

The view of freedom and standardisation among managers in Swedish construction contractor projects

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Abstract

It has been suggested that standardisation improves productivity. Simultaneously, construction contractor project managers are given freedom to run projects as if they were independent firms. If this is a motivating factor for the managers, firms may have to find other ways to improve productivity than to increase standardisation to be able to stimulate their most skilled managers. It could prove important to recognise their need for freedom before they start looking for alternative places of employment.

The purpose of this article is to inquire how standardisation may or may not conflict with contractor project managers' sense of freedom.

Interviews with 15 contractor project managers from Swedish medium-sized construction contractor enterprises indicate that standardised processes do not necessarily conflict with their sense of freedom and work motivation as long as their ability to overview the production process is preserved.

Based on the findings it is argued that standardisation should be implemented and developed with respect from top managers using a bottom-up approach.

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1. Introduction

Top managers in contractor organisations often advocate standards – for e.g. materials, processes, procedures, work roles and organisational structures – in order to increase productivity and to create competitive advantages (Gadde and Håkansson, 2001; Santos et al., 2002). The implementation of these standards is habitually delegated to middle managers. But implementing standards in construction is argued to be difficult and not seldom confronted with obstacles such as; projects of different kinds (Winch, 2002), companies with different foci (Egan, 1998), and a generally held view that every project is unique (Josephson and Saukkoriipi, 2007).

A counter-argument to increased standardisation in Swedish construction projects is that the managers (construction managers, project managers, site managers, and foremen, herein referred to as

the contractor project managers) who act as CEOs of construction projects (Styhre, 2006) may find motivation in their 'freedom' to work in a relatively unstandardised environment. It has further been suggested that these managers require freedom to navigate in their complex realities (Djebarni, 1996). Therefore, before standardisations are induced, it is important to question how it could influence the contractor project manager's sense of freedom and motivation.

It is not difficult to imagine that the decision to standardise in order to increase productivity is far from straightforward for construction firms. If the contractor managers, in charge of construction projects, become less motivated or chose to leave the firm due to imposition of new standards, productivity is likely to be affected negatively. Given the unique role and the considerable influence that contractor project managers have in Swedish construction projects, it may be prudent to ensure their involvement in this discussion. It should be investigated if these managers perceive loss of freedom as a consequence of standardisation. If so, are they willing to renounce some elements of

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freedom without losing motivation or even starting to look for alternative employment? Yet their views have been given little attention in the academic debate.

The purpose of this article is to inquire how standardisation may or may not conflict with contractor project managers' sense of freedom. Within the scope are two related research questions: 1) What aspects of freedom do the managers appreciate? and 2) How do the managers perceive standardisation? Combining the answers to these two questions opens up for a discussion on how standardisation may or may not conflict with the managers' sense of freedom.

The point of departure is the construction contractor project managers' and their situation at work, contrasting organisational control through standardisation on the one hand and the managers' need for freedom on the other. The article draws on literature review study where attention is directed to the concept of freedom from a work perspective and managers' perceived need for it, combined with explorative interviews with 15 managers from three medium-sized Swedish contractor firms.

1.1. Freedom

The term freedom has various meanings and interpretations but is basically subjective, centred on the individual (Ljungqvist, 1987; Sen, 2002). Due to the subjective nature of the term it has been suggested that individuals develop an idea of what they perceive freedom to be. This perception is to a great extent dependent on the individuals' background, experiences and expectations (Ljungqvist, 1987; Sandoff and Widell, 2009). It follows that some individuals require more freedom than others (Ljungqvist, 1987). Since freedom is subjective using the term "sense of freedom" is more appropriate and will be used hereafter.

In the following an attempt is made to define freedom from a work perspective. The literature that concerns freedom in relation to freedom of speech, empowerment or liberty will therefore not be further considered. To set the scene of how freedom from a work perspective is conceptualised throughout this paper, an indulgent definition by Sandoff and Widell (2009) is given. They argue that if there is compassion for work, if pleasure is sought for in contrast to pain, and if individuals are allowed to take on responsibilities, then the individual will have a sense of freedom. This definition will hereafter be viewed as a reference point in defining individual freedom from a work perspective.

The existing intricacy in defining individual freedom from a work perspective is easily illustrated by the question on how individuals' perception of the term is viewed in relation to other individuals at the workplace. Ljungqvist (1987) who maintains a psychological aspect argues that individual freedom, even from a work perspective, can be positioned on a scale between total dependence and total isolation from other individuals. Prendergast (2004), who focuses on freedom from an economist's viewpoint, instead argues that in order not to create obstacles for others at the workplace, freedom has to be recognised as a social commitment to adapt to the rest of society, even when focusing on an individual's perception of the term. She suggests that freedom, from a workplace perspective, has to be related to having due

respect for the needs of others. Sen (2002) who, in line with Prendergast (2004) argues for the term freedom in relation to dependency of others when identifying it divides freedom into opportunity freedom (to pursue what the individual value) and process freedom (to be immune from interference from others).

Given that an organisation is built up on individuals and their ability to collaborate it is herein maintained that freedom from a work place perspective should not be viewed in isolation from others. Instead, freedom from a work perspective is herein ensnared to a social commitment to adapt to the rest of society in line with the reasoning of Sen (2002) and Prendergast (2004).

The level of freedom at the workplace has been argued to affect individuals' motivation and well-being (Krause, 2004; Ljungqvist, 1987; Sandoff and Widell, 2009). An example in favour of freedom for the individual at the workplace comes from Krause (2004) who argues that granting autonomy to individuals is positively related to the individuals' innovative behaviour. She suggests that greater autonomy supports experimentation and the implementation of new ideas, both seen to be important to contractor project managers in construction.

Sandoff and Widell (2009) take the above argument further by arguing that the opposite of freedom and motivation at work is docility. Thereby they draw a more nuanced representation of individual freedom in the work role. They further highlight some aspects of individual freedom at work, which are not always positive from a collaborative perspective in relationships to colleagues. In line with Krause (2004) they argue that individuals who feel free in their work-role are more likely to challenge established routines and to create changes that make work more effective. But Sandoff and Widell (2009) point out that individuals who feel free at work might well be more demanding to manage. They are even, in accordance to the above argument, likely to cause difficulties when trying to standardise the processes, which they are in charge of.

1.1.1. Construction contractor project managers and freedom

The qualities of an individual that feel freedom as described above are not all beneficial for contractor project managers in construction since they are expected to shoulder a middle managers' role in the contractor organisation. Their ability to listen carefully and to take instructions may prove to be quite as important as being innovative (cf. Floyd and Wooldridge, 1997). Styhre (2007) who also raises questions concerning middle managers' freedom argues that greater individual freedom and responsibility could lead to a too heavy work-load and too much stress on one single individual. This in turn, he argues, may lead to poor decision-making, which is likely to affect project outcomes.

Another aspect of taking care of contractor project manager's sense of freedom that should be considered follows from the reasoning of Sandoff and Widell (2009) who maintain that this concern may lead to less sense of freedom for top management or other employees within the project organisation. Their ability to take on responsibilities, to seek pleasure instead of pain and to feel compassion in their work may to some extent be lost by continuously granting freedom to the contractor project managers.

A review of literature that focuses foremost on freedom and factors influencing freedom among contractor project managers

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