strategy,

- lack of proper coordination of activities, including insufficient coordination of improvement related activities,
- lack of knowledge of people management methods and tools, failure to create conditions for stimulating creativity,
- basing leadership on hierarchy and control instead of participation,
- failure to provide adequate funding for improvement activities, including staff training,

while it should be added that two experts did not indicate any difficulties in improving organisations on the leadership side.

Dignity based leadership practices and success in organisational improvement

Another question addressed by the surveyed experts of the Polish Quality Award concerned the importance of selected leadership behaviours for success in organisational improvement. The answers used a rating scale of 1-5 (where 1 means: 'did not matter', 2 – 'low importance', 3 – 'medium importance', 4 – 'high importance', 5 – 'very high importance'). Table 1 shows how the responses to this question evolved.

Table 1.

Selected dignity based leadership practices in terms of importance for success in organisational improvement[1]

Dignity based leadership practices	1 - does not matter	2 - low importance	3 - medium importance	4 - high importance	5 - very high importance	Difficult to say
democratic management style involving employees in problem analysis and decision making	-	-	2	2	2	1
not allowing rivalry between employees	-	-	3	2	1	1
example set by superiors of acting in accordance with values, their genuine commitment to work	-	-	-	2	4	1
conviction of managers that subordinates are capable of doing their job reliably, which means that they do not need to be constantly monitored	-	-	1	1	4	1
appreciation by superiors of employees' genuine commitment to improving their work	-	-	-	2	5	-
providing opportunities for managers to communicate openly and assertively, both in everyday operational situations and in emotionally challenging situations	-	-	1	2	4	-
transparent decision-making, especially at the highest levels of management	-	-	2	2	3	-

[1] - The table shows the number of experts selecting a particular answer.

Source: own compilation based on surveys conducted.

The majority of the leadership practices listed in Table 1 were given 'high' or 'very high' importance by the assessors, with the predominant belief being that these practices were of 'very high' importance. In contrast, among those listed, there were no leadership behaviours that were of low or no importance to success in organisational improvement, according to assessors and jurors.

In the assessment made, the greatest importance was attributed to superiors' appreciation of employees' genuine commitment to improving their work (a total of 7 indications of 'very high' and 'high' importance of these practices), superiors' setting an example of acting in accordance with values, their genuine commitment to doing their job (a total of 6 indications of 'very high' and 'high' importance responses regarding those practices) and managers' providing opportunities for open and assertive communication, both in everyday operational situations and in emotionally difficult situations (a total of 6 indications, similar to the previous case). There were also a total of 5 indications each from experts of the importance of: firstly, the belief of managers that subordinates are able to do their job reliably, which means that they do not need to be constantly controlled (4 responses suggesting 'very much' and one suggesting 'much' of the importance of such behaviours of leaders); and secondly, transparent decision-making, especially at the highest levels of management (3 responses suggesting 'very much' and 2 suggesting 'much' concerning the importance of these leaders' behaviours).

The greatest divergence in expert opinions was noted with regard to the question regarding impact of a democratic management style - involving employees in problem analysis and decision-making - on success in organisational improvement. Furthermore, the predominant view among assessors was that it was of medium importance not to allow rivalry between employees for success in organisational improvement.

6. Discussion of results

The considerations included in the empirical part of the article made it possible to answer the research questions posed. According to the experts surveyed, all dimensions of quality leadership played an important or very important role in organisational improvement, with strategic leadership being rated the highest. This dimension of leadership, combining visioning with operational management and perceived as the ability to continuously reorient and improve the organisation is a certain response to challenges of the volatile environment in which contemporary companies operate (see, for example, Radomska, 2010; Sajdak, 2013), hence all the PNJ experts surveyed rated strategic leadership as 'very important' in organisational improvement. Of particular relevance from the perspective of applying dignity based practices, ethical and social leadership were also rated as 'very important' or 'important' by the assessors.

According to the opinions of the PNJ experts interviewed, difficulties in the process of organisational improvement, located on the leadership side are nowadays primarily related to lack of certain social and technical competences of managers and their personal credibility. The empirical research carried out corresponds to findings related to the difficulties of organisational improvement based on the EFQM model reported in the literature. H.I. Saizarbitiria, M. Casadesus, F. Marimon (2011) and Haffer (2011) included the following factors among the main difficulties associated with implementation of the EFQM model: lack of organisational resources to work with the model, problems in assimilating the principles and criteria of the model, lack of awareness and commitment among management and employees, complexity of self-assessment or cost of implementing the model. What is more, according to Bugdol, it is 'the commitment to TQM that stems from the adopted strategy of action' (Bugdol, 2008, p. 359).

According to the PNJ assessors, success in organisational improvement was particularly fostered by such behaviours of leaders' as valuing their subordinates, leaders' ethical attitudes, their genuine commitment to work, managers' creation of continuous opportunities for open and assertive communication, trust towards subordinates, eliminating the need for constant control of their actions, as well as transparent decision -making, especially at the highest levels of management. The experiences of PNJ experts, as expressed in their opinions, confirmed the relationships described in the literature. Taylor (2005) points out that employee development is possible through managers' respect for their work, objective pursuit of fairness in the organisation, providing employees with a sense of fulfilment and sensitivity to their needs, including providing them with autonomy. Hicks (2011) draws attention to the role of thoughtful organisational communication, including the ability to express constructive criticism (without risking humiliation, even in the absence of convincing arguments) in building employee autonomy and respecting their freedom in the workplace. Hicks also points out that a high level of autonomy and freedom is a condition for the development of dignity, which allows for independent control of the organisation's actions. In an organisational culture based on values accepted by all employees, control becomes a form of 'trust -based supervision' (Górniak, 2015). According to M. Kosewski, 'The quality of any better organised work depends not on external control, but on the self-control of employees. In turn, this is achieved by restoring values to their rightful place in the work process, by linking it to satisfying the employee's need for dignity' (Kosewski, 2007, p. 121). Providing freedom of action (as a space for psychological freedom), made possible by the trust present in the organisation, fosters an increase in accountability for the tasks performed and achievement of the expected results, and even voluntary exceeding of the required standards (Górniak, 2015).

According to the survey, while there is little divergence in opinion, there was a lack of complete expert consensus on the question of the impact of a democratic management style - involving employees in problem analysis and decision-making - on success in organisational improvement (distribution of responses ranging from medium through high and very high

importance). However, respondents ruled out the unimportance or low importance of democratic management style on the improvement success of the organisations they surveyed. Similarly, literature suggests that concern for employee dignity requires managers to engage subordinates and give them responsibility for organisational tasks, allowing them to build their own self-worth through a sense of being socially useful and, at the same time, somehow independent of the decisions and actions of others (Sayer, 2007; Zawadzki, 2018). In turn, competing effectively in today's markets raises the need for organisations to openly share opinions and experiences (Blanchard, 2007). Assessors further advocated the medium, high and very high importance of not allowing rivalry between employees for success in organisational improvement, thus confirming the importance of community building in organisational improvement processes.

Undoubtedly, a certain limitation of the research carried out is the research method used. This is because questionnaire survey, despite its many advantages (e.g. time saving, wide range of data that can be obtained), makes it impossible to conduct a deeper analysis in terms of indicating the causes or wider context of the issues analysed. The opinions obtained should, however, be considered valuable, as the research involved experts referring to their experience in assessing organisations.

7. Conclusions

The research objective outlined at the beginning of this study has been achieved. Answers to the research questions posed were also obtained. Analysis of results of the empirical study conducted allows the conclusion that dignity based leadership practices are an important complement to organisational improvement activities undertaken on the basis of the EFQM model. Consistent implementation by managers of values that enhance the sense of dignity in employees fosters success in the improvement of contemporary organisations. In particular, dignity based leadership practices such as:

- being transparent, reliable and open to assertive communication,
- being genuinely involved in ongoing projects, including coordinating the improvement activities of staff teams,
- setting an example of behaviour in line with the values declared,
- appreciating those subordinates who actively engage in improvement processes and share their knowledge with others,
- fostering, formally and informally, an environment conducive to the involvement and creativity of employees by creating a community of responsibility based on trust, participation, delegation of decision-making powers and not on the control of subordinates.

Based on the analysis, further research directions can furthermore be identified. It would be interesting to identify factors influencing individual leadership behaviours, including the ethical and social dimensions of quality leadership, as well as to identify to what extent those leadership dimensions shape quality of the relationship between the superior and subordinates in the context of building their commitment to improvement processes. From a theoretical perspective, it would be useful to develop a system of leadership metrics to assess the level of readiness of an organisation to enter the Polish Quality Award competition in this area. Not only should those measures take into account issues concerning the substantive preparation of leaders (knowledge of principles, assessment criteria, RADAR logic), but also their approach to the idea of excellence or organisational values - diagnosed through the prism of dignity related values actually professed and followed by them.

Acknowledgements

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