

# **DOES THE USE OF PICTURES GIVE THE EMPLOYEES A VOICE IN VALUE-DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES?**

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## *Abstract*

In this paper we address management by values from the perspective of the employee. Much focus has been given the definition of values by organizations in recent years. However, the effect of defined values on the daily life and practice in workplaces is often quite limited due to the fact that employees are seldom engaged in defining, interpreting and implementing values. We argue that stronger participation from employees in these processes is needed if changes in practice shall appear. We focus especially on the use of pictures as a means to give employees a voice. Given the right conditions the use of pictures can to some extent create new ways of communicating at the workplace and make it easier for employees with little or no education to participate in the process.

The paper draws on experiences from a Danish research and development project 'New values in working life' initiated by The Danish Confederation of Trade Unions (LO). Five public and private organizations participated.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Values are on the agenda in most organizations these years. Within modern management theories, management by values is considered a way to create the flexible organizations needed to be competitive in the market. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century organizations have been met by increasing complexity and faster changing assignments. This means that work does not follow the principles of scientific management (hierarchies, control, management by rules and instructions) to the same extent as earlier. In stead, employees are expected to be able to make decisions themselves and operate fairly independently within certain frames, in other words to handle changes and unforeseen situations in a competent way (Dolan & Garcia 2002). At the same time, new forms of management are required. Leadership is considered more efficient than management and leadership should be conducted not only by managers but by employees as well. Definition of values is a way to establish such frames of operation, give room for leadership and regulate interactions at the workplace. Therefore, values act as guidance in a complex world.

At the same time contemporary organizations are concerned with the creation of meaningful and strong relations to central stakeholders; internal as well as external, i.e. employees, market and society/community. A growing recognition emerges that purely economic rationales are no longer sufficient to make organizations competitive. Stakeholders are not only occupied with economic aspects but include a large range of different perspectives in their assessment of organizations (Mac 2003). Corporate social responsibility, meaningfulness and development opportunities for potential and present employees are some of these perspectives. Thus values can play an important role in strengthening the relations to stakeholders.

The reasons for starting a value-process can be many. Some values-processes are primarily directed at external relations (e.g. branding), others focus on internal relations. Motives can for example be (Hagedorn-Rasmussen & Jagd 2007):

- Recruiting specific employee-groups (external)
- Branding towards potential customers and investors (external)
- New management tool; from management by rules to management by guidance and values (internal)
- Creating meaningfulness for employees thereby strengthening the ability to keep employees (internal, primarily)
- Building common understandings of goals and means within the organization (internal)

Management by values can take many different forms and the content and approaches in value-processes may vary. If a primary goal for management is to secure homogeneity in values and performances by employees, a need may be present to direct or even control the process of defining and interpreting values. Choosing the 'right' values and making sure that all employees accept and have a common understanding of the chosen values are crucial elements. The ability to tell right from wrong is essential and affects the methods and processes initiated. A focus on creating consensus and 'organizational spirit' will yet generate another process paying less attention to the actual values appointed and concentrating more on the development processes and the relations they build. Strengthening relations and developing things in common, 'the fruitful process',

are main goals in themselves. And should branding be on the agenda management can leave the main part of the work of defining values to marketing departments while the primary employees are not involved. However, employees should be able to see a connection between the values defined and current company practice in order to be trustworthy.

Thus, different strategies create different approaches. But even though one of the main ideas in managing by values often is the engagement of employees in organizational performance and development, values are often defined and implemented almost solely by management themselves or by staff members whereas employees seldom are engaged in these processes. A top-down approach is quite common. Thus the effect on the daily life and practice is often limited. Research shows that values make sense to and are practised by people participating in defining and/or interpreting them (Mac 2003). Organizations therefore face a challenge of finding ways to engage employees in value-processes and motivate them to take an active part in the implementation of chosen values. The use of pictures can be a means to achieve this goal.

The aim of this paper is to discuss how employees can be actively involved in value-processes in organizations and how the use of pictures can support and further this process. Considerations of the concept 'management by values' in general, its strengths and weaknesses in creating flexible, competitive organizations, could be interesting but is not part of the paper. Our approach is more methodological and in some ways normative: We believe that making employees take active part in defining, interpreting and implementing organizational values at their workplace at the same time will enhance chances of actually performing the values and the empowerment of employees. And we want to explore whether the use of pictures can support and enhance employee participation.

### **1.1 Structure of the paper**

In the next section, no. 2, we give a short presentation of a Danish research and development project, 'New values in working life', where five workplaces were engaged in value-based organizational development processes.

In section no. 3 we describe and analyze different ways of using pictures related to different purposes. Special focus is given to how pictures can be used to share individual values, select, interpret and implement organizational values and to illustrate, document and mirror practice in relation to values.

Finally in section no. 4, we discuss the importance of being alert to power relations and positions and discuss learning opportunities.

## **2. THE PROJECT**

This paper is based on experience from the project 'New values in working life'. The project was initiated by The Danish Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) and the aim was to engage employees in developing their work and organization, in casu to make it possible for employees to influence how values of the workplace were to be chosen and interpreted.

Five public and private organizations participated – kindergartens and day care run by local municipalities, and production enterprises. Different consultants were affiliated to

the workplaces in order to support and facilitate the development processes. Additionally, a research project followed the processes.

We (the authors) were consultants for one of the workplaces and furthermore responsible for planning and carrying through a series of seminars where managers, employees, consultants and researchers exchanged experiences and discussed gains and difficulties in their projects. Shared knowledge was condensed and resulted in a small series of publications aiming at giving inspiration and guidance to other workplaces working with value-based organizational development processes (i.e. Bottrup & Hjermove 2007, Hjermove 2007). However in this paper we draw on joint material and experience from the project including findings from the other consultants involved and from the research project conducted by Peter Hagedorn-Rasmussen, Søren Jagd and Jacob D. Rendtorff.

Using pictures in development processes and not the least analyzing and trying to comprehend their effects is a fairly new experience to us. Our field is organizational learning and development whereas assessment of strengths and weaknesses in the use of visual media is new land to us. Therefore we consider our experiences with visual pictures and the findings in this paper as part of an experiment. We are trying to explore how this method, the use of pictures, can be beneficial in value-based organizational development processes aiming at involving employees.

### **3. DIFFERENT PURPOSES OF USING PICTURES**

Many organizations face a challenge when engaging the employees in choice and implementation of organizational values. Especially semiskilled and unskilled workers can have difficulties participating in organizational development processes, even when invited. Being unfamiliar with expressing and discussing their own understandings, values, organizational strategies etc. these groups find it difficult to take an active part in such processes. We therefore wanted to investigate if their participation could be enhanced by the use of pictures.

Pictures may take several forms. We use the term in relation to physical products such as photographs, paintings and graphic expressions. Physical products have a substance and do not disappear like spoken words. They stay in the room, you can keep on referring to them even though the interpretation of the picture may be affected by the dialogue. As words written on a flip-over they can be shared and a common interpretation may be achieved.

We encouraged the participating workplaces to use pictures in meaningful ways as a part of their value-processes. We expected to find out how the use of pictures can contribute to value-based organizational development processes and which ethic principles are needed. We will pursue these questions in the following sections. We will start out by illustrating some of the situations in which pictures may be of use. The workplaces had quite different value processes and therefore varied purposes using the method. Some wanted to use pictures as a means of branding the workplace and document the work to the outside world. Others had an internal purpose of engaging the employees in improving the working life, making the goals clearer or giving opportunities of reflection.

In our descriptions we would have liked to actually show some of the pictures that has been used and discussed in the project. However, for several reasons it is not possible for us. Hopefully we will be able to give a few examples in our presentation.

### **3.1 Sharing individual values**

Pictures can be an efficient tool to gain understanding of the factors that employees and managers prioritize in working life. Through dialogue around the pictures similarities and differences in priorities unfold. The process makes it possible to point out which values are shared - and which turns out to be diverse. In order to achieve this each participant must be met in a respectful manner by the others to feel comfortable since he or she reveals a personal priority of great importance. To do this trust, curiosity and appreciation among the participants are required.

The process was carried out in a small work place (10 persons) in which everybody was asked to take a photo showing the individual source of job satisfaction. The pictures were put on display in a meeting room - and turned out to be rather diverse. For some the primary source was to make a difference to the people they work for. For others sparring and knowledge sharing was important.

Initially, it was quite difficult to figure out what the photographer intended the photos to show since they were unaccompanied by a heading or story. Therefore, each photo was commented upon. This session was carried out in two ways. Some photographers told themselves what they intended to illustrate. Other photographers left it for the spectators to guess the intentions behind the photos and were only later given the opportunity to explain themselves. The latter modality requires even more trust between the participants but also opens up new perspectives.

At this particular workplace the process ended at this very point. The primary goal was to have the employees socialize and enhance the awareness of the priorities of each other's working life; the individual values. The process was not aimed at pursuing organizational values. However the workplace could also have chosen the process to be a platform for the outlining of organizational values, to reflect upon whether or not the actual values were given enough space in working life, to compare the individual values with daily practice, to discuss possible clashes between different values and priorities, etc.

### **3.2 The selection of organizational values**

Pictures can act as a tool in the process of finding out how individual values correspond with the strategic challenges of the organisation. The result is hoped to be a common decision on the shared values of the workplace.

The following method has been tested in the process of a merger in a newly established group of managers. The objective of the process was to agree upon the shared values according to which the group wanted to work in the years to come. In other words, they were to find values that enabled the group to carry out the merger most efficiently and satisfactory.

Prior to the picture session several discussions had made it clear which strategic and managerial challenges the amalgamation implied.

Each manager was to choose a picture that illustrated what the manager emphasized in his or her own management style. The pictures were chosen from a book filled with beautiful landscapes. It was crucial that the selection was carried out instantly in order to encourage the managers to put forward their favourite ideas openly. Having chosen a picture each manager was to state the reason for his or her choice of picture.

As an example, one manager chose a picture displaying a selection of carpets spread out on the ground. The manager emphasized that the carpet illustrated plurality besides being a beautiful joint pattern in itself. The carpet was an example of beautiful handicraft. Making an allegory to management, the manager accentuated the importance of spotting the unique traits of one person while also acknowledging the individual contribution to the joint palette.

The process illustrated that the managers attached importance to different managerial styles. The group concluded that the overall capacity of the group was strengthened through this diversity. In order to maintain adherence to the values, the pictures are put on display every time the group is assembled.

In the course of this process the individual becomes more distinct and subtle in the description of her own values. Words are elaborated upon and the exact meaning of every value becomes clearer. This elaboration of words is conducive to a more precise distinction between the shared and individual values of the group. It goes without saying that trust among the participants is also vital using this method.

### **3.3 Interpretation and implementation of selected values**

Values are often abstract and generic words that hold different meanings for different employees and managers. An example: In one of our case-organizations the word 'respect' entailed 'respect of diversity' for one particular person whereas another person linked the word to 'respect of assets' meaning tools and other material goods. This person explained how important well kept tools were for doing a proper job and he therefore wanted his colleagues to take responsibility for caring for the materials and reporting if anything needed mending.

Managers and employees are also prone to view values from opposing perspectives. To managers, for instance, the notion of 'engagement' can be used when judging individual performances whereas employees may highlight the external factors needed for making a person engaged in an activity – factors that they often find that managers are responsible for providing. An example illustrates these different perceptions. At one workplace a manager has interpreted 'engagement' as a description of people who do their utmost. On the other hand, an employee in the same organization defines 'engagement' as a result of other people taking an interest in him on a personal level.

Thus the workplace needs to bring the interpretations into the limelight if values are not to remain empty words or given different interpretations. Using pictures is one such way to highlight dissimilarities.

One way of bringing the interpretations into view is to ask employees and management to take photos of a particular practice they find corresponds with their notion of a specific value. If for example the employee associates the value 'respect' with the colleagues acknowledging his need for order and neatness, he could take a photo of a wall on which every tool was exactly in place. His close colleagues are apt to have other

interpretations and other needs. The pictures need to be accompanied by a dialogue on the interpretations invoking a greater understanding between colleagues and management on how values are transformed into daily practice.

### **3.4 Illustration, documentation, and mirroring**

Pictures can be utilized to illustrate values and document how values can be put into practice. This usage can serve an external purpose and form part of a branding process as well as having internal purposes.

A number of the child care facilities have utilized pictures to showcase the meaning of the values and the educational theory of the kindergarten to the board, the parents and the municipality. In one kindergarten the kindergarten teachers chose to take pictures as illustrations of their values and show them to the parents thus inspiring a dialogue about their work.

In another kindergarten the photographer has chosen to document how the values of the kindergarten contribute to the children's development of the competencies 'contemplation' and 'resourceful'. The photographer has taken a series of photographs of both values to present the atmosphere as the situation evolved. The pictures have been put on display in the child care facility for parents, children and other staff to see and discuss upon. In the long term the kindergarten intends to illustrate all the required documentation material of the kindergarten e.g. educational plans and organizational schemes with pictures accompanied with stories.

Pictures can serve internal learning purposes as well. An example:

A manager in a kindergarten photographed a kindergarten teacher for two days. The photographs were to document her work day. The photographer captured the range of tasks a kindergarten teacher has to manage, the abruptions significant to the daily routine and the conflicts occurring e.g. when a child needs comfort and the telephone needs to be taken at the same time. Afterwards, the kindergarten teacher explained that being photographed had made her more conscious about her actions and that she had given more thought to her single actions during the process. Her professional reflections were enhanced. Another aspect that also became evident to the photographer and the kindergarten teacher was the fact that she was constantly attentive despite the pressure of work. Making this observation was not an intended part of taking the photographs but turned out to be a vital realization of the process for the participants. Professional knowledge and empathy have been chosen as values for the municipality. Hence, the photos demonstrated how the values are transformed into practice. The pictures are later to be displayed and discussed at a staff meeting, contributing furthermore to a professional discussion on the daily organization of work in the child care facility and how this correspond to the chosen values.

Another example revolves around an activity, the morning assembly. The photographer decided to take the photographs in order to facilitate a discussion on the values forming the basis of the morning assembly. How do the children perceive the assembly? The photographer took photos of several groups. The photographs illustrate that the children seem to have rather different perceptions of the assembly. In one group the boys seem pretty bored while the children in another group appear to be excited and engaged in the activity. This example shows that pictures can be instrumental to sticking to a specific

point. Despite the good intentions of the kindergarten teachers the boys being bored with the morning assembly can't be overlooked.

Simply watching the photos one can't know the exact context of the pictures taken and what was actually happening at the time. Maybe the boys had not been behaving well and the talk is about this issue? An element of caution therefore is needed in the interpretation of pictures. In this case the pictures were discussed upon by the group of staff. In this setting the kindergarten teachers explained the exact context in which the photos were taken. It illustrates the importance of carefully scrutinizing a situation in order not to make incorrect assumptions of what is taking place.

As the examples show pictures can act as eye openers to the photographer, the persons being photographed and the surrounding world. Pictures can further a learning process in which time is set aside for dialogue and reflection of values and the organizational and professional practice.

It is possible that these realizations could have occurred without a camera. Yet, through the camera a distance is created between the photographer and the observed person making it all the more easy to abstract from the sensation of being followed by others. When watching the world through a lens, an analytical distance appears giving access to discover the spontaneous. In effect, access is provided to seek new knowledge. When the photographer is furthermore engaged for a longer period of time opportunities rise to contemplate and spot new aspects of a situation.

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

In this final part we will discuss two issues we have just touched upon in the previous part: learning opportunities and power relations and positions. We want to qualify our reflections how learning can be furthered by the picture method and to discuss how power relations may affect the process.

##### **4.1 Learning opportunities**

In what ways can the use of pictures disturb the ways of thinking at the workplace and create new learning possibilities? Is this method just another way to create dialogue – is it anything special?

Experiences from the development project show that using pictures may create a more fruitful learning environment than traditional meetings and discussions. When we use well-known forms of sharing opinions as for example meetings with official agendas, we tend to end up reproducing existing power structures, understandings and ways of approaching certain themes. The usual people talk, what they say is pretty much what they usually do and is thus predictable, and finding ways to address themes in new and innovative ways is difficult. By using pictures we can create another frame for this communication and thus enhance learning opportunities.

For example, pictures may make it more legitimate to bring up issues that are difficult, complicated or even contested. Since the picture may be seen as part of the potential story the issues are in some sense connected to the picture and not directly to the persons raising them – and can even make it easier to carry through the discussions. This is partly due to the fact that pictures can be interpreted in different ways. An example: In one organization a group of employees and middle managers were gathered



to discuss central values in their department. They had a number of pictures to choose upon. Two picked out the same picture showing a rowboat with eight oarsmen and a cox cheering/shouting at them in his megaphone. One participant chose the picture because he appreciated the teamwork and the effort to pull in the same direction – although realities at the work place, as he said, did not quite live up to this vision. The other paid attention to the cox shouting and giving orders and underlined that he saw that as a part of the problem in the department: too much control and giving orders by management and too little trust and free scope for employees. A potentially intricate theme was brought up but at the same time made less dangerous partly because of the different perspectives made conceivable by the picture. This indicates that given the right circumstances of mutual trust between the different groups in the organization pictures may play a part challenging the organizational values and fundamental assumptions about the organization and its surroundings creating an opportunity for double loop learning (Argyris and Schön 1996).

Pictures can be used in two fundamentally different ways in organizational development processes: as an experience or as a text. When pictures are used as a text attention is paid to interpreting the message and the set-up. When pictures are used as an experience the focus is on which senses, feelings and thoughts the picture raises with the persons choosing, making or observing the picture. The observer may be able to see and sense the mood or situation in which the pictures were created hereby taking part in the story the picture-maker tells. By affecting the impressions, feelings and thoughts a deeper understanding may be created. The understanding may be deepened even further if the observer and the picture-maker get a possibility to share their feelings.

Pedersen (2003) points out pictures enhance an open-minded contact if mutual trust is present. When the preferences of the participants are related to their personal experiences and senses rather than to their intellectual opinions and judgments a potentially active learning space between the participating employees develops. When a person invites other persons to join his experience most people sees it as an access to a more personal side of the person which encourage the other participants to be open, curious and respectful. One explanation for this is a widespread convention that aesthetic experiences are personal and cannot be challenged. It is well known that the choice of a picture may be taken intuitively and may not imply an intellectual assessment. The aesthetic experience is first and foremost sensuous even if a combination of cognition and sense perception may be apparent. To question the experience that another person has of a picture or the importance he attributes to it is therefore not as easy as to question an intellectual argument.

Taking pictures involves a learning process for the photographer when choosing the theme and motifs, when becoming absorbed in the relevant situations having a distance behind the lenses to the theme, when evaluating the resulting pictures and making the final choice of which ones to exhibit. And afterwards learning continues when listening to the reactions of the other participants.

If the employees are to take pictures themselves they must be able to see or stage possible motifs and situations. Certain values may be difficult to illustrate or stage. A value such as 'empathy' may not be present when pictures are to be taken and is not easily staged. Even if empathy is present the value may not be transmitted through a picture without words. Often dialogue is needed in order to make sure that the intention is revealed.

In value processes pictures are a tool to create dialogue among the employees. The participants therefore also need to be able to communicate their story verbally. The pictures may support the story-telling and enable the employee to keep to the point and maintain his position even if the colleagues disagree. Having spent time taking and choosing the pictures the employee may feel better prepared and may have more courage to have his say. On the other hand the pictures may reveal personal opinions, feelings or moods which may take more courage to share with others than is usually needed in a discussion.

We conclude that pictures may provide new learning opportunities since the pictures may inspire new ways of meeting and of reflecting. Pictures may touch senses as well as thoughts hereby opening access to new types of interaction. In the following part we will stress how power relations may impede learning possibilities.

#### **4.2 The importance of power relations and positions**

Is the use of pictures in value-processes just another way of manipulating the employees and cross personal boundaries that should have been left untouched? Or is it a means to invite employees, including the semi-skilled and unskilled, to gain influence and participate actively in development of their workplace? These questions cannot be answered by an easy 'yes' or 'no' but rather calls for a thoughtful 'that depends...'. It depends very much on the overall goals for the value-process and whether or not the employees openly and voluntarily give their consent to participate in the value process and the picture method.

If the primary goal of the value process is to ensure homogeneity in attitudes and performances the employees may feel restricted and find it hard to take or choose proper pictures since they may unintentionally reveal differences of opinion – or at least be nervous about doing so. Having a closely defined job may also diminish the motivation for participation. Is the goal on the other hand to inspire dialogue and differences of opinion the employees will more freely be honest and creative in a picture process. A major issue is therefore which task the participant in a picture process is given and how the task is presented to the participant.

The picture process may consist of two situations: the picture production and the use of pictures.

Producing pictures implies decisions on who is to take pictures of whom or what and for internal versus external purposes. Colleagues may see pictures as a key to develop the workplace and gain influence, learn from each other and get to know each other better. When colleagues take pictures of valued aspects of the work and workplace a deeper understanding and mutual accept of differences may be created. In turn this may inspire the employees to develop new ways of performing the tasks and of communicating the values to the outside world.

In several cases of the development project the manager took pictures of the practise of their employees. When managers take pictures of the daily routines an element of power is present. The employee may feel self-conscious and vulnerable seeing his practise with the eyes of the manager. An agreement about destructing the pictures after their use may help since the awareness that the practise is preserved for a long time may be an extra strain on the photographed employees. To diminish this feeling the manager needs to make his intention explicit. If the intention of the manager is to use the pictures

to brand or document the good practise of the organization the employees might find it easier to be a subject. Is the intention to use the photographs for internal learning the employees may be uncomfortable with the presence of the manager and the camera not knowing in advance what may happen and therefore not knowing what is to be the object for the learning-situation. It seems as a good idea to discuss the pictures after the shooting and to ask the employee to approve of the specific use of specific pictures.

If the organization is characterized by finding flaws and lack of competence and the purpose of the picture process is to illustrate good and bad behaviour the employees may get uncomfortable and fear the consequences and will not be motivated by the process unless the flaws are made by others and cause irritation.

If colleagues take pictures of each other formal power relations are not present but informal status differences may play a part – or may be contested. Pictures may provide an opportunity to debate difficult issues and controversies among the colleagues. Pictures can give colleagues who are not used to saying much a new means to influence the process if they are capable of taking relevant pictures and dare to participate in the dialogue.

The situation in which the pictures are shown and used is also of importance. Again a decision needs to be taken concerning who is to participate in the use and what the purpose is.

When using pictures it is important to remember that a picture is not self explanatory, but needs to be accompanied by a heading or a story about what the picture intends to say. This is due to the fact that ‘the pictorial meaning is created in the meeting between the picture and the observer. The producer of the picture sees a certain segment of reality from a certain position and the observer puts in meanings that spring from her experiences and interests’ (Flensburg 2006). A dialogue between the participants is therefore of vital importance. The dialogue improves by agreeing upon certain rules of communication that puts curiosity, constructive feedback and mutual appreciation at the forefront.

However, position in itself is not conclusive for the effect. The context in which the pictures are taken and in which the pictures are used is equally – or more – important.

Since pictures appeal to senses and feelings as well as thoughts pictures move and influence other people. When using pictures in organizational processes caution must be taken in order to make sure the employees are comfortable with the method. The situation at the workplace needs to be favourable to experimenting and revealing personal beliefs and practises. If the workplace is characterised by trust and a good relationship between employers, managers and employees pictures are well chosen. If conflicts are in the process of breaking out, if some opinions are not well thought of or the workplace seeks consensus and does not allow differences of opinion pictures may bring these features into light thus strengthening the potential conflicts and problems. If the proper actions are taken to take care of the employees or managers who may have difficulty dealing with the situation pictures may be a relevant tool bringing awareness to malfunctions and thus give the workplace an opportunity to develop a better work environment in which dialogue is incited and criticism allowed.

#### **4.3 Final remarks**

Our aim has been to find out whether or not the use of pictures support and enhance employee participation, especially among semiskilled and unskilled workers. As we have indicated the answer is not clear.

Even if the purpose of the value processes may vary the employees need to participate actively if the values are to have lasting effect on practise. The employees need not participate in the definition of the organizational values but have to take an active part in the interpretation and implementation of the values in order to make them live. Pictures can be used as a tool to involve the employees and give them a possibility to tell their own stories. However, the agreements about how the process will be conducted, a trusting context and the relevant competencies need to be present.

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