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## A participatory stress intervention process - the core of a self-help tool to succesful preventive changes

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## **A participatory stress intervention process - the core of a self-help tool to successful preventive changes**

The aim of this paper is to present the results of a research project which had the objective to study whether it is **possible to develop and implement successful stress preventive changes using a participatory intervention process in the form of a self-help tool.**

The self-help tool was modeled as part of the same research project based on the premises that in order to secure a sustainable anchoring of primary preventive organizational changes it is vital to develop a common understanding of problems and causal relations as well as ownership, and base the changes on the collective reflections and organizational capabilities.

Previous studies have made it clear that the prevailing stress management practice in knowledge intensive companies in Denmark has had an individual focus. The practice can overall thus be characterised as individualised, informal and randomised. The consequence of this approach has been characterized by secondary and tertiary stress management interventions. The result is short-sighted solutions and recurring incidents besides new cases. This affects the performance and productivity, and is evidently costly. A need for new knowledge and tools on what can secure sustainable preventive changes has consequently been expressed from the knowledge industry.

This paper claims that it is possible to develop and implement successful stress preventive changes using a self-help tool. The core of the tool to successful preventive changes consists of a participatory stress intervention process. The tool has been applied in a case study in six knowledge intensive companies with the aim to support the development and implementation of primary preventive changes and create an opportunity to change the work practices and conditions as well as improve business.

The self-help tool is based on several assumptions where participation is a key focal point. Firstly, changes are to be based on a local collective understanding of the causal relations and rationale behind the changes in order to secure sustainability. Secondly, tacit knowledge on working conditions, work practices, related problems, causality and relevant solutions is to be made explicit using collective rooms for reflections. The knowledge is used in the development and implementation of preventive organizational changes. Finally, both employees and managers are to develop a plan for the intervention which should point at which changes can be initiated to solve their problems, who will benefit from the changes, what are the expected results and what are the potential obstacles.

This paper reports on the results of the six companies having carried out the intervention using the self-help tool including the conditions for success and obstacles.

For nine months six companies worked with the self-help process tool which resulted in the development and implementation of a set of organizational changes. The changes were based on local reflections in several departments where both employees and managers participated, both separately and together. Firstly, Fish-bone charts by Ishikawa were used to map the experiences of the employees in relation to work practices and conditions. A corresponding workshop was carried out among the managers where the focus was still on the employees and their working life. The outcome of the workshops was a set of organisational conditions, either stated to cause stress and strain in the daily work or to create enthusiasm. Secondly, following the Fish-bone workshops the whole department prioritised the suggested problems and improvements. Based on the collective reflections and prioritising several organizational changes were initiated.

The process and results were studied and evaluated systematically during the whole project period in order to identify and understand what supported progress and caused barriers.

The interventions resulted in specific local changes both in work practices and working conditions which could be characterised as primary preventive changes. They focused on topics like acknowledgement, managerial feedback, and quality of meetings and planning of tasks. The changes resulted in improved experienced well-being, less strain and frustrations and improved performance quality among the employees. From a managerial perspective it resulted in reduced costs of illness, improved performance, productivity and leadership. Moreover, it created an organizational awareness that successful preventive changes are to be based on participation and systematic collective reflections about the work practices and conditions. From a process point of view it is evident that successful preventive changes require allocation of resources and explicit management support. It is also a key factor that a company is familiar with running internal change processes and that it has internal resources to dedicate to the assignment as coordinator of the changes and activities.

The experimental use of the presented self-help tool gave support to the assumption that it can result in successful development and implementation of primary preventive changes and create an opportunity to change the work practices and conditions as well as improve business. In order to succeed it requires support from a dedicated coordinator and experience in running internal projects as well as well known factors like allocation of resources and management support besides.