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Strategies for co-workership retention

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ABSTRACT

Co-workership is a Scandinavian working life concept that is based on post-bureaucratic organizing, the cornerstones of which are decentralization and a vision of responsible individual autonomy and participation. Research has shown positive results from implementing/developing co-workership in organizations; however, in terms of the post-bureaucratic character of the concept, it might be more challenging to retain positive results than to succeed with short-term development and implementation. This study aimed to describe and analyse the retention of co-workership. A qualitative case study based on interviews and observations was conducted at an elderly care unit that had attracted a lot of attention for its organizational development, largely due to co-workership. The present study focused on retention of the active co-workership that the former development had resulted in. Four main challenges were identified as central to co-workership retention. The paper contributes to the scientific community concerning retention of organizational development efforts, particularly by emphasizing the concept of *co-workership retention*, which is crucial for producing excellent operational performance over extended periods of time.

Introduction

Co-workership is the English equivalent of the Scandinavian working life concept *Medarbetarskap*, which has become increasingly prominent in Scandinavia since the 1990s (Kilhammar and Ellström 2015; Andersen and Hällstén 2016). The concept has been commonly used in HR-driven development initiatives in organizations (Andersson 2018). Implementing co-workership in organizations has had positive results, given that it has been adjusted to the local context and integrated in daily operations. Such integration requires organizational members to participate in the local development process (Kilhammar and Ellström 2015).

The concept of co-workership is connected to internationally well-known concepts such as empowerment (Conger and Kanungo 1988; Thomas and Velthouse 1990) (co-workership has been referred to as Scandinavian empowerment; Jönsson and Macintosh 1997), followership (Uhl-Bien et al. 2014), and organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB) (Organ 1988). Although the concept of co-workership has made some limited forays beyond Scandinavia, it is a manifestation of post-bureaucratic organizing based on

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decentralization and on a vision of the advantage of responsible autonomy and participation in decision-making for employees (Kilhammar and Ellström 2015). Co-workership involves high-involvement work processes and lateral collaboration between employees, often in the absence of supervisor involvement (e.g., Lawler 1988). The theoretical section of this paper explores the relation to the term *collective leadership* (Denis, Lamothe, and Langley 2001; Empson and Alvehus 2020) since it is fruitful to see co-workership as an example of such leadership.

However, a challenge with all development work related to post-bureaucratic organizing is that bureaucracy remembers, whereas post-bureaucratic organizations tend to forget (Pollitt 2009). Consequently, even if co-workership development is an obvious challenge (Kilhammar and Ellström 2015), it could be assumed that it is even more challenging to retain co-workership after such development programmes considering its post-bureaucratic character. Therefore, maintaining an active and constructive co-workership is an interesting and new area of research, and the paper aims to describe and analyse the retention of co-workership.

Co-workership – perspectives, development and retention

Scandinavian working life has a long tradition of decentralized organizations focusing on group organization and teamwork, as well as on cooperation-oriented and trustful relationships between managers and workers (Tengblad 2003). Articles in international journals have translated *medarbetarskap* as employeeship (e.g., Møller 1994; Bertlett 2011) or co-workership (Styhre 2002; Heide and Simonsson 2011; Tengblad and Andersson 2014; Kilhammar and Ellström 2015). We have used co-workership in this study, since this is the most established translation. Co-workership relates both to the employees' abilities to handle the relation to their own organization and leader (the vertical dimension) and the relation to other employees in the organization. In this respect, co-workership can be viewed as a form of collective leadership (e.g., Denis, Lamothe, and Langley 2001).

Collective leadership can be seen as an umbrella of leadership approaches that criticizes the individual-centred view of leadership and favours paying more attention to relationships and interactions (instead of a particular leader) as a better way of understanding leadership (Crevani, Lindgren, and Packendorff 2010). Leadership is even considered to be more effective when it is shared between several people (Pearce and Conger 2002), especially in contexts characterized by complexity (Denis, Lamothe, and Langley 2001). However, while research on co-workership clearly contributes to leadership research in general and collective leadership in particular, Blom (2016) claimed that a major problem with leadership research is that everything is conceptualized as leadership. This hegemony of leadership (Blom and Alvesson 2014) risks making leadership unable to explain anything at all. Blom (2016) argued that many processes (such as co-workership) are relevant to leadership but do not need to be conceptualized as leadership. Consequently, our co-workership research contributes to collective leadership research but we see value in not conceptualizing it as leadership.

Extant research has treated the concept of co-workership in two different ways: descriptive and normative (Andersson and Tengblad 2015). When understood from a purely descriptive view, the central themes in co-workership are employees' practices

and attitudes in their relationships with their managers, colleagues, and employers – in balance with their approaches to their work. When viewed normatively, co-workership is an organizational ideal, characterized by cooperative, inter-dependent relationships between managers and workers, based on trust, participation and responsibility. Rather than being substitutes for leadership, co-workership and leadership are seen as inter-dependent and as co-constructing each other based on a normative view (Andersson and Tengblad 2015). Consequently, the normative view of co-workership is largely about making a post-bureaucratic organization work in practice (cf. Elliott and Turnbull 2003) and supporting a high-involvement work system (HIWP) (Lawler 1988; Rana 2015). The normative view of co-workership is mainly conceptualized through the preconditions of constructive co-workership identified by Hällstén and Tengblad (2006).

Co-workership research has covered working life conditions and institutions that nurture co-workership (e.g., Tengblad 2003); conceptual modelling (e.g. Hällstén and Tengblad 2006; Andersson and Tengblad 2015); descriptive research that describes and analyses the current co-workership in different organizations (e.g., Andersson and Lindeberg 2006; Hällstén and Lindell 2006; Andersson, Liff, and Tengblad 2011; Wickelgren et al. 2012; Andersson 2018); and descriptive research on co-workership development (e.g., Stockhult 2005, 2013; Kilhammar and Ellström 2015). However, few studies have addressed the retention of active and constructive co-workership that has been achieved by co-workership development work.

Despite the lack of studies of co-workership retention, the challenges described in descriptive co-workership can also be relevant for co-workership retention. Previous research has identified several challenges related to co-workership, such as the relationship between leadership/management and co-workership. Hällstén and Lindell (2006) established that dominant management may limit co-workership, even when the management is well-intended and competent. When management influence all decisions, there is no room left for co-workership to develop. Andersson and Lindeberg (2006) provided further insights into the relationship between leadership and co-workership, illustrating the delicate balance and interdependence between the two processes. Co-workership cannot be developed in a vacuum; it needs to be balanced by the development of leadership. Similarly, Stockhult (2013) concluded that without supportive leadership, the willingness to participate and take responsibility among workers may be limited.

Another common theme in co-workership research is responsibility. Karlsson and Lovén (2006) described how workers need supportive structures to take responsibility in everyday work, but also that the challenge is for structures to provide support and freedom of action simultaneously. Several studies have described co-workership in organizations with strong professional identities, such as healthcare (Andersson, Liff, and Tengblad 2011; Eriksson, Skagert, and Dellve 2013; Eriksson 2018), public administration (Gustafsson and Jansson 2006), and public schools (Hällstén and Lindell 2006). Strong professional identities often lead to individual-oriented co-workership (Gustafsson and Jansson 2006; Andersson, Liff, and Tengblad 2011), which may threaten co-operation and community in organizations (Andersson and Lindeberg 2006). Furthermore, professionals are often more strongly connected to their profession than to their organization, which may restrict what professionals consider themselves responsible for (Liff and Andersson 2011) and thereby prevent the development of co-

workership. There is an important difference between different contexts regarding responsibility and co-workership: the challenge in high-skilled sectors is what the workers take responsibility for, while the challenges in low-skilled sectors are the ability and willingness to take responsibility at all (Andersson 2013; Stockhult 2013).

Elderly care organizations have taken many initiatives to meet the expectations and demands of a rapidly ageing population. Both managers and employees are experiencing continual innovations in organizing principles, work tasks and leadership. Therefore, management and leadership in elderly care is a key factor in making such innovations sustainable over time (Schultz, André, and Sjøvold 2015). The only previous co-workership study on elderly care (Andersson 2013) focused on the ability to take responsibility, but also on the learning process related to co-workership. According to Andersson (2013), learning co-workership requires time, structure and support. Time refers to the time needed to develop work practices together that resemble active co-workership. Structure can create such time by coordinating meetings and driving the process forward. Structures do not create themselves; they are created by individuals, which means that the creation of structures needs to be supported by managers and colleagues. Consequently, our interpretation is that the lack of time, the lack of structure for co-workership development and retention, and the lack of support for such structures may threaten co-workership retention.

Analytical framework: co-workership retention

The present study uses institutional theory to investigate co-workership retention. Researchers within institutional theory have studied how schemes, norms, beliefs and routines shape everyday human behaviour (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Scott 1995). If a phenomenon is supported by such schemes, norms, beliefs and routines, it can be described as an institution. Institutions evolve over time and may be subject to reform efforts (Brunsson and Olsen 1993) but often develop a certain kind of stability and can be taken for granted (Berger and Luckmann 1967). Nevertheless, aspects of the institution are often disputed and subject to competing ideals and beliefs (Friedland and Alford 1991; Scott and Christensen 1995). The present paper examines the institutionalization of co-workership practices, both regarding challenges to those practices and how they are retained.

The concept of retention in organizational settings has most frequently been used in employee retention; that is, an organization's ability to retain its employees (Cascio 2014). In the present study, we have used retention to describe the ability to retain an implemented concept/idea. Even if there are major differences in retaining a concept/idea to retain employees, some research results on employee retention could be useful. Organizational support has proven to be significant, especially supervisor support (Eisenberger et al. 2002). The other relevant factor for employee retention is the importance of organizational culture (Sheridan 1992). Therefore, according to culture as a system of norms, values and beliefs (Scott 1995), it seems important for a leader to act consciously to maintain and support the values and norms of a concept for its retention.

Translated to retaining a concept/idea, we can assume that leadership and organizational values that support co-workership are important for co-workership retention.

Figure 1. The co-workership wheel. Source: Andersson (2018)

Post-bureaucratic organizations are more reliant on ongoing organizing than bureaucratic organizations (Pollitt 2009), which implies that co-workership retention is used as an ongoing organizing effort to retain practices and underlying values of co-workership. As the tool for analysing constructive co-workership, we have used a model identified by Hällstén and Tengblad (2006). The model describes four pairs of concepts that are important preconditions for constructive co-workership: trust and openness, community spirit and cooperation, commitment and purpose, and responsibility and initiative (see Figure 1).

Trust and openness

Trust is the key to all well-functioning relationships, including work relationships. Openness is manifested primarily by open dialogue between all parties, whether managers and workers, workers and workers, or workers and employers in general (Hällstén and Tengblad 2006).

Community spirit and cooperation

Positive community spirit and cooperation at work support constructive co-workership. Effective cooperation should transcend internal borders, regardless of whether those borders are created by organizational structures (departments, groups, etc.), professional roles, functions, or other barriers (Andersson and Tengblad 2015).

Engagement and meaningfulness

Many organizations involve a combination of challenging and monotonous jobs, meaning that some workers may not be engaged in or committed to their jobs. Beyond the engagement in and commitment to the work, constructive co-workership also requires commitment to the organization itself. Such commitment can make work more meaningful, regardless of the nature of the job (Andersson, Liff, and Tengblad 2011).

Responsibility and initiative

Responsibility and action are closely linked, since those who feel responsible in a situation tend to be active and take initiative (Andersson and Tengblad 2015). Responsible individuals need to have some measure of authority. Empowered individuals are more likely to take initiative.

The co-workership wheel describes the conditions necessary for constructive co-workership. When these conditions exist, they can support a self-reinforcing development process. The processual and reciprocal relationship between the conditions and constructive co-workership makes it self-reinforcing, where the conditions become both conditions and outcomes of constructive co-workership. Increased openness and open dialogue strengthen the sense of community, promote cooperation, create greater engagement in work, and make work more meaningful, all of which strengthens followers' sense of responsibility and willingness to take initiative. If such approaches are shared in an organization, co-workership will inevitably have a central position in its culture (Andersson 2018). The culture constitutes an interpretation pattern that helps workers understand situations in similar ways, prioritize in a similar fashion, and ultimately handle similar situations in a similar manner.

Research method

Setting and background of the case

The case in the present study is Sun Garden,[1] an elderly care centre that has received considerable media attention for its user orientation and salutogenic (health-promoting) perspective on elderly care. Co-workership and active participation in organizational development have been important means of achieving this perspective on elderly care. At the time of study, the care centre had almost 100 care-takers and approximately 80 permanent employees, divided into six departments and a night shift. The staff consisted mainly of assistant nurses and care assistants, while nurses belonged to a separate organization. Prior to 2011, Sun Garden could have been described as an ordinary elderly care centre in a large Swedish city. The route to change started with the appointment of a new unit manager. In 2012 the unit manager started a comprehensive improvement work towards a salutogenic elderly care centre with high user orientation. For example, the interior decoration was designed to resemble a hotel lobby, the care-takers were referred to as tenants, and the staff and tenants planned many outings and other activities together. To break the perception of an institution, the staff started to work in their regular clothes. Daily care was divided between the staff, depending on each tenant's physical and psychological care need to create a better and more just work environment,

but also to clarify and enhance the individual accountability among the staff for the care for each tenant. The rapid development and improvements were highly dependent on active and engaging leadership. An assistant nurse explained the rationale behind the improvement work as follows:

> It was an eye-opener when we were asked if we would like to live at Sun Garden when we got older. Nobody wanted to, and we realized that it was time to rethink how we thought about our work. We should be there to make life good for the people who live here; it is not only about caring. (Assistant nurse)

An interviewed assistant nurse explained how the change process had also meant empowering the workers. They received greater opportunities to introduce and test their own ideas for improving care towards user orientation:

> At first I thought it would be impossible to make the changes she [the unit manager] planned. We should participate, it should be an open climate, and any suggestion from anyone would be welcomed. Previously there had been focus on rule-following, almost like being on a production line. There was a fixed schedule with the same duties at the same time every day. When she came [the unit manager] she tried to make everybody think differently, but it was hard to change. I cannot understand how she did it but she did. She had a vision, which people bought into, so she has proved that it can be done!

Co-workership was the means of achieving salutogenic care and user orientation, and in a few years the measures for the tenants' experience of their care were raised to high levels.

Since 2017 there has been new management at Sun Garden. This new management has focused on maintaining this high level of employee engagement, but their work has been more focused on documentation, administrative plans and deviation analyses. Such administration had not been in focus during the change process. The quality of care is still high, although the measures from the user questionnaire started to decline in 2017 and continued declining during 2018. In 2018 the measures were slightly above the national average, according to surveys conducted by The National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen), but are no longer exceptionally high. Our study mainly concerns the period of retention, from 2017 and onwards, but through interviews we have also been able to capture some information about the period before 2017.

Data collection

The co-workership retention process can be best understood by studying the phenomenon closely. A research method that allows the researchers to have continuous dialogues with actors in their own environment helps deepen this understanding of the phenomenon (Czarniawska 2007). The field study started in the autumn of 2017 and ended in December 2018. Because of the lack of previous studies of co-workership retention, we opted for a qualitative case study based on interviews and observations. The main methodological frame of references has been Merriam (1998), Merriam and Tisdell (2015) and Miles and Huberman (2014), all of whom have emphasized seeking rich qualitative data. Various data collection techniques were used to capture valid data about co-workership at Sun Garden, and the researchers aimed to be sensitive, friendly and trustworthy. Following Patton (1999), many different types of data collection and

a combination of data in the analysis enhance credibility in a qualitative research design. There has been no need for ethics approval since we have not studied any interaction with the tenants or investigated issues with inherent ethical difficulties.

Twenty interviews were conducted with both managers and employees and the interviews were all recorded and transcribed. Twelve interviews were conducted in a first round in May–June 2018 and eight were conducted in a second and final round in November–December 2018. The interviews each lasted for approximately 30–90 minutes. The managers and some employees were interviewed twice so that certain areas could be treated in more depth and to get a broader picture by talking with employees at different stages during the development process. The basis for selection of interviewees was that they should represent different departments and that they volunteered to participate. The employees were informed they could terminate the interview and participation at any time without any explanation. They were granted anonymity, both during and after the research project, which is one reason why not all respondents are represented in a figure with their name, age, education background and position. Most of the 20 respondents were female assistant nurses who had 5–30 years of experience in elderly care, while some also had experience from other elderly care centres. It became obvious during the interviews that the interviewees could contextualize and compare their experiences at Sun Garden with other organizations representing other actions, norms and values from other elderly care centres. Assistant nurses who had worked at Sun Garden for a long time were also able to describe the changes over a long period of time. The interviews were conducted by two of the researchers separately using an interview template based on the co-workership literature. The semi-structured interviews were also grounded theoretically in the thoughts of values, norms and beliefs as part of everyday actions (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Scott 1995). Interviewees were asked to openly describe themselves, their work and how they perceived Sun Garden, before we started to ask more pre-determined questions. The interviews were held in a closed room at Sun Garden in an environment familiar to the interviewee.

In addition to interviews and participating in the responsibility groups, two kinds of observations were made: observations through shadowing (Czarniawska 2007) and observations in meetings (especially in responsibility groups, which was one of the main structures for supporting co-workership). The responsibility groups typically consist of one or two members from each department. As Czarniawska (2014) claimed, shadowing is suitable for studying the work and life of people moving from place to place. Our purpose with shadowing as a methodology was to find and explore the acting of both managers and other employees in their authentic work environment. In total, approximately 40 hours of shadowing observations were conducted. Managers were shadowed, but that also involved meeting all the parts of the organization that the managers interact with. Notes were taken during the observations and after each observation the notes were written down in a document with thoughts and questions for preliminary use in the ongoing interviews or next time observations were planned. Observations in meetings followed one of the responsibility groups, which included activities such as tenant activities, budget and quality. In total, 12 meetings in responsibility groups were observed during a 14-month period. Each meeting lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours. The observations helped us obtain a background to the interviews and background

knowledge about the work environment and interplay between managers and employees and among the employees themselves.

Data analysis

Following Miles and Huberman (2014), the data analysis process consisted of certain steps. The first step involved inductively trying to understand co-workership in the studied organization. Examples of questions in the first step of the analysis process included: What is co-workership at Sun Garden? Why are they acting like that? What kind of responsibility is present? What is this an example of? During this step, all three authors read the interview transcripts and the excerpts were sorted according to the co-workership wheel. In this phase, we identified that the achieved active and constructive co-workership was constantly challenged by environmental factors, so we decided to focus on what we refer to as co-workership retention. The second step of the data analysis was to focus on these challenges to co-workership retention; reading the transcribed interviews thoroughly revealed certain categories. In this process, discussions were held among the research team on how the data should be interpreted to gain a rich under-standing about employee retention. These discussions provided a richer and more nuanced understanding of the material compared to the individual understandings after reading the interview excerpts. There were a few disagreements, which were resolved in this stage of the research process.

During this second step, four major challenges were identified and, through the observations and the transcribed interviews, the third step included an analysis based on the co-workership wheel. The transcribed data were read several times, which is a qualitative way of ensuring the validity of the analysis (Creswell and Miller 2000) and reflecting on the multiple ways of understanding the data (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009). The outcome of this third step of reading the transcribed interviews and notes from observations and integrating the literature was the co-workership retention strategies that were used to meet the above-mentioned challenges.

Challenges to co-workership retention

The analysis of the empirical data enabled us to identify four main challenges to co-workership retention: (1) the presence of traditional professional roles, (2) staffing problems, (3) us-and-them thinking, and (4) lack of supportive leadership. These challenges constitute the structure of this empirical section.

Traditional professional roles

The interviewees contrasted work roles in Sun Garden with elderly care in general, which they feel often suffers from traditional professional roles that are passive and not user-oriented. Such a passive mentality can be referred to as working in an institution that follows certain rules, which are inflexible regarding the care-takers' wishes and individual needs. At Sun Garden, responsibility groups have been the main way of making the professional role more active, and the salutogenic approach has made the role more user-oriented.

> We [at Sun Garden] have the opportunity to influence our work; it is not only about following what the manager says. We are close to the users and we have the best knowledge regarding what is needed to be done. (Assistant nurse)

The salutogenic approach is not only a way to perform care; it has become an organizational value at Sun Garden that influences how the personnel view the users. Furthermore, the employees are proud of the approach, which distinguishes Sun Garden from other elderly care centres.

> Before the salutogenic approach, Sun Garden was more of an institution. The way we performed work before was not good. Even if you become old and ill, you have still the right to live as you lived at home. Today, the tenants are our main focus. (Assistant nurse)

> In other elderly care centres where I have worked, the patients have mostly been in their rooms without any attention from the staff. But here they live in another way, which makes it more fun for everyone. The spirit is positive. This should be an environment where they should live and have fun. (Assistant nurse)

Despite the success of responsibility groups and the salutogenic approach, traditional professional roles have proved to be a constant challenge for retaining active co-workership. For example, assistant nurses and orderlies tend to neglect the importance of their own roles and do not experience pride in their organization or their work competence. Reduced self-esteem may make it difficult to step forward and take initiative to develop their work.

Although Sun Garden has created a work place that the employees are proud of, and is making the professional role more user-oriented, constant work is needed to maintain such accomplishments. Unit managers work actively to prevent and counteract a negative self-image among workers, emphasizing that they are performing skilled work and can be proud of their professional competence.

However, even if the professional role in Sun Garden has changed, new recruits are likely to have established their identity in relation to traditional professional roles. They met this challenge by focusing on applicants' approaches to work rather than traditional work roles in recruitment processes and when introducing new recruits to the work place. The recruitment process is more focused on applicants buying into user-oriented care than other competences, which are more related to traditional professional roles in healthcare. A downside of this approach, which will be discussed in the next section, is that there are not enough suitable applicants for the job.

Staffing problems

Staffing is a constant problem in elderly care settings, given that wages are relatively low and the sector is not attractive to job applicants. Many applicants do not have the right prerequisites or attitude to be a good health provider. The recruitment process at Sun Garden excludes people who do not seem to buy into a user-oriented work orientation. Experienced elderly care workers know their value and can choose between units with regard to geographic location, salary level and working conditions.

> We assistant nurses are so disparaged. Not many want to become assistant nurses. There are unsocial hours, staffing problems and over-sized units. We have received greater responsibility, which is good in one way, but it requires us to be correctly staffed with competent people, and be able to participate in training and courses, but that has been so-so over the years. (Assistant nurse)

Staffing problems have made it more difficult to retain work structures and work processes that supported active co-workership, such as responsibilities for activities beyond the traditional professional role. Due to the recruitment problems, staff retention can only be achieved by providing good work conditions and a collaborative working climate. The personnel turnover for Sun Garden was 5.5% in 2016 and 9.6% in 2017, compared to 13.6% in 2016 and 16.3% in 2017 for elderly care housing across the entire municipality.

When employees leave and are not replaced, or when no substitutes are available for employees on sick-leave, the staff must maintain the daily care with too few personnel. An assistant nurse from a department with high personnel turnover said:

> It is worse now. We are two heads short. I hope it will be better in the autumn. It is 10 employees for 16 care-takers. For sure we can manage the basics, but want to give more. (Assistant nurse)

Staffing problems can challenge a developed co-workership in several ways. They can make the employees lose their engagement if they feel drained by the ordinary work and have little energy to feel engagement. They can also make the employees lose interest in the elderly care housing as such and seek new positions elsewhere. To maintain a high quality of daily care, everyday work requires stamina and a positive outlook.

> To work 100 per cent in a dementia department is exhausting. One gets totally run-down in the head; one almost does not have the energy to keep a family [...] There is a need for smaller units. (Assistant nurse)

Existence of us-and-them thinking

Us-and-them thinking occurs when there is competition and envy between working groups. Such thinking has existed at Sun Garden, and conscious strategies were adopted to diminish this, with effective results. According to the interviewees, this has led to a cooperative attitude in housing so that departments with staff shortages received help from other departments. Furthermore, all employees worked in the other departments on a regular basis, enabling them to get to know the employees in all six departments. Responsibility groups are another important tool for avoiding us-and-them thinking. There are six active responsibility groups at Sun Garden: methods, budget and procurement, activities, dementia, food and alarm. Most of the responsibility groups had one or two members from each of the six departments and typically met once a month for discussion, decision-making and planning within each group's area of responsibility. The groups actively contribute to joint work practices and sense of belonging at the housing levels. In the interviews, many care providers said there was a cooperative spirit in the care centre:

Interviewer: How does the cooperation with other departments work?

Respondent: Very well, we help each other. We just go there and ask if they need some help, and if they do we stay and help them as much as we can. Sometimes people are sick and then we use to help each other. (Assistant nurse)

Lack of supportive leadership

Finally, there was evidence that supportive leadership is a prerequisite for active co-workership. Managers are sometimes overloaded with administrative work and unable to fully support processes retaining co-workership. The case of Sun Garden showed some interesting aspects about the role of leadership and the changes in leadership that could be related to the retention of co-workership. Leadership in recent years in Sun Garden can be divided into two phases, the first of which lasted from 2012 to 2016. In this phase, the leadership could be described as charismatic and enthusiastic, and employees were required to participate in an extensive change process to create a strong user orientation, with a focus on employees and their roles. This initiative was taken by the former leader, who many of the employees describe as charismatic, enthusiastic and inspirational. She described her vision well and had the ability to share the vision in an inspiring way. Many of the employees talk about leadership during this phase with a lot of confidence and trust in the employees. Leadership has changed in some ways.

> It is a different leadership now. One of the former leaders was always here, from early morning to late evening, weekends. Her mission was to build the organization after her vision. She was a great enthusiast like no other. That is a type of leadership that we no longer have. (Assistant nurse)

The second, and current, phase of leadership started in 2017. The new leadership is more administrative and less change-oriented but does delegate, as during the first phase. The employees are given a lot of freedom to conduct their work on their own. In 2017 there was only one manager in Sun Garden but a second one joined in 2018. The relationship between the two managers and between the managers and the employees can be described as one of communication: there are morning meetings, weekly newsletters and an 'open door' policy. While the new managers work together with employees less than their predecessors, they provide support for the employees at the unit level or in the responsibility groups.

Like the former managers, the new managers had a lot of experience from the salutogenic concept of elderly care, which directs attention to possibilities rather than problems. The vision of the new manager is elderly care with the user in focus, which is similar to the values of the former managers. Despite this, some things have changed when it comes to leadership. One of the employees explained:

> She [one of the former managers] was the best! She was not a 'boss', so to say; she was one of us. If you told her about a problem, she grabbed the problem and solved it. Right there. (Assistant nurse)

The same assistant nurse described the present leadership at Sun Garden:

> It's more like, you are free to fix it as you please. Even if I am in charge of the problem you do not really get the support you need. This is how I feel. (Assistant nurse)
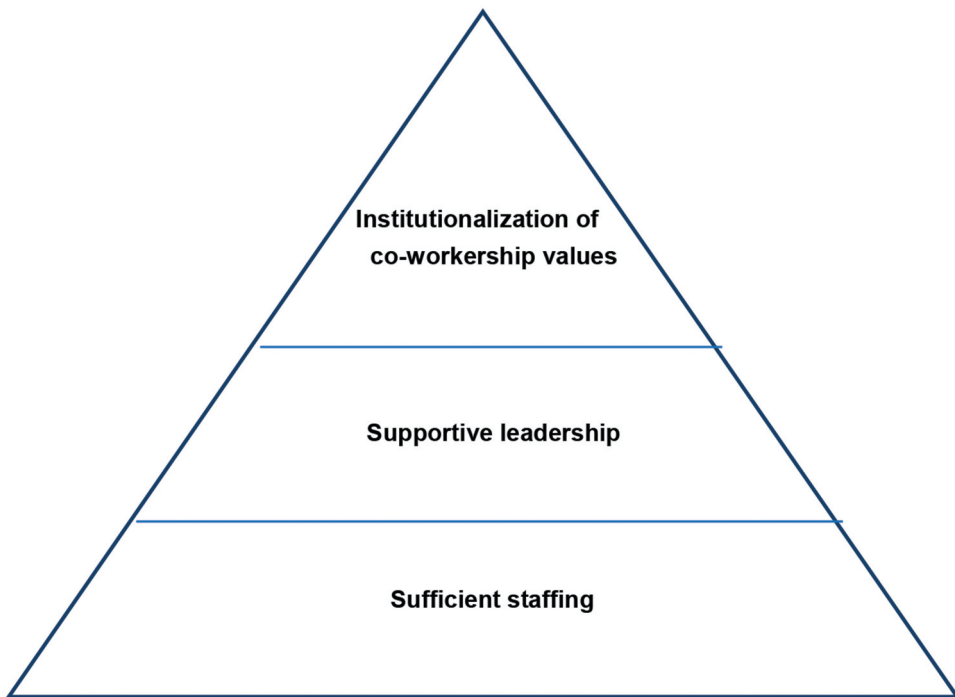
Figure 2. A model for co-workership retention.

A model for co-workership retention

The results section illustrates how co-workership at Sun Garden was continuously challenged. Co-workership retention basically defines successful strategies to approach these challenges. With a foundation in institutional theory assumptions, such as norms, beliefs and routines (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Scott 1995), contextual factors that challenge co-workership at the workplace can be identified and discussed. Institutional theory framework helps explain how challenges to co-workership are shaped in everyday work in the relations among leadership and co-workership. Competing norms and beliefs (Friedland and Alford 1991; Scott and Christensen 1995) regarding the empirical grounded co-workership challenges – staffing problems, supportive leadership, us-and-them thinking and traditional professional roles – can explain how and why co-worker retention is challenged. The use of norms and beliefs related to the co-worker wheel has led to the identification of three major co-workership retention strategies: *sufficient staffing, supportive leadership* and *institutionalization of co-workership values*. Together they constitute an integrated model for co-workership retention (See Figure 2).

Sufficient staffing

The bottom level of the model is based on empirical evidence concerning the feelings of stress and exhaustion experienced by some of the interviewees from departments with personnel shortages. This finding has been reported several times in the nursing management literature (Sietsema and Spradley 1987; Wilson 1998; Caroline 1994; Aitamaa et al.

2010). The data clearly show that even if Sun Garden developed good practices enhancing co-workership, such as a good community spirit and cooperation between the different departments, employees were less willing to help other departments during periods of under-staffing. Thus, community spirit and cooperation is somewhat dependent on sufficient staffing. This resembles Andersson's (2013) research on co-workership in elderly care, which emphasized that co-workership required time, structure and support. Community spirit and cooperation seem to require the same conditions, and time, structure and support disappear without sufficient staffing. However, sufficient staffing is not only about numbers; it is about relationships that last. There was a challenge to create a joint spirit among the entirely elderly care centre in units with high personnel turnover, since it takes time for the employees to get to know each other and to develop a good interplay, especially with workers in the different departments.

The main threat to employee engagement in Sun Garden was an increasing long-term problem of under-staffing, since it was difficult to recruit enough personnel with motivation and ability to produce high-quality work. Under-staffing also made it hard to direct attention to the work in the responsibility groups, since daily and basic care took all the workers' time and they only could attend the meetings if there were enough workers to perform the daily duties with the tenants. The responsibility groups had generated a lot of engagement among the employees, so under-staffing threatened the engagement in several different ways. There was a feeling among several informants that the work drained the employees' energy levels. A high proportion of the employees reported problems achieving work/life balance and finding enough time for recovery. Employee engagement caused by extended work roles and individuals' search for meaning and fulfilment at work could challenge the work/life balance and create other dilemmas connected to post-bureaucratic organizing (cf. Elliott and Turnbull 2003). One of the informants talked about the responsibility groups as a form of acknowledgement and a structure for being seen as something more than an assistant nurse. The responsibility groups led to a co-workership situation where the employee has the opportunity to be an active and constructive co-worker.

High work pressure caused by under-staffing could also lead to a reversion towards a more passive work role. Previous research on elderly care has shown that when organizational conditions exert pressure, care as a mere technical activity or routine seems to be prioritized (Johannessen, Werner, and Steihaug 2014), meaning that the service aspect of care (as salutogenic approach) and organizational responsibilities would risk being down-prioritized. This inherent priority within the traditional work role was evident in the studied unit. If responsibility groups threatened basic care work because of staffing problems, workers did not participate in group meetings. During times when organizational conditions exerted pressure, the entire structure of responsibility groups was neglected.

Supportive leadership

The second layer of the model, supportive leadership, also proved important in the empirical material. In this sense, co-workership retention has similarities with employee retention (e.g., Eisenberger et al. 2002) concerning the importance of leadership, with one major difference. When employee retention is dependent on employees perceiving

organizational support through leadership, supportive leadership as co-workership retention means support for the idea of co-workership; that is, leaders living the values of co-workership and emphasizing conditions for co-workership (cf. Stockhult 2013). Rather than focusing on the relation between the leader and the employee, the relation between the idea of co-workership and the employee matters for co-workership retention. Schultz, André, and Sjøvold (2015) emphasized the role of leadership in elderly care as balancing the three facets: the quality of care, the working environment and the societal efficiency. However, taking steps towards collective leadership, as in the present study, means that leadership should support organizational values that enable employees to become important actors in such balancing, rather than leaders performing the balancing. André et al. (2014) showed that leadership in elderly care supporting empowerment – a similar concept to co-workership – is important for improving quality.

At Sun Garden, the changing leadership as a consequence of appointing new managers illustrated the importance of leadership. The employees described the former managers as charismatic and enthusiastic individuals who worked closely with them. They wanted the employees to participate in things beyond their formal job description and displayed this with their own actions. Nevertheless, the new managers themselves described their relationships with their employees as open and trustworthy. While the purpose of the leadership, as described by the leaders, remains the same, the meaning of openness has changed. The openness has developed in a more formal way through new forms of organizing communication within the organization, such as more formalized meetings. The leadership expressed by previous managers was less formalized, but still appreciated even more by the employees. The managers were more involved in the daily work at that time, which meant that formal meetings were not necessary.

The interviewed employees valued the more direct style of leadership, where the manager herself could sometimes step in and help an employee; this resembles Andersson's (2013) elderly care research results. Accordingly, the retention of co-workership could be described as the extent of formalization of leadership but also the distance between the leader and the employee. In this context, leadership characterized by action is seen as more trustworthy by the employees, and the change in that case could be described as lacking support. The relations built by formal meetings could not replace those built by a more informal leadership. A manager who helps is seen as one who is supportive and trustworthy, which enhances the relations and reduces challenges of co-workership retention. This resembles research results on retail stores from Wickelgren et al. (2012), who described how leadership that is informal, direct and frequent tends to support co-workership values, since leaders and employees work, exchange ideas and solve problems together.

There is a fine line between intervening as a manager and letting the group solve the problem itself. Previous co-workership studies have directed attention to the complex relationship between leadership/management and co-workership (e.g., Andersson and Lindeberg 2006; Hällstén and Lindell 2006; Stockhult 2013). Trust is a big part of a manager's decision to either intervene or let the group solve the problems itself. Active co-workership is built on trust and openness (Hällstén and Tengblad 2006; Tengblad 2010; Andersson and Tengblad 2015; Andersson 2018). In some way, the open way of communicating as an important aspect in the former more informal dialogue between leaders and employees provided a better base for trust to develop.

Institutionalization of co-workership values

The top layer of the model concerns the values needed to maintain a well-developed co-workership. Co-workership is largely about values and about retaining values identified in the co-workership wheel (Hällstén and Tengblad 2006). Institutionalization of these values is central, as has been stated in employee retention research (Sheridan 1992). As mentioned in the previous section, trust is one of these values and is closely related to leadership. Trust ties people together and strengthens relationships (Rousseau 1998). Openness is one way of supporting trust and is manifested primarily by open dialogue between all parties, whether between managers and workers, between workers and workers, or between workers and employers in general.

Organizations with well-developed co-workership have employees who feel a community spirit and are oriented towards the maintaining of cooperation with other employees (Andersson 2018). As our empirical material shows, there is good community spirit within Sun Garden. The different departments regularly help each other when necessary. The system where the employees work in different departments helps them learn about each other and helps create a joint spirit for the care centre.

In general, the employees felt that their work was meaningful and that they were engaged in their work. The personnel turnover and sick leave rate in Sun Garden was clearly below the average for the municipality. As Rana (2015) described, introducing such work systems empowers employees, and employee engagement can be considered as an outcome of high-involvement work systems. However, the processual and reciprocal character of co-workership makes the question of pre-condition or outcome less important, since both are correct. The Sun Garden case illustrates that employee engagement is both a pre-condition and an outcome of developed co-workership.

Previous co-workership research has emphasized that constructive co-workership requires both task competence and organizational competence (e.g., Andersson and Tengblad 2015; Andersson 2018). Task competence is the ability to perform work tasks, whereas organizational competence is the ability to integrate care providers' work into the organizational context, which means competences such as co-operation, responsibility for organizational goals, and loyalty.

Managers in the studied organization worked hard to enable more responsibility, both in relation to the professional work (mainly the salutogenic perspective) and in relation to organizational demands (mainly the responsibility groups). The responsibility groups constituted a core in the more active and constructive co-workership that evolved at the elderly care unit. Furthermore, the salutogenic approach nurtured a more active professional role, especially in relation to the users. Whereas elderly care can otherwise be performed in a rather passive way – keeping the tenants as clean and healthy as possible – a salutogenic approach means keeping them active and 'alive'. Users should not only be passive objects that are cared for; their abilities and willingness should be supported, which requires a more active and holistic approach from the elderly care professionals. The combination of a salutogenic approach and co-workership development created a more active and constructive co-workership, where workers at the unit were proud of their work and of their organization.

However, even if the co-workership development raised the co-workership to new levels of responsibility and initiative, retention was not easy. Traditional work roles constantly

challenged the retention of co-workership in different ways. Responsibility and initiative are not qualities that can be taken for granted; they have to be learned (Andersson 2013). Consequently, co-workership development was very much about learning-by-doing; when workers were empowered to take responsibility in responsibility groups, the activities of taking responsibility implicitly implied learning. However, when new workers were employed, it was not self-evident that they had the required skills to take responsibility, either in relation to organizational issues or to a salutogenic perspective. Furthermore, it was not self-evident that they even wanted to do this; they were used to traditional work roles and did not perceive activities such as purchases or planning to be related to their role. Even if the work role had changed in the unit, the general professional role in society had not changed, which meant that every new recruited worker presented a possible challenge to the achieved work role in the unit – not only by acting according to a traditional work role, but also to influence existing workers and make them doubt what they were doing. Socializing new staff into this upgraded work role takes time and resources (Korte 2010), which may be insufficient in strained situations.

Conclusions

The present study contributes to research on co-workership by focusing on the retention dimension, which is lacking in previous research. We did this by identifying and analysing different challenges to co-workership retention and how co-workership retention can be upheld. It is clear that co-workership needs retention work, since there are constant challenges in the organization to co-workership. This paper focuses on the retention of co-workership after a successful co-workership development project in an elderly care centre that attracted a lot of national attention. The fact that the co-workership development project is performed in elderly care is especially interesting, since the concept of co-workership has traditionally been related to industries with high-skilled and high-status workers (Hällstén and Tengblad 2006). Co-workership is entering new industries that are not high-profile, such as elderly care (Andersson 2013), call centres (Stockhult 2005), postal services (Stockhult 2013) and retail (Wickelgren et al. 2012; Andersson et al. 2013).

The present study described an elderly care centre with highly developed co-workership, which has been developed from a successful organizational change. The study was conducted six years after a transformational organizational change occurred and can therefore enrich our knowledge about how an idea of co-workership is retained in the long run. Our findings confirm earlier studies of co-workership in elderly care, which have found that learning co-workership requires time, structure and support (Andersson 2013). The present study takes this a step further and stresses that support is not just for employees as workers but also for workers as co-workers who could contribute to the organization as a whole. According to this idea, co-workership is challenged by the institutional norms and beliefs of what a co-worker at an elderly care organization contributes. Such norms challenge traditional professional norms of both co-workership and leadership. All in all, the analysis shows that even if it possible to institutionalize new role behaviour and work practices, there is an ongoing need to support these behaviours and practices with appropriate leadership and sufficient staffing and training.

A major contribution of this study is the identification of the co-workership retention model, which constitutes a requisite for the long-term viability of a well-developed co-

workership and, in turn, for high-quality operations. This is a missing link in the research literature about organizational change and development; that is, what can enable a change effort to stand the test of time. There is always a danger that organizational development efforts lose momentum and that an organization may even revert to its state before the development efforts started (Abrahamsson 2002). Therefore, the co-workership retention model is not only a contribution to co-workership research, it is a contribution to the HRD field at large, by showing both the possibilities and challenges of retention of development efforts. HRD is about individual, group and organizational development and learning. Regardless of the type of development, retention is needed in order to make it last. The co-workership retention model can easily be translated to other fields of development to understand necessary retention strategies. Therefore, investigating adaption of the co-workership retention model to other areas within HRD is also a suggestion for future research.

Finally, this study contributes to collective leadership research, which needs more empirical studies (Crevani, Lindgren, and Packendorff 2010). Individual-centric views of leadership tend to neglect other important processes and actors that contribute to leading an organization (Denis, Lamothe, and Langley 2001), such as co-workership. The fact that supportive leadership is one of the identified co-workership retention strategies in the study further underlines the intertwined processes of leadership and co-workership over time.

Note

1. Pseudonym used for the case organization in this text.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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