Peer Group Counseling as a Tool for Promoting Managers' Communication Skills in Industrial and Planning Organizations

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Abstract— In this study, we focus on investigating and developing communication skills for managers and employees from industrial and planning based organizations that participated in Frictionless Communication (FriCo) project. Our main aim was to explore the effectiveness of Peer Group Counseling – training method (PGC) in promoting managers' communication skills and to find out the possible changes in these skills before and after the training. We used Counseling Response Observation System (CROS) to examine communication skills in 11 managers during the training. In examining the communication skills with CROS, we focused on the periods before and after the training. Communication skills were increased after participating in PGC training. The theoretical background and the training method are presented first, then we describe the methods and measures used in this study and last, the results and conclusions of the study are presented. It seems that the training method (PGC) is effective for improving communication skills. This study points out also the importance of communication skills in working life and for subjective well-being at work.

Keywords-communication; communication skills; training; counseling; organizations; leadership.

I. INTRODUCTION

The role of communication skills in working life has clearly increased lately and the demand for developing communication skills for managers and personnel overall has risen. Communication and information processes have become vital for success specifically in knowledge organizations. [1] Social relationships and communication are important factors of working conditions in creating functionality to work, engagement and commitment for employees' [2]. Current research also suggests concentrating on the relationship between supervisor and subordinate and developing communication skills in managers [3]. Dialogic leadership brings out the idea that it is more vital to concentrate on the interactional process of supervisor and subordinates instead of individual characteristics of the leader [3][4][5]. The quality of the relationship between supervisor and subordinate can be seen by Leader-member exchange theory (LMX) [6]. The impact of the quality of this relationship has been shown to have great impact for

example on employee job satisfaction, well-being, reduced staff turnover and innovativeness [7][8][9]. The baseline of LMX lies in social theory [8] and social exchange theory [11][12].

A growing body of research indicates to a large number of problems related to psychological health in work settings [13][14]. Psychological health problems reflect mostly on job stress and burn out. One important cause for job stress and burn out seems to be related to social interactions and lack of social contact [15]. Social skills and communication skills are associated with two indicators of psychological well-being: reduced symptoms of depression and life satisfaction [16]. Bakker et al. [7] have suggested one option for developing working life and subjective well-being by bringing out the concept of work engagement [17][18]. Even though it has been seen that social interaction is an important factor in creating engagement of employees, there is not much research about this relationship between social interaction and employee engagement. Hayase [18] points out that there is a positive relation between internal communication and employee engagement. Current research also shows that internal communication is associated with commitment, discretionary effort and meaningful work which can all be seen as factors of work engagement [2][18]. When planning the Frictionless Communication (FriCo) project, the baseline was the demand arising from the working life for improving the communication skills of young engineers [19][20]. The impact of engineers' communication skills in adjusting to jobs and achieving career goals seems to be meaningful [21]. Many of the engineers work in leadership positions already at the very beginning of their career, which creates the demand for leadership skills which are not however developed much during university training (see for example [22]).

There is a relationship between social skills and greater well-being (lower level of stress and social skills). The competitiveness depends more on intangible assets that are mostly related to the social interaction of people in organizations and can be identified by psychological and social capital. For competitiveness and creating innovations, there is a demand for qualitative and fluent communication in organization knowledge creation process. Leaders' relational behavior is positively associated with social capital

in organizations. Social capital includes the feeling of enthusiasm which is positively associated with employee job performance. [23][24]

The field of communication skills and management is still quite new and growing. There is some study to be found on supervisory communication skills but this kind of systematic training like peer Group Counseling –training method (PGC) on communication skills in supervisors or managers is still quite new and infrequent. Zohar et al. [25] bring out a discourse-based intervention for modifying supervisory communication for creating safety climate and improve performance. Guidance-based leadership training program also concentrates on communication skills training [26].

Communication skills' training is not that noticeable in the field of management but in the area of counseling and therapy it is clearly seen as very important. In counseling and therapy sessions the role of communication skills is clearly significant and counselors and therapists are systematically trained in such skills. Most of the theories in the background of this method PGC also lie in counseling and therapy. These skills are needed in building a successful counselor/therapy and client relationship as well as in supervisor – subordinate relationship. [27][29]

This kind of setting is also quite common among health professionals, especially in doctor-patient relationships [29]-[33]. Moore and Wilkinson [29] have shown results of communication skills training for health professionals. In this setting with three trials on 347 health professionals showed a significant positive effect on communications behaviors and the study suggests providing communication skills training for health professionals. One important finding is also that nurses used more emotional speech than untrained counterparts. This result was also seen in patients who also used more emotional terms when interviewed by trained nurses.

Work engagement is an emerging concept in occupational health psychology and it reflects on job resources and personal resources. The concept of work engagement includes a positive, fulfilling, affective-motivational state of work-related well-being that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption. Job resources can be divided into physical, social and organizational aspects of the job. Job can fulfill human needs like autonomy, relatedness and competence [32]. In this study we concentrate on the social support of the job resources which support and satisfy the need for autonomy and the need to belong. [35][17][34]

In the project FriCo funded by The Finnish Work Environment Fund, we used PGC training for developing the communication skills of the participants. PGC method has been developed at the Research Unit of Psychology at the University of Oulu [36][37]. The main purpose of the FriCo project was to develop communication skills in Finnish industrial and planning organizations. The communication skills were developed at individual, work community and organizational level and the methods in the project are PGC (individual level), ethnographic (work community level) and participating planning (organizational level). The project

develops communication skills in order to create innovativeness in organizations and develop management and leadership that are associated with performance of work community, profitability and subjective well-being.

PGC, also known as consultative method, is based on structured role working, where the participants are given the opportunity to contemplate their own and other participants' experiences of their work issues in emotionally safe and peaceful environments [37]. Consultative method is divided into three phases: orientation, counseling and discussion session and sharing. The phases help the participant to focus on different stages in the discussion and be able to define the concepts of the task of the counselor for the participants. [37] Consultative method is based on multidimensional and process like action [38]. Multidimensionality reflects on a negotiating and inquisitive approach to problem solving. It can be seen in interaction situations that the focus on discussion is on the matter of the client. Consultative method emphasizes the skills in communication that help the owner of the matter to recognize his emotions and knowhow and in that way reach the real problem. Consultative method is developed by peer learning principles [39] [41]. The method focuses on the experiences and expertise of the participants in communication training.

The focus of PGC is on basic skills in counseling and communication. Those skills can be seen as professional counseling and communication skills and those skills can be divided into following items: conducting, listening, dialog, concentricity, reflecting, attending skills, focusing, and agreement. [41][42][43][44]

The approach in this study to counseling and communication skills is based on the Human Relation Counseling Model (HRCM) framework that derives from many formal theoretical points including phenomenological theory and client centered theory [42][44]. HRCM emphasizes a client-centered, problem-solving and helping relationship. The behavior changes and actions (outcomes) can be the result of one or both of the following: 1) the client's exploration and understanding of his or her own feelings, thoughts or actions, or 2) the client's understanding of and decision to modify pertinent environmental and systematic variables [44]. We used the Counselor Response Observation System (CROS) to measure the communication skills of the participants. CROS consists of Counseling Response Coding System (CRCS) which includes the categories reflecting to Ivey's micro skills on counseling and Skilled Verbal Response Scale (SVRS) which consists of seven dimensions of skillful counseling [46][47]. Micro skills in counseling can be divided into verbal and nonverbal skills and in this study and in CROS the focus is on verbal skills: listening, attending and influencing skills [46].

The background of SVRS lies in the definition of helpful verbal responding in HRCM. CRCS categories are derived from Ivey's micro skills. Micro skills model includes combination of a response and its focus and a preliminary model included 12 categories for each response variable (perception check, reflection, specifying question, summary, conclusion, direction, suggestion, self-disclosure, feedback, leading to logical consequences, immediacy, confrontation)

and seven categories for the response focus variable (feeling, action, explanation, history, facts, strengths, context). [47]

CROS consists of six SVRS items as presented in Figure1: 1) the counselor speaks of things that the client has not mentioned, 2) the counselor uses open questions, 3) the counselor focuses on exploring the client's problems, 4) the counselor does not share opinions or give advice, 5) the counselor does not act mechanically, 6) the counselor uses specifying questions [46].
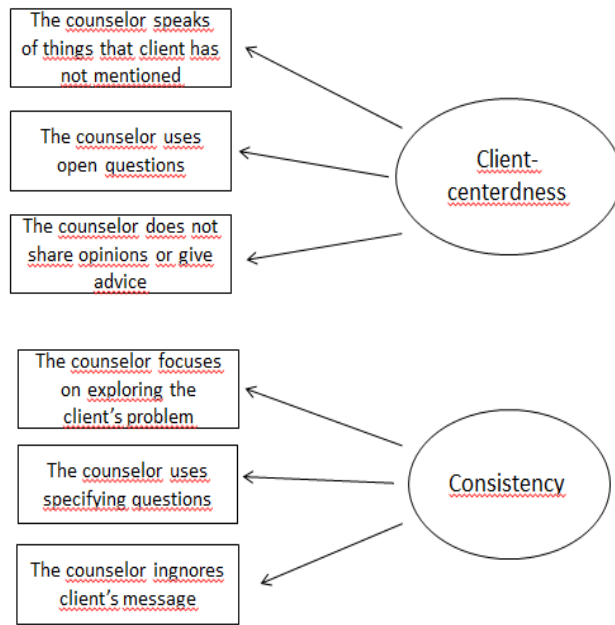
Figure 1. Dimensions of SVRS (Rantanen et al. 2013)

The purposes of the study is to 1) describe the typical communication skills and types of the participants in the beginning of the training based on CROS, 2) present the changes in communication skills during the training and 3) present the participants' feedback about the training and its' effectiveness.

In this study we use SVRS to describe the typical communication skills of the participants and to analyze the changes in communication skills in training. We analyze the written feedback of participants to provide qualitative insight into the effectiveness of PGC as a training method. The study of the role of communication skills in organizations and working life is an important theme today and for the future in occupational health psychology and organizational psychology.

II. METHOD

We present here the methods we use in this study. We begin with participants and then describe procedure of the training method and research design, then continuing on measures and data analysis.

A. Participants

In this study we examine 11 managers and employees who work in industrial and planning organizations and participated in FriCo project. 11 participants take part in the communication skills training. The communication skills' training was firstly planned for managers but we had to replace two of them with other specialists because of time problems. 8 of 11 in training are male and 3 of 11 female. There were no specific selection for sex and the large amount of men is explained by the field of the companies (mostly engineers). PCG training method includes all the participants working in both roles: as subordinate (usually client) and supervisor (usually counselor). The professional status of participant does not play any role in this training design neither does sex.

B. Procedure

The study is executed during the communication skills training with 11 participants taking part in the FriCo project. All the participants work as both supervisor (counselor) and subordinate (client) in the counseling sessions (discussion sessions). The training method in consultative session is based on structured role working when all the participants are required to work as a counselor and a client [37]. We use subordinate-supervisor design in this FRICO project as it is more suitable for the participants coming from industrial and planning organizations. This training in FRICO is planned for managers and that's why we change the counselor- client design into supervisor – subordinate design. That doesn't influence on communication or communication training.

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The sessions are all videotaped. The communication skills training session include an intervention during the session. The communication skills of each participant are measured with SVRS scale.

C. Research Design

The subjects are observed in a peer consultation team as presented in Figure 2. A peer consultation team includes a supervisor (counselor), a subordinate (client), a counselor (supervisor) and observers (2-6). PGC training requires working in both roles as a supervisor (counselor) and a subordinate (client) to be able to adapt communication skills. Working in both roles gives important information via practice about consistency and client-centeredness [46]. We examine the whole consultation sessions and SVRS scores are given to all the participants when working in the role of the client.
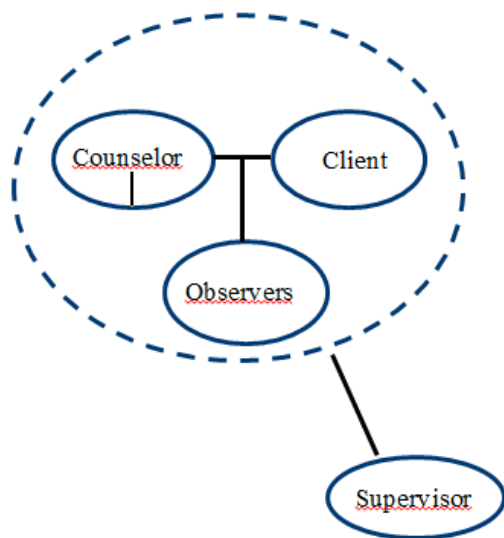
Figure 2. Peer Group Counseling method – roles

D. Measures

1) CROS

We use the CROS to measure the level of communication skills. CROS consists of CRCS and a SVRS, and in this study we focused on SVRS as the aim is to examine the skill level of the participants' communication skills [46]. SVRS focuses on measuring skilled responses of the counselor during a counseling session. The task of counseling is to help the client to explore and understand his/her problem. The counselor can make the most of the counseling session by focusing on the client's message in a personal, consistent and thorough way. Measuring skillful response is based on these qualities. The SRVS consists of six observational items (rated on 4-point Likert scale, 0 = not at all, 1= a little, 2 = somewhat, 3= a lot). SVRS measures the degree of the counselor's ability to help the client to explore his/her problem [45].

2) Data Analysis

We collect the feedback from each participant after each day of training as well as after completing the training. The feedback is collected in the form of open questions and the received qualitative data is analyzed by using constant comparative method (for example [47]). Based on the data it is possible to create an understanding of how the participants experience the PGC method and which facts in their opinion advanced the learning process.

The training sessions are videotaped for later analysis and feedback. A few the participants commented that the presence of the camera had made them feel nervous at first, but during the training recording was forgotten. The actual recordings are however considered to be a good tool for getting feedback and observing one's own action in the communication situations. Based on the comments from the

participants a small training group creates a safe and relaxed atmosphere, which makes concentrating on the practices easier. The immediate feedback after the training sessions, as well as discussions and sharing with the other participants and with the trainer is evaluated as the most effective factor for learning the PGC method.

III. RESULTS

SVRS scores in the first training session do not show any typical ways for managers to respond in the communication situations. It can be seen rather that they each are responding in their own typical ways. None of the six dimensions includes into SVRS scale is considered as better as or worse than the others. When comparing SVRS scores in the first training session and in the second training session the results show that most of the participants were able to improve their communication skills during the training (see Table 1). SVRS scores had increased from the first training session to the second training session (session1: mean 10.71 and session2: mean 13.29). It seemed that client-centeredness had improved the most for these participants, which was seen in this training mostly in dimension scenario "counselor speaks of things that client has not mentioned". Unfortunately, all of the participants were not able to attend the second training session and therefore are missing the second scores, but for those who attended both of the sessions it seems that the training method has been effective and we can show preliminary results.

TABLE 1. PARTICIPANTS' SVRS SCORES IN FIRST AND SECOND COMMUNICATION TRAININGN SESSION (11 participants took part in first counseling and 7 participants took part in second counseling session)

PARTICIPANTS	SVRS SCORES1	SVRS SCORES2
1	7	15
2	7	13
3	15	17
6	12	12
7	13	11
8	10	11
11	11	14

p= 0,000, sd svrs1=2,98, sd svrs2=2,21, mean svrs1 10,71, mean svrs2 13,29

We also analyze the feedback from the participants qualitatively using grounded theory. At the beginning of the training the participants report feeling some confusion concerning the PGC method, but as training progressed, the participants started to comment quite quickly that the method felt good in the sense that participating and actual training

started immediately. The orientation to the training sessions via a short theory overview (for example concerning the link between the communication skills and work well-being) was appreciated by the participants, but there were however several statements that PGC method could not be adopted via theory or by memorizing: based on the comments, adopting PGC method requires concrete practices, self-involvement as well as ability to reflect and change one's own actions. The participants reported that they gained practical and applicable tools for better communication during the training period. The overall comments concerning the usability of the method in everyday work were very positive.

"The method starts to clear up and sometimes at work I remember to listen more carefully and catch their message instead of offering a solution",

"The method is clearing up and I am already using it at work, it is comforting to know that it is possible to train one's communication skills

"Good experience. I would recommend this to others too. First I thought that there should be more theory included, but later on I noticed that this method is good. I got tools to improve my communication and learned what my strengths and challenges are [when communicating]"

"Practices and watching them [from the video recordings] as well as evaluation have been an educating ensemble, which created an opportunity to see one acting in a communication situation. The skill, how to give feedback has improved during the training."

"Very good practices. It is good to get the feedback concerning the performance right in the middle of practice session."

"Practice, practice, practice and feedback. It is not possible to learn these things via theory sessions. This training model is very good. A half-day training session is convenient and starting time at 12 o'clock is good as well."

"The special feature of this training is that you can't learn it "by heart". It requires assimilation, reflecting one's own action and changing one's personal ways to act. Challenging tasks, which most probably everyone is not capable of handling."

"There could be more practices for each trainee, for example the whole day reserved for the training and each trainee could practice several times a day."

When we further analyze the feedback from the training and compared the data with SVRS scores, it could be seen that those participants who were capable of analyzing their own leader experience and reflect on their own action in the practices during the training, received higher SVRS scores in the second training session. We also notice a correlation between the participants' self-reflection and increasing SVRS scores between the first and the second training session.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

In this study we describe an example of a communication skills training method and show results derived from the project FriCo [20][21]. We show here that our method PGC had increased communication skills for the participants, measured with CROS. These are preliminary results but we can see this training method and the subject of communication skills and organization success as an important area to be investigated in the future. We can recommend PGC as a tool for promoting communication skills in managers within different organizations. The effectiveness of this training demands active participation, commitment and self-reflection. We note the connection between high SVRS scores and self-reflection: participants that had used self-reflection during the training had higher scores in SVRS compared to those that had not used self-reflection. Our previous studies also showed the effectiveness of the method in developing counseling and communication skills (for example [36]). There is a need for further study in examining this method with a larger sample and we can only show preliminary results in this paper. We are also interested in examining the connection between communication skills and well-being at work which would benefit this method and research as well as give important information for the research and study of well-being and the Quality of Working Life (QWL).

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