

RESEARCH FORUM

DIGNITY AT WORK IS ABOUT MORE THAN GOOD PEOPLE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

Dignity at work is a complex phenomenon, related to various organisational issues such as mismanagement, over-long hours, bullying and poor working environments. As a basic human right, it has been recognised by businesses through initiatives such as work-life balance and equal opportunities.

While these are valuable interventions, we believe that dignity at work should be seen as more than simply good people management, where the ultimate goal is inevitably increasing performance.

New research at Lancaster University Management School, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, suggests that dignity can be more clearly explored if its multi-dimensional character is highlighted. Our research proposes that, rather than talking in general terms about dignity at work, it helps to delineate different dimensions – dignity *in* work (“dignified work”) and dignity *at* work (“dignified workers”).

“Dignified work” is work that is interesting and meaningful and that includes a degree of autonomy and recognised social status. “Dignified workers” relates to how people are perceived and valued in the workplace – the structures and practices that offer equality of opportunity, a collective and an individual voice, safe and healthy working conditions, secure terms of

employment, and just rewards. The evidence suggests that achieving at least some elements of these two dimensions causes organisations to be seen as employers of choice, beacons of best practice and, hence, dignified workplaces.

The multi-dimensional analysis we are using will clarify some of the complexities involved in understanding dignity at work and give far greater transparency to the role that government policy, organisations and management practice might play.

The research will investigate existing data, including information on people’s experiences of work and their place in the labour market. The three main sources it will use are the *Labour Force Survey*, the *Sunday Times Best Companies to Work For* list and the *British Household Panel Survey*.

This data will offer the opportunity to identify the relationships between what might be perceived as “good work”, the structures and practices that support that work, and the overall well-being and success of the company and its employees.

The research will have a broad scope rather than examining issues – such as bullying, hours worked and security – in isolation, to allow us to see them as dimensions that contribute to employee and corporate well-being. In doing so, we will bring all the dimensions into a singular framework of analysis that reveals how they work together to create, maintain or negate dignity at work.

The research will also explore people’s positions in the social world in terms of race, gender, age, and location; their experiences of work; and how these can be related to an understanding of dignity.

Sharon Bolton is reader in organisational analysis and director of the MA programme in human resource and knowledge management at Lancaster University Management School. For further information, visit the dignity project’s website. >> www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/Departments/owt/Research/dignity



LEARNING CENTRE

TRAINERS SHOULD EASE OFF THE INFLUENCE PEDAL

Is it a trainer’s job to influence participants? Earlier in my career I probably would have said “yes”, but now I’m not so sure.

Persuasion and influencing reduce free choice on the part of the person being persuaded. And if we don’t choose freely to change a way of behaving, we may not take full responsibility for the consequences of the change. Also, it is unlikely that I, the trainer, will ever fully appreciate the context in which one of my participants has to execute a change. So how can I know what I should be persuading them to do?

As a trainer, it is impossible to completely avoid influencing people. Unless we lack credibility, we will influence others simply by the way we behave. We invite participants to join in a line of thinking or an activity; we intrigue them, or promise challenge or fun. In these ways and many more, we influence people and enable them to have a more varied and rich experience of a topic.

But when it comes to the nitty-gritty of changing behaviour back at work, we probably need to ease up on the influencing pedal. There, we want to inform, to enable people to choose to behave differently, and to facilitate wise choices. If they are given the knowledge, time and space, our participants will know what the best choice is for them.

I wonder if, in our eagerness to please our paymasters, we sometimes inadvertently accept the job of persuading people to change? We receive urgent instructions: the new performance management system must be implemented, leaders must adopt a coaching style, business developers must build trust with their clients. It is our job to facilitate such changes happening. But it is not our job to persuade people to make them.

Robust change depends on the free and active co-operation of all involved. Change produced by an exercise of my will over yours is fragile.

Alison Hardingham is director of business psychology, Yellow Dog Consulting

KEY POINTS

- Lancaster University is researching the concept of “dignity at work” to further understanding of employee well-being in the contemporary workplace.
- The research will analyse data about people’s experiences of work and their place in the labour market.
- The research will provide an opportunity to identify what might be perceived as “good work”; the structures and practices that support that work, and the overall well-being and success of the company and its employees.

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