MEANINGFUL WORK, EMPLOYEESHIP AND WELL-BEING

- BRINGING EMPLOYEES' DIGNITY IN THE WORKPLACE

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EURAM CONFERENCE, REYKJAVIK, ICELAND, 19-22 JUNE 2018

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Recent publications:

Nathan, G. (2019, forthcoming). Design Thinking Approach to Ethical (Responsible) Technological Innovation, In: *Responsible Research and Innovation: From Concepts to Practices*, (eds.) R. Gianni, J. Pearson and B. Reber, Routledge.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- This paper and the presentation was based on the earlier presentation at EBEN annual conference in Finland, June 2017.

- Thanks to those anonymous peer reviewers of EURAM for their encouraging remarks and the nomination for the best paper award!

OUTLINE

- Introduction
- Evolution
- Meaningful activity and well-being
- Human dignity and self-respect
- Employeeship in focus NOT leadership
- Workplace dignity and conditions – Implications for leadership
- Implications for corporate culture
- Conclusions

INTRODUCTION

- Increasing interest and research into understanding meaningfulness of work through various theoretical concepts over the last two decades (Bowie, 1998; Michaelson, 2008; Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009); meaningful work is equally important like pay and security or even more (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003: 309)

- However, there is still ambiguity of what is the meaning of meaningful work along with the implications for management in terms of organizational culture, structure and leadership

- Two main traditions: 1. management and organizations studies (includes leadership, organizational culture, recently employee engagement) and 2. humanistic paradigm ('fragmented to explain the holistic experience of meaningful work' Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009: 495)

OBJECTIVES

- To clarify the meaning of meaningful work as a moral issue

- To critique work-life balance and argues for integrating meaningful work within work-life continuum

- To show how it is linked to employee well-being by introducing a concept of 'employeeship' (as a counterpart to leadership – not followership!)

- To show the link between meaningful activity and well-being and to argue for the just context rooted in self-respect (not self-esteem) to bring employees' dignity at workplace

POINT OF DEPARTURE

- My point of departure is to focus on meaningful work from eudemonic (well-being) perspective of employees as their well-being along with dignity at workplace is an ethical concern (Nathan, 2016), rather than hedonic (pleasure seeking) aspects of organizational life (Lepisto et al. 2013; cited in Michaelson et al. 2014).

KINDS AND VALUES OF WORK

- Market based work and wages: manual and knowledge based

- Non wages work: domestic care and charity

- Value of work can be traced from Marxism to today's capitalism

- Certain kinds of work have become commodity – low margin and repetitive and are being replaced by robots – human essence is cut out!

- However, there are many other kinds work that are being performed by human beings but without much regard to their well-being – in many dimensions – emotional, intellectual, physical and spiritual

PROBLEMS WITH MEANING OF WORK

- In market based wages, meaning of work is heavily emphasized on economic value creation in terms of productivity neglecting social value creation in terms of affective, cognitive and attitudinal aspects

- Furthermore, meaning of work is marred by political and social factors; for example, treating employees with stereotypical distinctions of culture, gender etc.

- Employees are 'motivated for all wrong reasons- money, self-esteem, social acceptance, and escape from home...'(Michaelson, 2007)

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VARIOUS ASSOCIATIONS OF MEANINGFUL WORK

- Meaningful work with individual self-esteem (Nozick, 1974)
  - The issue here is self-esteem (a psychological concept) versus self-respect (philosophical)

- Meaningful work is primarily concerned with working conditions for the powerless (Schwartz, 1982; Arneson, 1987; Bowie, 1998)
  - The issue here is that it is not clear how normative context of well-being is addressed

- Kantian concept of meaningful work (Bowie, 1998)
  - This has some merits and I will derive self-respect from Kantian works

- The engagement of the human spirit at work (May et al. 2004)
  - Reveals meaningfulness have the strongest effect on engagement (with a significant role of psychological safety)

- Just and dignified work (Hodson, 2001; Lamont, 2002; Murihead, 2004)
  - Human dignity and just conditions are important

EVOLUTION OF HRM

- HRM as a discipline and practice has been evolving away from treating employees as resources to treating employees through some concepts such as employee satisfaction, employee empowerment and employee engagement

- Employee engagement has recently become a significant topic both within human resources management consultancy and academic research (May et al., 2004; Saks, 2006; Macey and Schneider, 2008)

- However, there are many different meanings associated with employee engagement and a variety of factors have been identified and proposed for employee engagement

MEANINGFUL WORK AND ACTIVITY

- These factors contributing to employee engagement may contribute to meaningfulness of work; however, 'meaning of the employee engagement concept is unclear' (Macey & Schneider, 2008)

- Although employee engagement may be construed to comprise a) psychological sate engagement, b) behavioural engagement and c) traits engagement (Macey & Schneider, 2008), it is not clear how it links to meaningful activities

- Meaning has to be given by the employee and it cannot be ascribed by the management; meanings are authentic when they are ascribed by the participants who engage with their activities and not by the observers (Nathan, 2015a; see also Nathan, 2010; cf. Frankl, 1959)

- Therefore, it is important to link meaningful activity to well-being

ON WELL-BEING

- It is not to develop a theory of well-being but rather to understand the normative context of well-being (Nathan, 2010)

- Well-being cannot be reduced to one master value (Parfit, 1984; Dworkin, 2000 & Scanlon, 2000)

- Our worldview shapes our ethical convictions of good or meaningful life

- Our worldview is gradually formed through interaction of ideas of 'good' life (idealism) and our lived experience (realism) (Nathan, 2010, based on Dilthey)

- One has to genuinely endorse one's ethical convictions; activities are meaningful when they are in accord with their ethical convictions (Nathan, 2010);

- Therefore, our context gains normative significance

NORMATIVE CONTEXT AND JUSTICE

- What should be our normative context for us to engage and carry out our activities in accord with our convictions?

  - ➢ Right circumstances of justice (see Dworkin, 2000) for not only one to genuinely endorse one's convictions, but also to pursue one's meaningful activities accordingly facing 'fair challenges'

  - ➢ Therefore, as the firm is embedded within society and its activities cut across many spheres – social, political, ecological – the above question leads us to rethink the purpose and the social responsibility of the firm in meeting the right circumstances for all stakeholders to pursue their well-being (Nathan, 2016)

MODEL OF CHALLENGE

- Based on Aristotle's view of good life constituted by intrinsic vale of 'skilful performance' Dworkin argues that:

  - 'The model of challenge holds that living a life is itself a performance that demands skill, that it is the most comprehensive and important challenge we face, and that our critical interests consist in the achievements, events, and experiences that mean that we have met the challenge well.' (Dworkin 2000: 253; also cited in Nathan 2010: 76-77)

- Work is a major part of one's life and many people view it as 'an unquestioned necessity' (Michaelson, 2008: 339).

- Therefore, it is important to consider how work affects one's life for living a life as a 'skilful performance'. This requires facing challenges of work.

A CRITIQUE OF WORK-LIFE BALANCE (WLB)

- Meaningful work is a fundamental human need as opposed to being a preference (Yeoman 2014)

- Therefore it is important to consider how work constitutes life

- There are many employee benefits associated with WLB such as flexible working hours, maternity and paternity leave, work from home etc.

- However, the motivation for employers are the organizational outcomes in terms of increased productivity and low turnover etc. without much regard to whether employees find their work meaningful or not.

WHY WLB IS PROBLEMATIC

- The notion of WLB is to prioritize between employees' work and lifestyle, which includes their leisure time, health and family etc.

- Therefore, it is plausible to argue that the quest for WLB implies that work undermines quality of life and therefore we need to strike a balance.

- In this line of argument, life is only meaningful outside of work and therefore it also implies work is meaningless to good or meaningful life.

- Based on the model of challenge, we cannot leave out the challenges one faces at work and achievements that constitute one's critical interests in living a good or meaningful life.

WLB TO WLC (WORK-LIFE CONTINUUM)

- Employees identify themselves as a member of the organization as well as in their professional roles even outside of the work environment notwithstanding integrating some of the organizational values and norms (Van Knippenberg, 2006)

- It is also important for employees to integrate their ethical convictions and values of their life into their workplace for being authentic to themselves

- Cutting out these ethical convictions of life and expecting them to hold on to a different set of ethical convictions in their workplace would be like treating them as schizophrenics! – can lead to 'moral muteness' and 'moral stress' (Bird and Waters, 1989)

- Restricting one's multiple intersecting identities and ethical convictions within the realm of work can lead to constricting one's ethical horizon in life and thereby undermining their well-being (Nathan, 2010 & 2015a)

INTEGRATING MEANINGFUL WORK INTO WLC

- Therefore, we need to consider work-life as a continuum, but not as separate entities

- The focus within work-life continuum should be to integrate meaningful work to their life rather than dichotomizing work and life and to find meaning outside of work

- As Muirhead (2004: 45) puts it: 'The notion of fitting work as an integral part of a life well lived reflects a deeper affirmation of the working life.'

- Non-meaningful work affects other areas of life and can detrimentally affect human well-being (Yeoman, 2012)

- However, it is important to note that 'working with dignity is an essential building block for a life well lived' (Hodson (2001: 4)

DIGNITY AT WORK PLACE

- What makes these people function well despite their repeated failures and setbacks?

- Rowland and Foxx (2003) suggest that people who have *self-respect believe 'that they are worth the effort it takes* to consider their disappointments and failures as closely as their triumphs and successes'.

- The moral significance of self-respect, also known as 'magnanimity', 'proper pride' and a 'sense of dignity', has been discussed in moral philosophy by Aristotle, Augustine, Spinoza, Rousseau, Hume, Hegel, Nietzsche and many others.

- In short, one may define self-respect as 'a sense of one's own dignity' or 'a sense of personal dignity and worth'.

Source: Nathan, 2010; cf. Roland & Foxx, 2003; cf. Dillon, 1995

CONSTITUENTS OF SELF-RESPECT

Deriving from Kant and Dilthey, a self-respecting individual has the responsibility and moral duty to reflect on himself/herself as a moral being. The concept of self-respect should highlight autonomy, character and conduct as essential components (Nathan 2010).

- Autonomy entails taking responsibility for oneself and leading a meaningful life by facing one's challenges in life.

- Character reflects a relational aspect of personality.

- Conduct is the manner in which a person carries out her meaningful activities through social participation.

Source: Nathan, 2010; cf. Sennett, 2003; cf. Roland & Foxx, 2003; cf. Dillon, 1995

THE UPSHOT OF SELF-RESPECT

- The upshot of self-respect (which is constituted by autonomy, character and conduct) is that those who respect themselves will take responsibility seriously and will be considerate of others' self-respect within the context of an interdependent web of social relationships (Nathan, 2010)

- 'If a corporation is to treat the humanity of employees as an end and not as a means merely, then a corporation should honour the self-respect of the employees.' (Bowie 1998: 1085)

ON SELF-ESTEEM

- Self-esteem is a 'subjective measure', an emotional response to self evaluation in terms of liking or feeling good about oneself; it depends on how one feels about one's capacities, performance and perception of others' opinions.

- People who engage in strategies such as 'self-serving attributions' to increase self-esteem can get into social difficulties when others realize that this tactic is being used (Roland and Foxx 2003: 265; cf. Forsyth et al. 1981).

Source: Nathan 2010

SELF-RESPECT AS A MORAL FOUNDATION

- will enable:
    - taking responsibility for one's failures without blaming others
    - giving due credit to others on their successes
    - failures to be taken not as a shame on oneself (lowering self-esteem) but as learning with self-confidence – no loss of self-confidence
    - mutual recognition (no need to demand for respect)
    - diversity to be embraced as a source of growth – (no need to develop us-against-them syndrome)
    - pursuing one's interests whilst allowing others to pursue their interests – no blocking or burdening or arbitrary interference
    - not to take pride on what is given by birth or to be ashamed of

EMPLOYEESHIP

- Employeeship is basically self-leading rather being led (the focus of leadership) empowering employee responsibility (see Nathan, 2015: 117; cf: Lui and Irfaeya, 2004; Møller, 1994); it is not about followership!

- Therefore, it is constituted by
  - Autonomy
  - Ownership and
  - Responsibility

- Although the above components have been emphasized in various contexts of meaningful work and engagement, it has not been defined as above.

- In traditional management practices, employees are expected to take responsibility without much regard to ownership and autonomy

EMPLOYEESHIP, DIGNITY AND WELL-BEING

- Employeeship can foster self-respect which is constituted by autonomy, character and conduct (followership lacks autonomy and ownership and only highlights responsibility)

- Emplyoeeship would enable employees to engage in their meaningful activities according to their ethical convictions thereby contributes to their well-being

- However, it is to be noted that one may be mistaken with one's ethical convictions, due to unfair challenges due to unjust conditions

- Therefore, it is important to provide just context

CONTEXT FOR EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AND DIGNITY

- Employee engagement promotes the notion of 'desirable condition' with the idea of organizational purpose' for attitudinal and behavioural components (Macey and Schneider, 2008: 4); however, it is not clear how these can be linked to autonomy, ownership and responsibility

- The workplace is a 'key arena for human agency and for the realization of human dignity' (Hodson 2001: 16)

- Therefore, it is imperative that workplace provides the normative context of right circumstances for employees to engage in meaningful activities with skilful performance facing fair challenges.

JUST CONTEXT FOR EMPLOYEESHIP

- Autonomy
    - Requires no arbitrary interference by the management
    - Freedom as non-domination – no blocking or burdening of engaging in meaningful activities
    - Meaning ascribed by employees should not become a 'form of normative control' by the management (Lips-Wiersman & Morris; cf. Ashforth & Vaidyanath, 2002; Casey, 1999; Willmot, 1993)
    - Employees to be treated as stakeholders not as resources (Nathan, 2015)
- Ownership
- Responsibility

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP

- Employeeship is to be complemented with leadership in the sense to create just conditions to foster employeeship

- Based on the conditions for deliberation for justice (Nathan, 2014; also Nathan, 2010), the leadership should provide the following conditions:

  - Freedom as non-domination

  - Recognition in three dimensions

    - Acknowledgement in their employees' identities (multiple and intersecting)

    - Authorization of their view points (listening and fully heard)

    - Endorsement of the practices that shall not violate the above conditions

IMPLICATIONS TO ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

- Culture should enable employees to derive their meaning of meaningful work through emplyoeeship

- It should foster self-respect and thereby employeeship

- Freedom as non-domination
  - The ability to resist and oppose (Ciulla, 1998; Lamont, 2002)

- Developing code of ethics and conduct to foster self-respect

- Human Resources Management should be renamed to foster human dignity at work place – Employee Stakeholder Management (see Nathan, 2015)

CONCLUSION

- Argued meaningfulness of work is a moral issue

- Brought to attention the link between self-respect and employeeship and emphasized these are important for dignity at workplace

- Showed meaningful work is constituted by meaningful activities according to one's ethical convictions which contribute to employees' well-being

- Leadership without counterpart of employeeship can lead to undermining employee's dignity at work place

- Leadership should create just conditions at work place and is not about leading employees

- Organizational culture should foster employeeship and HRM should be termed as Employee Stakeholder Management (ESM) in order to re-humanize the workplace with dignity

FURTHER RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

- How employeeship could be put into practice – from job description (key factors of autonomy, ownership and responsibility) to job crafting (be the driver not a follower) and mindfulness at workplace using empirical research or qualitative research through organizational ethnography

- Types of leadership to foster employeeship

- Various organizational structures to foster employeeship

- New forms of employments (including work 4.0) – how employeeship may be implemented

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THANKS FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION

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