



Bridging the Gap Between Labour Unions and the Management Through Leadership Development Programs?

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Abstract

In this paper we explore if leadership development programs can be applied to bridge the gap between labour unions and the management. By describing and discussing three different programs we can see that joint leadership development programs can promote collaboration between labour unions and the management. The paper argues that such programs need to be built on a premise that more actors than just formal managers can exercise leadership and contribute to organizational development. The paper also discusses why such programs are more easily achievable in a Norwegian setting. However, to make lasting improvements leadership development programs also need to include large organizational development elements, like the co-generative learning model (Elden and Levin (1991) Participatory Action Research. Sage, Newbury Park, pp 127–142). Sufficient time, resources and focus, including assessments of employees' needs and internal politics, is needed to not only bridging the gap between labour unions and the management, but also to bring in “ordinary” employees.

Keywords Co-generative learning model · Leadership development programs · Participation · Norway · Organizational development programs

Introduction

Within the field of organizational development (OD), where participation and collective reflection is seen as the core principles (Levin 2004), getting labour unions and the management to collaborate jointly in change- and development efforts has long been acknowledged as vital (Levin et al. 2012). Although the Northern tradition of industrial democracy

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is a suitable context for such collaboration (Elden and Levin 1991; Greenwood and Levin 2007), OD-programs and projects are uncommon and not widespread. In contrast, leadership development programs (LDP) have become a huge industry worldwide (Day 2000). Would it be possible to promote collaboration between union representatives and managers through the more widespread leadership development programs?

First, it should be noted that the term leadership development programs might cover fundamentally different approaches. Day (2000) points out the necessity of separating between leader- and leadership development programs. Leader development programs have a training orientation where people in formal management positions is given knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform better in their role as managers (Day 2000). Here, “leadership has been traditionally conceptualized as an individual-level skill” (Day 2000, p. 583), following the historical roots of leadership research within psychology (see Yukl 2013). In contrast, leadership programs are expanding the collective capacity of organizational members to engage effectively in leadership roles and processes, in anticipation of unforeseen challenges (Day 2000).

Second, in the Norwegian context we are aware of two development programs that seems to be examples of leadership development programs, and where union representatives and formal managers have participated side-by-side. The main goal of both PALU (Øyum et al. 2010) and TVD (Buvik et al. 2018), was to expand the collective capacity of organisational members to enable them to work together on learning, solving problems through change efforts in their own organisation (Levin et al. 2002). Interestingly, Morten Levin has been partially involved in both programs, suggesting a connection between leadership and organizational development programs.

Third, both action learning (Pedler and Burgoyne 2008) and action research (Greenwood and Levin 2007) strive to strengthen and develop the organisation through processes that ends out in lasting improvements. Both perspectives build on collaboration and learning formed in the intersection between the formal managers, union representatives and employees. Implying that a framework, like the co-generative learning model (Elden and Levin 1991), is needed for facilitating participatory change process (Eikeland et al. 2023).

There are thus some indications that a broader approach to leadership development programs might function as a participatory change process. However, we need to go in more detail of both examples and the literature to be certain. In this paper we will therefore explore: “How can leadership development programs be designed to promote union-management collaboration?”

The paper starts with a brief introduction to the field of OD, moving on to understanding leadership and leadership development in the Norwegian setting, before describing three different leader/leadership development programs. Based on the descriptions of these three programs, we suggest that joint union-management leadership development programs are a feasible strategy to bridge the two parties. However, to make lasting improvements in the organization it is necessary with broad participation of employees, and sufficient time, resources, and focus.

Organizational Development (OD)

Over the years, OD has provided organizations with practical knowledge for addressing challenges, such as group decision-making, participative management, and enriched work

(Burnes and Cooke 2012; Cummings and Cummings 2020). There is no accepted general definition of OD (French et al. 1994; Levin 2004), however Cummings and Worley (2015, p. 2) lean on a definition where OD “is a system-wide applications and transfers of behavioural science knowledge to the planned development, improvement, and reinforcement of strategies, structures, and processes which leads to organization effectiveness”. OD-processes are carried out through a variety of approaches and organizational concepts. Examples include Human resource management (HRM) (Perrow 2014), Industrial democracy (Emery and Thorsrud 1969), and Action research (Greenwood and Levin 2007; Reason and Bradbury 2001). These movements were clearly connected through their critique and parting from the ‘scientific management’ perspective and practices (Perrow 2014; Trist 1981). In the attempt to develop and create better conditions for workers, many of the approaches under the umbrella of OD promote employee participation in development processes, in order for workers to gain a greater control of their working life, have a say in decision-making processes, as well to utilize workers local knowledge (Brøgger 2010; Levin 2004).

Levin (2004, p. 72) highlighted participation and collective reflection as the two cornerstones of OD. In addition, (1) OD is expected to result in new practical solutions, (2) OD rests on an epistemological foundation where knowledge development is integrated into the construction process of the new organization, and (3) an OD process will raise fundamental value questions related to work life democracy. One of the “schools” under the OD umbrella, which also aim to facilitate participation and collective reflection is action research (AR). Greenwood and Levin (2007, p. 5) defines AR as “a research strategy that generates knowledge claims for the express purpose of taking action to promote social analysis and democratic social change.” This implies that unless all the three elements of action, research and participation are present, the process is not really action research. The field of action research includes several different approaches, most of which focus on improving the capacity of community or organizational members to develop knowledge that can solve identified problems through developmental efforts (Greenwood and Levin 2007; Reason and Bradbury 2001). The strong emphasis on democratic values and participation explains why this particular understanding of action research is also called participatory action research (PAR).

The Northern tradition of industrial democracy have influenced the field of action research, including the co-generative learning model (Finne, Levin & Nilsen, 1995), which underscores the collective process where both problem owners and action researchers engage in equal partnership in generating change and knowledge (Elden and Levin 1991; Greenwood and Levin 2007). Historically, two research groups are regarded as the main inspiration for this form of organizational development. The first, led by Lewin (1943), focused on group dynamics and the interplay between practice and theory to develop change (Greenwood and Levin 2007; Klev and Levin 2021). The second, the Tavistock Institute, highlighted the relationship between production technology and work organizations through socio-technical analysis (Greenwood and Levin 2007) and developed a program with real-life experiments to promote industrial democracy (Emery and Thorsrud 1976; Gustavsen 1992; Greenwood and Levin 2007).

The industrial democracy experiments were strongly democratic and were promoting valuable “participation at the shop-floor level” (Greenwood and Levin 2007, p. 22). They also focused on learning, innovation, and collaboration within self-regulating work organizations (Trist 1981). This approach influenced companies like Volvo and Saab-Scania

(Greenwood and Levin 2007). However, participative OD may vary depending on the context, roles, and organizational levels involved, as well as the degree, level, range, and scope of the participative initiative (Marchington and Wilkinson 2005; Wilkinson et al. 2018).

Leadership in a Norwegian Context: Introducing Three Development Programs to Discussing the Difference Between Leader and Leadership Development Program

In Norway it is common to have contradictory expectations towards managers: On the one hand Norwegians value independence, and thus dislike the existence of managers, on the other hand we expect them to be competent, responsible, and trustworthy (Byrkjeflot 2015). There is a collective understanding that the re-construction period after the second world war, where the nation was led by strong social democratic governments, has had major impact on both the regulation of work-life, welfare-state, industrial democracy, and expectations to the relationship between management and labour unions (Levin et al. 2012). Sørhaug (2004) asserts that the execution of management is dependent on authority, which is developed as a function of direct relations, positions in both internal and external networks, and hierarchical position. Because of rules and regulation of work-life, in addition to the legitimate authority of labour unions, the exercise of managerial authority in Norway will be less direct and a balancing between these different interests (Levin et al. 2012).

In contrast to Day (2000) and Day et al. (2014), few scholars differentiate between leader development, focusing on the individual, and leadership development, focusing on developing the collective (see Ravn (2002), for an exception). This might be because of the difficulty of translating both management and leadership to the same Norwegian term (*ledelse*), however, it could also highlight a fundamental different understanding of management, leadership, and organisations.

We will explore these potential differences further, based on three cases of development programs from Norway. In the next sections we will describe and explore three different development programs, chosen based on variation regarding (1) the target group for the program, (2) if union representatives are included or not, and (3) if it is a leader- or leadership development program.

The Oldest Development Program for Managers in Norway: The Solstrand-program

AFF is a foundation dedicated to leadership and organizational development, in close collaboration with NHH (Norwegian School of Economics) in Bergen. Established in 1952, AFF is most well-known for the Solstrand-program, a leadership development program with open enrolment, aiming at ambitious top executives (Jørstad 2002). More than 2700 have taken part in this program over the years (Levin et al. 2012). From the beginning in 1953 the program has had a firm footing within organizational psychology and group dynamics, picking up inspiration and idea from the Human Relation movement and Tavistock (Strand 2007), combined with a more traditional business and management perspective focusing on structure, strategy, finance etc. (Jørstad 2002). One of the implications from this starting point is a consistent pedagogy focusing on groups of 6–8 persons, centred on sharing experience, developing, and trying out new skills, discussions etc., under the guidance of a facilitator (Jørstad 2002).

The program runs for 1–2 years with a few (3–5) gatherings lasting for usually 2 weeks each (aff.no). Between the gatherings the participant work with development projects in their own organization, and gains support and feed-back from a consultant. An evaluation of the Solstrand-program made by Jordahl and Midtun (2002) indicates that participants changed their behaviour significantly more than the control group on the dimension for employee-, environment- and action-orientation based on a 360-degree instrument. There are numerous issues with evaluating leadership development programs that are beyond the scope for this paper. However, we are glad that Jordahl and Midtun (2002) only suggest that participants become better leaders, which should benefit their organisations and the society. By acknowledging that their evaluation does not say anything about actual improvements in the results and goals for the organisations, Jordahl and Midtun (2002) just implies that better leaders lead to better results in the organization. Unfortunately, we have not been able to find any more recent evaluations of the Solstrand-program, and our descriptions might be outdated. However, their web page is public and tells us that the current cost for taking part in the leadership development program (2025–2026) is now at 360 000 NOK.

PALU: A Socio-technical Approach to Leadership Development

The socio-technical perspective acknowledges that although managers have some legal rights, duties, and responsibilities, both labour representatives and managers can contribute equally to organisational development (Levin et al. 2012). In this perspective both parties share an equal goal to mobilize broad participation to co-produce change, innovation, and development of the workplace.

Researchers at SINTEF developed the project Union-Management Leadership Development Program (PALU) as a response from four industry companies wanted to support labour-management development groups (Øyum et al. 2010). The 18-month program was organized with six to-day seminars for 20–22 participants, with a combination of teaching in organization and management, discussions, and sharing experience and knowledge from the four different companies (Levin et al. 2012). The researchers insisted that the companies developed organizational development projects of high strategic importance for the companies, with cooperation between union-management and broad participation (Øyum et al. 2010). The program design was that these projects should give the participants real-life experience both with development projects, but also collaboration with each other. Working with the development projects in between the seminars, returning to the seminars were an arena to share experience, discuss, reflect, and get support and suggestions from the other companies to improve their own learning and on-going development process (Ravn 2002). Stressing the local development projects moved the leadership development program more towards organizational development (Levin et al. 2002), and a more collective than individual understanding of change and management.

We interpret this program design as an example of developing management competence through doing; problem formulation, action, discussion, reflection, and new actions, very much in line with the co-generative learning model (Elden and Levin 1991) and the field of OD. In addition, it seems like many more people were involved in the development project in the companies, compared to what seems to be the norm in similar activity in the Solstrand-program (Jordahl and Midtun 2002) and other leadership development programs (Lysø et al. 2011). The evaluation of the PALU-project reports many other positive out-

comes, like increased collaboration between the unions and employer representatives both at the local and regional level (Øyum et al. 2010).

TVD Development: A Joint union-management Leadership Development Program

Researchers from NTNU and SINTEF, where a few of the researchers involved in PALU-project, joined forces, and took part in a HR-initiated organizational development program, Traffic and Vehicle Department (TVD) Development, where a joint union-management leadership development program was one of the parts (see Buvik et al. 2018).

The leading members in the HR-department at the Norwegian Public Roads Organization— Eastern Region, were responsible for the design, development, and implementation of the whole program. The researchers, after winning a public tender, were primarily involved in the six leadership development seminars, collaborating closely with the HR-department, holding lectures and actively participating in the seminars. Additionally, the researchers conducted a formative evaluation of the whole program, which was portrayed as an action learning initiative by the HR-department. However, the organization was also inspired by action research through Morten Levin and an earlier organizational development initiative (Buvik et al. 2017; Finnestrand, Vie & Boas, 2023). Morten Levin was part of the research team involved with the TVD-program in the initial phase, but unfortunately, he had to withdraw shortly before the activities got started.

The TVD development-program also consisted of activities where employees should explore and look for best practice in the organization, local development projects, a union-management leadership development program, and a clear expectation that the already existing, ordinary management meetings should be used more for development issues (Buvik et al. 2018). As part of the agreement with the organization the researchers executed pre-mid and post evaluation of the program and the activities, as well as taking an active part in the design phase, and in on-going discussions. Additionally, the university provided founding for a PhD-candidate to follow and do independent research on the program (Lebesby and Benders 2020, 2023; Lebesby et al. 2023).

The union-management leadership seminars followed much of the structure and content from the PALU-project (Øyum et al. 2010), in having six seminars and applying the organizational theory framework by Bolman and Deal (2004) focusing on structure, human resources, politics and symbols. Between the seminars assignments were given where the various management groups (in addition to a common group of union representatives), should discuss related topics before the next seminars. Presentations of some of the group's reflection was given at the next seminar, in addition to a few lectures in organizational theory and management, and topics given by internal managers. Discussions in groups, facilitated with support by HR, across union and management, and across the ordinary structure took the most time. The seminars ended in reflection and discussion in the ordinary management groups, as a learning summary, but also as preparation for the assignment.

The evaluation report is in general positive to the implementation of the activities in the project, although it is much harder to say something concrete about the organisational outcomes (Buvik et al. 2018). The researchers could observe that the management groups spend more time on development issues than before, the managers having a local development project felt more competent in leading change processes, the managers seems more coherent in their practice across the different units, systems and processes were changed

to make more room for learning and development, the union-management collaboration was clearly improved with more inclusion in management meeting at several levels in the organization (Buvik et al. 2018).

However, the report also suggested that both management and unions could become better at supporting organizational development and inform and engage the rest of the employees much better (see also Lebesby et al. 2023) for an even more critical evaluation (see Lebesby and Benders 2020, 2023;). In hindsight, we have realized that the local development projects probably received too little attention from the project team, in the management group meetings, and at the leadership development seminars. The lack of successful integration of these different elements reduced the probability for making lasting changes in the organization that could have benefited for the ordinary employees. However, we are confident that the union-management cooperation received a long-lasting boost that helped the organization in later processes, based on contact with both parties a year after the program ended.

Comparing Leadership Development Programs in Search for Organizational Development

In the previous sections we have described and explored three different Norwegian leader/leadership development programs. In this section we will return to the three dimensions, which were applied to select the cases, (1) the target group for the program, (2) if union representatives are included or not, and (3) if it is a leader- or leadership development program.

The Solstrand-program, being an open development program for those that can afford it, seems to have formal managers as their target group (Jørstad 2002; Strand 2007). Although discussions and working in groups are very central for the program, the content and understanding of the context seems to revolve around the manager. There are elements that bring the participant's organization into the program, however, it is still centred around the individual, like 360-degree evaluations getting superiors, peers, and subordinates to assess the participating manager (Jordahl and Midtun 2002), all together this implies a traditional top-down, individualistic, psychological understanding of leadership. In accordance with Day (2000), it seems fair to categorize the Solstrand-program as being more a leader development program, than a leadership development program. Although the evaluation suggest that the managers seem to change their behaviour after the program (Jordahl and Midtun 2002), it is far from certain that these changes have significant impact on their respective organisations. In some cases, they might have an influence, and in other cases there is not much change because the structure of the organisations is still the same (Antonacopoulou 2006).

The PALU and TVD programs have both chosen to include labour union representatives together with formal managers in the organization. This suggest that they build on a broader view of leadership process as more collective than individual, in line with the industrial democracy movement in Norway (Levin 2002; Levin et al. 2012). On the other hand, the two programs had different target groups. While PALU had participants from different organizations, within somewhat similar industrial context, TVD was a program within only one public organisation. Although evaluations of both programs conclude with positively increased labour-management collaboration (Buvik et al. 2018; Øyum et al. 2010), it seems like PALU was more successful as an organisational development effort. The PALU-proj-

ect (Øyum et al. 2010) demonstrates that letting the local companies formulate their problems jointly with researchers, and making enough room for the experience, reflection and feed-back to-and-from the various local development projects were the key to make lasting improvements (Levin et al. 2002; Ravn 2002), and in practice bringing the PALU-project very close to the co-generative learning model (Elden and Levin 1991). Table 1 below, summarise a categorisation of the three programs based on the three dimensions (1) the target group for the program, (2) if union representatives are included or not, and (3) if it is a leader- or leadership development program.

Based on Table 1, we notice that both programs categorised as leadership development programs, PALU and TVD, also have included union representatives as participants side-by-side with the formal managers in their organisations. In both cases the respective evaluations conclude that joint labour-management leadership development programs strengthen the relationship and collaboration between them. Participation from union representatives in such programs might be enough to further the collaboration between unions and the management. However, a leader- and individual oriented development program, like the Solstrand program, might not be the best place to develop the understanding and appreciation of these distinct roles. We thus have some indication that a more collective leadership orientation is needed to better understand the distinct roles labour representatives and the management are playing.

From the descriptions of the programs, we notice some differences in the outcome of the two leadership development programs, which we will discuss in some more detail. Both the PALU- and TVD-programs were focusing on the differences and commonalities between unions and the management, bridging the gap between the two sides. However, from the descriptions of the programs we get a clear impression that the PALU-program as being more successful in initiating lasting organisational changes. Although fewer managers and union representatives took part in the PALU-program compared to the TVD-program, it seems like more ordinary employees were involved in the companies' own development projects, suggesting that PALU had a stronger OD-orientation than the TVD-program. Our interpretation is also that the PALU-program gave more focus to the content and implementation of their development projects, and perhaps understood the context and the challenges in the organisation better than in the TVD-program. It also seems like more "ordinary" employees were engaged in the PALU-program compared with the TVD-program (see Table 2 below).

We need to be clear that we strongly see improved union-management collaboration from the TVD-program, although most organisational members failed to notice any changes

Table 1 Comparison of the three selected programs

	The Solstrand-program	PALU-program	TVD-programs
Target group	General, formal managers	Industry sector, several organisations	Large unit in a single public organisation
Union representatives	No	Yes, both top and local representatives	Yes, both top and local representatives
Leader- or leadership program	Leader development program	Leadership development program	Leadership development program

Table 2 Comparison of the involvement of the home organisation in the three programs

	Leader development programs	PALU-leadership program	TVD-leadership programs
Inclusion of managerial positions	Indirectly, e.g. 360-degree feed-back	To some degree	Included all managers in unit
Inclusion of “ordinary” employees	Indirectly, e.g. 360-degree feed-back	To high degree	To some degree

(Buvik et al. 2018). An increased focus on the local development projects in the TVD-program would certainly have helped, and a process like the co-generative learning model (Elden and Levin 1991), would probably have been immensely helpful. In comparison, traditional leader development programs only interact indirectly with the participants’ home organisations, focusing rather on the individual manager in his/her context.

Conclusion

We will now answer the research question: “How can leadership development programs be designed to promote union-management collaboration?” First, based on the previous discussion of the three varied leadership development programs (summarised in Table 1), we conclude that programs that include unions representatives also happen to be leadership development programs (Day 2000), that also includes varying degrees of participation of “ordinary” employees. If programs have a broader view on who contributes to leading organisations, it is probably easier to include topics, discussions and reflections on the similarities and differences between the roles of the management and the unions in organisations.

Working with understanding the respective roles in joint leadership development programs for unions representatives and formal managers, is necessary to promote more collaboration between them. However, one of the prerequisites for joining shared programs is that the two sides already have a trustful enough relationship. As pointed out by Klev and Levin (2012, p. 56) several factors like power of labour unions, state regulation, form of democracy, expectations of participation in organisational change processes, and willingness to solve problem as a collective, influence the relationship between trade unions and the management. It is therefore more likely that joint programs are much more feasible in Northern Europe than in the USA, because these factors contribute to a more enabling collaboration environment.

Second, the implication of Table 2 is that a leadership development program can be designed to include “ordinary” employees at higher or lower degree. A leader development program will only indirectly include employees and the participants “home” organisation as context for the individual manager. In contrast, an expanded, collective view of leadership is needed to best promote improved collaboration, making both action learning (Pedler and Burgoyne 2008) and action research (Greenwood and Levin 2007) suitable starting points for designing joint union-management leadership development programs like PALU and TVD. However, in addition to designing the program for broad participation, enough time, resources, and focus are needed to secure the development of lasting solutions for the problems that should be jointly formulated by managers, unions representatives, employees,

and researcher (Elden and Levin 1991). We discourage the inclusion and participation of employees in any development programs without prior analysis of employee needs, internal power, and politics (Levin 2002, p. 211). Failing to understand the context of the employees, preferably in learning processes together with them, leaves development programs in danger of merely becoming prescribed participation (Lebesby and Benders 2023). However, this requirement also highlights the major drawback with such programs, as it requires more resources to understand the particular context of the organisations, making such leadership development programs hard to upscale to a general audience.

Finally, we conclude that joint leadership development programs can promote union-management collaboration by taking a broader view on leadership and highlighting the commonalities between the two parties, as done in both PALU and TVD. If the organisation in addition wants to make permanent improvements, they also need to include many employees in context-driven OD-projects (Elden and Levin 1991), with sufficient time, resources, and focus; those bridging the gap between labour unions, the management, and “ordinary” employees.

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Declarations

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