Self-esteem based management creates meaning

There is a high price to pay when meaning is left out of management. The model below shows that performance without underlying meaning leads to frustration. This manifests itself in the organisation in the form of apathy, stress, sick leave and notice of resignation. It happens when management gives lower priority to creating meaningful relations.

Put simply, you might say that the performance-focused manager generates results in the company every day but at the same time drains industry for billions of kroner each year in the form of insufficient employee responsibility and commitment. The management approach of many managers is characterised by an inner lack of self-esteem that all too often leads to a lack of qualified relational management, sub-optimisation, irrational decisions, silos and power struggles.

This article seeks to challenge over-rational, performance-oriented, one-track management. It is a criticism of an approach that has been hailed as good management practice for decades.

The double driving force

Managers are usually trained and educated to achieve performance improvements by means of reward based on measurements, management and control. Good management is described as setting goals, creating and supporting competence, following up and rewarding what works and identifying and fixing what does not. This view of management has created a predominantly self-confidence based approach to management. A performance-focused approach. When a manager adopts a performance-focused approach, it stimulates the need for self-confidence, and when a person is praised for his or hers performance it leads to a feeling of competence. It feels like a recognition of ability. It feels nice, often give a feeling of pleasure and can motivate people to great lengths, especially if this is the only kind of praise a person has previously known. It, however, seldom feels meaningful on an emotional level.
The model below shows that the performance-oriented approach only affects people at a certain emotional level. Cf. the model below, the performance-oriented rarely speaks to our core values and deeper needs. From a motivational perspective, self-confidence only activates two cylinders in a six-cylinder engine or put another way: all too often a narrow performance focus leaves out deeper motivation and a sense of meaning.

If we want to realise more of our potential and as managers create the basis for employees doing the same, we must experience relationships that promote and support both self-confidence and self-esteem. We must thus activate the double driving force that exists in what we call the developing result and relation(ship).

Recognition based on self-esteem comes from being seen as the people we are. When a manager practices self-esteem recognition, he tries to see, hear and confirm not only the abilities of the individual, but equally what the person stands for and the underlying initiative. This approach results in a common examination of the process, and what works for oneself and the other person in the many work situations in which there is something personal at stake. Where we feel committed and want something from the other person.

Recognition based on self-esteem is reciprocal and relational. Focus is given to the importance of the quality of the relation, but also the importance of an inner reflexive process. It is this inner self-focus or self-awareness that enables a genuine response. An awareness that is activated and heightened through interaction with others who insist on developing the relation. Relations based on self-esteem cause both parties to grow and provide the courage for further self-development. This paves the way for a strengthening of mutual confidence and thus a strengthening of the conditions that promote greater self-esteem as the individual dares to be himself – as manager and/or employee.

**Developing relations and performance**

Self-esteem management seeks to promote developing relational patterns so that the individual’s self-esteem and sense of responsibility grows. The feeling of developing one’s self-esteem creates loyalty towards the developing relationship, and we see greater stability in management groups and teams that work with self-esteem management. We say that the unique human character thrives. Human diversity is the potential of all cooperation. This is where the opportunity lies to combine abilities, opinions and ideas. As the model shows it
creates confrontations or conflicts, but if the relation is developing and acknowledging, such clashes lead to further human development and business innovation. The process generates a meaningful feeling and activates change.

The model below illustrates the developing relationship together with two other restraining relationships. Each approach has its own set of characteristics. Relation patterns that are present in the management group, departmental teams, in the family and in all of us to a greater or lesser degree.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>The restraining relationship</th>
<th>The maintaining relationship</th>
<th>The developing relationship</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Norm</td>
<td>Diversity as a potential for conflict</td>
<td>Diversity is neutralised</td>
<td>Diversity is potential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handling</td>
<td>Rules and control</td>
<td>Common views – pseudo consensus</td>
<td>Cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
<td>Mistake oriented</td>
<td>Lacking or indirect</td>
<td>Involved and involving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confrontation</td>
<td>Attack and defence</td>
<td>Ignored and suppressed</td>
<td>Encouraged and cultivated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict solution</td>
<td>Retrospective</td>
<td>Stagnation</td>
<td>Forward-looking</td>
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<td>Responsibility</td>
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<td>Self-sacrifice</td>
<td>Action</td>
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Self-esteem is potentially undermined when we are not appreciated by people whose opinion we value. This particularly happens in situations where we feel that there is a lot at stake. Here, our manager will often figure as a person whose opinion we value highly and this is why the response of the manager might affects our own sense of self-esteem. This is also why it is so crucial that management is based on a developing and appreciative approach towards the employee. It is this developing relationship that the manager must cultivate in himself and the people he manages. It triggers the feeling of meaning and deeper commitment in the employee and the manager alike.

**The self-esteem culture**

When a manager pursues a policy of self-esteem management and gets others on board, this leads to an organisational change process that affects social conventions, commitment and responsibility. The developing relationship is an attracting force, which once started, is difficult to stop. It attracts people, retains and develops. The developing relationship and self-esteem relations give meaning, both for managers and employees.

Self-esteem management must be embedded in top organisational management and the approach works best when it seeps down through the various management levels. It is a value-based management approach that is rooted in the executive management’s core values and ability to express itself through own leadership. It is a style of management that has the potential to become a management culture and subsequently a significant corporate culture. A creative culture that generates performance and relations that are mutually intense. A culture that is performance-oriented, but with a performance process that feels meaningful and thus fiercely involving.

**About the authors**

The authors of this article are part of Scanlead – Scandinavian Leadership Development Aps. We are a team of coaches that works with self-esteem based leadership in Scandinavia.