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No Smoke Without Fire? The Tension Between Employee Autonomy and Employer Authority

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7.3. No smoke without fire? The tension between employee autonomy and employer authority

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Abstract

Anna, the HR manager and owner of Takomo, a manufacturing company in Finland, was facing a severe challenge. Sickness absences, job dissatisfaction, and open conflicts with employees had increased, even though she had tried her best to improve employee wellbeing, while at the same time trying to keep up with the turbulent business environment. When an essential step in her wellbeing agenda, smoking restrictions, were introduced, the situation caused an uproar among some employees. How was it possible that she had failed in promoting wellbeing, and the situation had only become worse than before? How could she make sense of the situation and explain the employees' reactions? What should she do next in order to fix the situation? This case leads students to examine the holistic view on wellbeing in companies. Moreover, it leads them to explore a sensitive HR practice, which diminishes employees' autonomy. Further, this case addresses Sustainable Development Goal 8 ("Decent work and economic growth, targets 8.2, 8.3, 8.5, and 8.8) by emphasizing employee wellbeing, sustainable people management, and creating an inclusive organizational culture.

Keywords

Work wellbeing; human resource management; social sustainability; inclusiveness; autonomy

1 Teaching case

1.1 *The tip of the iceberg?*

Concerns over employee wellbeing had been increasing, even though companies in the Nordics and Finland were traditionally especially active in catering for their employees' wellbeing issues. The welfare system there emphasized the meaning of employees – employees having a voice and value -, and the environment fostered high expectations towards work wellbeing, work safety, and caring for employees. Thus, there was a tendency to expect and demand a certain level of work wellbeing practices and efforts from employers, and generally

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all efforts were seen as beneficial and sincere. It was unbelievable and shocking to discover that efforts to increase and foster wellbeing could go wrong.

It was a Monday morning in Finland. Anna, the HR manager, opened her email in her office at the company Takomo², which she owned with her husband Otto. Seeing one of the new emails, she almost burst into tears.

“Otto, could you please come into my office! We have gotten another angry message from an anonymous sender!”, she shouted down the phone to Otto, who was walking to the main factory area. Otto could hear that Anna’s limits were close to breaking point.

While walking to Anna’s office, Otto, the CEO of Takomo, wondered what on earth they should do next. Having already received a few hostile emails, he and Anna knew that the sender must be somebody from their company, as the content of the email referred to internal issues that no one from outside could know. The messages were full of anger, frustration, and dissatisfaction towards the employer. The sender spoke about “us employees”, so there were obviously several employees behind the message.

“We are carrying a huge financial risk ourselves and trying to maintain our position in an ever so difficult market, and this is what we get! We are trying to offer these people their living and an income to provide for their families! And we have put so much effort and lots of money into their wellbeing!!! What do we get in return?!?”, Anna moaned to Otto.

“I know, Anna. The situation is unbelievable. The outcome seems to be the opposite of what we were aiming for. We must find ways to solve this crisis now.”

Indeed, the situation was very tricky. Anna and Otto had done their very best in their pursuit of enhanced work wellbeing, but the situation had not improved. For example, they had invested in extensive (and expensive) health care, offered free exercise classes and massages during the workday, provided fringe benefits to be used in a variety of activities from sports to culture, and offered complimentary coffee during breaks. Additionally, they had moved to clean and suitable facilities, invested in work safety, and provided the newest techniques in the industry to enable safe and productive work. Anna had also introduced a new smoking policy as a part of their wellbeing agenda and taken steps towards creating a smoke-free workplace in the near future. To their surprise, job satisfaction measurements had shown

² The case company name and all the protagonists in the case have been anonymized but this case is based on a real situation that happened in a firm in Finland.

a deterioration of results and the employees were openly expressing their hate and disgust towards their actions.

Otto and Anna did not understand why the issues around the new smoking policy had escalated so quickly, and why employees were rebelling against their actions, questioning all of their decisions, and increasingly showing their anger. All they had wanted to do was to look after their employees and provide them with a good place to work. Why could the employees not see how much the employer had done to promote wellbeing? Why did they not appreciate the management's decisions and efforts?

1.2 Headwind after a long calm period

Otto remembered how, starting from their garage around 30 years ago, his parents had grown a desirable and stable company, where the employees, from the same village, seemed to be like one big, happy family. His mother used to bake buns for the employees almost every morning, and his father was highly involved in hands-on work. The firm was operating as a subcontractor for the metal industry. The engaged employees had been the key asset when the company employed only a handful, but during its years of growth, skillful employees had also been the key to its success.

When Otto's parents' health had worsened around a decade ago, they had had to step aside. After that, Otto, together with Anna, had grown the company from a small employer in the village to a significant one within the whole region. They had expanded their markets internationally, gained large customers, and adopted modern and rather rare technology.

Consequently, Takomo was no longer a cozy workshop but employed well over a hundred employees. It operated as the designated component manufacturer for several big, multinational companies with tough requirements, and competed on high-tech products, modern technologies, high quality, reliability of deliveries, and excellent customer feedback.

Anna and Otto had a long discussion. They really tried to understand how they had ended up in this situation, despite having always considered employees their most important resource. Anna reflected on the fact that the company's growth and development had at least partially led to the change in the relationship between employer and employees.

“It is impossible to be like a family anymore. The staff has changed a lot since those golden days. There are many of us now and [will be] even more in the future”, reminded

Anna. During the last few years, Takomo had recruited plenty of young workers. For many of them, Takomo was their first employer. In addition, some of the Finnish employees had worked at Takomo throughout the history of the company and they had recently employed some workers from Eastern Europe to broaden their catchment area for recruiting skilled employees.

The lack of skilled labor was increasingly becoming a real bottleneck to growth. Because of its location in a rural area, recruiting new people had not been easy, and a skilled workforce was hard to find in Takomo's business field, even across the whole country. Anna knew very well that employer brand was crucial for Takomo when recruiting people in the area, and the image of the firm – based mostly on the experiences of the employees and how they talked about the company with their friends – was at least as important a factor as salaries. These depressing anonymous emails were definitely not a good sign from the perspective of remaining an attractive employer either!

“I have seen the whole history of the company and bet my parents managed to stay out of any kind of drama like this in the workplace for 30 years,” sighted Otto, and continued: “we have so many other things to worry about, too. We really do not need extra confrontations with the workers.” During the last ten years, the sales had grown steadily each year, and the accounting periods had been profitable. However, the global crises had increased the prices of raw materials, and the general cautiousness in the market was demonstrated by smaller orders and hesitance on the part of their biggest clients. As the sales had begun to decrease, pressure to increase productivity was high. Otto and Anna had even begun to think that, if they did not succeed in improving productivity, their position in the market would escalate to a make-or-break situation.

Anna and Otto knew very well that the employees played a big role in the success of Takomo. Even though Takomo had been able to build a competitive advantage with its technological solutions, it was highly dependent on its employees, their skills, and their competences. They ensured the quality of their products and made it possible for the company to fulfill its promises to its customers. Therefore, it was critical that the employees felt good.

At least the physical work environment now offered a good starting point for that. Two years earlier, Anna and Otto had rented a large and modern facility for the company in a nearby town. This enabled new investments and technology – and growth. Even though the new facilities were more suitable and cleaner than the old ones, it meant a longer commute

for many of the employees. At the same time, new technologies meant that employees needed to be re-skilled and trained. “After all, there have been many pressures on the employees as well, but I still do not understand how they can misunderstand our good intentions so completely”, said Anna, frustrated.

1.3 Employee wellbeing at the core

Anna and Otto’s intentions to improve wellbeing dated back to two years earlier when Anna had noticed that the absence rates had increased significantly. In fact, their occupational health partner had also noticed a steep increase in occupational health visits and sick leave. Consequently, Anna immediately began to create a work wellbeing agenda for Takomo. At the core of the agenda was the aim to train the employees into good physical condition by supporting them with exercising, taking good care of themselves, and in the most recent and new initiative - stopping smoking.

The exercise opportunities and occupational health services offered by Takomo were considerable in terms of money spent. The company paid around 250,000 euros yearly to health service companies for its employees. This included typical occupational health services such as nurse and doctor appointments, and also specialist medical services, surgeries, and psychologist services as extras. In addition, they offered physiotherapy and massage services. Further, Takomo gave all its employees fringe benefits, which could be used, for example, for swimming, gym memberships, or downhill skiing, to mention a few. Moreover, the company arranged wellbeing events every year, physical exercise opportunities in the factory many times per week, and free daily coffee. It also made big developments in its health and safety practices in production and, as a result, the occupational accident rate was extremely low compared to those of its competitors. However, sickness absences had not decreased as one might expect, and job satisfaction had suffered considerably.

“It seems that, the more money we spend on employees’ wellbeing, the more we have to suffer employee dissatisfaction. This is completely incomprehensible,” Anna reflected. Even inappropriate Facebook and Internet forum posts from employees were spotted. Some of the employees had criticized Takomo and its management on their own Facebook page, claiming Takomo was a bad employer with despotic leadership. The topic had been the recent smoking restrictions.

According to their wellbeing agenda, Anna and Otto had made the unilateral decision to restrict smoking. However, he had discussed the matter with the company's occupational health doctor and some of their colleagues whose companies had already introduced smoking restrictions. Based on these discussions, there were a few important reasons behind the decision. First, Anna and Otto believed that one cause of the large amount of sick leave could be poor physical health of employees, caused by smoking and low physical activity. Smoking was typical among men with less education in the region, and thus the majority of the employees smoked. Second, they were worried about the amount of time spent smoking instead of working. Some of the smokers went for a cigarette several times during the working day, and a few of the non-smokers had expressed that they were upset about it. Third, the legislation had already been in place for over ten years, giving employers the authority to make this kind of decision, and Anna thought that it was time to grab the opportunity.

When informing the employees, Anna had explained the decision by emphasizing the importance of equality between smokers and non-smokers (the smokers took some extra breaks for smoking), and the adverse health effects of smoking. Moreover, she announced that their factory would become a non-smoking company in the next few years, and smoking would not be allowed during work. As a counterbalance, Takomo promised support for smokers to be provided by occupational health (e.g., nicotine products, such as patches and chewing gum, and meetings with health care professionals for possible therapy and medication).

Naturally, some resistance was to be expected, but Anna thought they would manage with their clear and sensible justifications. Smoking had been rather usual, especially among blue-collar workers, and even though smoking in certain public places had been restricted, smokers had rather a lot of flexibility in choosing where they smoked. Some educational institutions and public organizations had banned smoking on their premises, but there were no fines or consequences for violating such bans. Takomo, Otto and Anna decided, wanted to be the trailblazer in the industry and ensure a healthy, smoke-free workplace for their employees. Their ideal was to support everyone's wellbeing, and restricting smoking was a big part of this picture.

Anna and Otto did not smoke themselves. They firmly believed in the power of exercise and were examples of people who took good care of their own wellbeing by doing a variety of sports in their free time. Thus, they felt that low absence rates and good physical condition would allow their employees to perform well and that they were important to increasing

the productivity of the company. However, in Finland, where the labor markets were highly unionized, the employees were used to voicing their opinions, and there was a dedicated person – the shop steward – who helped employees to voice their concerns to their employer. After the announcement of the smoking restriction, it became a topic that employees were raising, not only in personal communications, but also through institutional, i.e., work union and shop steward, means.

1.4 Autonomy or authority?

Marko, the shop steward at Takomo, acted as a representative of the work union. Marko was in a position where he had regular meetings with the top management, especially Anna. Whenever the employees had something on their mind, or the employer suggested any changes, Marko would act as the link between the employees and the employer. In Finland, and especially in the manufacturing industry, the level of unionization was high, and the majority of the employees were represented by a steward such as Marko.

When Marko listened to Anna's presentation about the wellbeing agenda, and especially the smoking restrictions as part of it, he felt disgusted. "The wellbeing talk is a devil in disguise", thought Marko. "This is yet another way for the management to increase productivity by banning smoking, and all the so-called nice actions from them is just a theater show." Marko was sure that the employer was simply trying to own the employees' health in addition to their labor input. He was especially angry about the manner in which the decisions had been made: the matter had not been discussed with the employees at all. They had simply been informed of the decision! He felt that the employer had heavily violated the employees' autonomy, and as shop steward, he at least should have been involved in the decision making. He was afraid that this authoritative decision making would once and for all destroy the good conversational company culture that they had had during the time of Otto's parents. Marko, a non-smoker himself, was against the new smoking ban, even though it did not directly concern him. He felt insulted on behalf of his colleagues who smoked as a way to relieve their stress.

Half of the employees smoked, and many of them several cigarettes during the workday. The previous practice had been that the employees could smoke whenever they wanted if it was possible, but they had to clock themselves out. In other words, they were smoking in their own time and the company did not pay them any salary for that time. According to the

new restrictions, smokers could not take these extra breaks anymore. They could smoke only three times per day: during the morning coffee break of ten minutes, during the lunch time of 30 minutes, and during the afternoon coffee break of ten minutes. Moreover, previously there had been several places near to the exits where they could smoke. Now the smokers had to go to a smoking shelter, which was built in the back corner of the factory yard. It took several minutes to walk there. However, after the new restrictions were put in place, many heavy smokers hid behind pallets and buildings, still smoking secretly many times per day, and afraid of getting caught.

Marko had worked at Takomo for more than 20 years. He felt sad that the good atmosphere they had had some years ago was now gone. The humor and team spirit had been lost, and people were just trying to get through the day. He was irritated because all kinds of regulations and restrictions had emerged at the company. He was sure that the effects of these policies on productivity were not positive.

Marko knew that he was not alone in thinking this way. He had noticed that the smokers were very anxious, irritated, and difficult to work with when they could not smoke during the day. What seemed even more ridiculous to him was that, at the same time, white-collar workers were able to smoke whenever they wanted in front of the main door. “Are they only trying to divide us? This just provokes an ‘us versus them’ concept. I wish we could have the ‘one-for-all-and-all-for-one’ attitude back in the company”, he thought, frustrated, tired, and disappointed.

Ultimately, Marko felt that the management did not really listen to the employees. For example, they had asked their supervisor for a clock on the wall in their department, but nothing had happened. No one had explained why they did not get it. Instead, in the meetings, the management just said that they should work faster and provide good quality. Mistakes were the focus all the time, such as claims from clients and faulty products. Marko would have liked to hear something positive sometimes, too. He had decided to try to find a new job somewhere else.

1.5 Moving forward together

The attempt to promote wellbeing at work could not have gone any more wrong. It seemed that the more the management had tried to support their employees according to this

ideology, so as to meet the challenging demands for high productivity in manufacturing, the more there was bickering between the employees and management.

It was Wednesday afternoon, a couple of days after that terrible Monday morning. Anna was now preparing her presentation material for the next day's meeting. She had invited shop stewards, occupational health care professionals, the management group, and several supervisors to a meeting to discuss what to do next. She had mapped out different options, gathered information to support her decisions, and discussed things for hours with Otto to find a suitable solution to tackle the wellbeing challenges and rebellious stance of the employees. She also wanted to get to the bottom of all of it and find an explanation for why everything was getting even worse even though they were trying even harder.

In the meeting, she needed to present the causes of the situation, as well as principles, targets, and means that would fix the situation.

“How on earth am I going to get us all in the same boat tomorrow and untangle this dead end we have gotten ourselves into?” sighed Anna as she opened her computer.

2 Teaching note

2.1 Synopsis

This case is a story of a family-owned manufacturing company in Finland employing approximately 100 mainly blue-collar workers of different ages, and cultural and lifestyle backgrounds. The managers of the company genuinely strived for sustainable people management with their uniform wellbeing agenda, but not without negative consequences. The teaching case addresses the legitimization of an employer exerting control over employees' wellbeing, and the use of employer authority over employee autonomy. It prepares students to understand conflicting expectations that exist in companies, in this case relating to employees' autonomy over smoking during the workday. The intention is for students to reflect on the complex repercussions of top-down decisions and to ideate strategies for including employees in the decision-making process concerning employee wellbeing practices.

The case shows the complexity involved in building a sustainable organizational culture for a diverse workforce, and highlights the need for true inclusion of employees in decision making using strategies that are in line with the demographic landscape of the workforce. The case leads students to consider challenges in relation to decent work, which refers to overall quality of employment (Kuznar 2023) and is an essential sign of firms' social sustainability (Santos 2023). The International Labour Organization (ILO) has listed employment creation, social protection, rights at work, and social dialogue as four pillars of decent work. This case especially focuses on human rights at work, which refers to the freedom to express concerns, organize, and participate in decisions affecting individuals' lives.

For companies, decent work is a challenging task, because it is subjectively experienced even if some objective criteria exist (meeting the requirements of the law). Thus, Pereira et al. (2019) have defined it as “a sum of people’s aspirations in their working lives”. Important criteria in evaluating the state of decent work are, for example, communications and transparency, work-related wellbeing, employee participation, and equality in the workplace (Pereira et al. 2019). Overall, the case relates to SDG 8 (“*Decent work and economic growth*”), and especially the following targets: 8.2 *Higher levels of economic productivity through, for example, diversification*” 8.3 *Promoting development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalization and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises*; 8.5 *Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities by 2030*; and 8.8 *Protect labor rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers*.

The students can analyze the case through various theoretical lenses, such as the Job Demands-Resources model, the theory of autonomy according to Self-Determination Theory, or more broadly the literature on social sustainability, work-related wellbeing, diversity, equity, and inclusion. The case in particular offers a view on the complexities of decision making about employee wellbeing (see, e.g. Donaldson et al. 2022). This story leads the students to examine how top-down decision making about wellbeing can reinforce power inequalities, cause ethical dilemmas, and hinder the application of inclusive practices.

2.2 Learning objectives

This assignment leads students to consider the question of the autonomy of individuals in relation to wellbeing at work, which is important for employers both as a factor affecting productivity and as part of a company's social sustainability. Specifically, it challenges students to think about the tensions between the individual's rights and need to make decisions concerning their own wellbeing, and employers' striving to promote employees' wellbeing at work, power in decision making, and the use of employer authority. The case will lead students to discuss how the conflicts in these kinds of sensitive situations should be handled between managers and employees: how the management should include employees in decision making on work wellbeing activities at the company, and how to achieve a mutually satisfactory situation through dialogue.

The concrete learning objectives are:

- learn to analyze and evaluate employee wellbeing as a complex phenomenon including physical, psychological, and social dimensions (reflecting, e.g., the Job Demands-Resources model, JDR);
- learn to analyze and evaluate the concept of autonomy in relation to employee wellbeing from the perspective of managerial decision making (reflecting, e.g., the Self-Determination Theory, SDT);
- learn to apply the inclusion of employees in decision making concerning wellbeing activities in the company;
- learn to critically evaluate social sustainability and create concrete plans accordingly when balancing employee autonomy and employer authority.

2.3 Position in course

The case is designed for graduate-level courses on Management, Human Resource Management, Organizational Behavior, Ethics, and Corporate Responsibility, and in other courses that deal with social sustainability, employee wellbeing, inclusion, and employee relations.

2.4 Relevant readings

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2.5 Assignment questions

1. How are social sustainability and work wellbeing featured in the case?
2. What would have caused the employees' reactions? How would you explain the situation in the light of the Job Demands-Resources model and/or in the light of Self-Determination Theory?

3. How could Anna and Otto balance employee autonomy and employer authority? How should they better take the different expectations into consideration and make the shared interests more visible in relation to employee wellbeing and company performance?
4. What are your developmental suggestions for Anna and Otto? What would an employee wellbeing agenda for the next year include and why?

2.6 Teaching plan

Table 1: Teaching plan.

Discussion point	Time (minutes)
Case outline	10 minutes
A concept of sustainability and decent work	10 minutes
A concept of work wellbeing Antecedents of work wellbeing	20 minutes
Job Demands-Resources model	15 minutes
Self-Determination Theory	15 minutes
Autonomy as a factor for wellbeing	10 minutes
Participation of employees in work organizations	10 minutes
Total time	90 minutes

2.7 Alternative pedagogical approach

An alternative pedagogical approach can be elaborated from the teaching plan and utilized instead. This longer version allows the students to go more in-depth in their analysis. Pedagogically, it leans on problem-based learning. It is a student-centered approach where a complex real-world problem is used as a tool for learning. The students actively engage with the practical and open-ended problem, explore it with the help of theoretical knowledge, and develop solutions for it. Working in teams, the students can self-organize knowledge processing, reflect on their existing knowledge and experiences, and learn critical thinking.

The same assignment questions as in the previous teaching plan can be used. The teaching process is divided into four phases: preparation, theoretical framing, teamwork, and

presentations and discussion (see Table 2). In the preparation phase, the students engage themselves with the case. In the theoretical framing session, the teacher presents different theoretical angles and discusses them with the students. In the teamwork phase, the student teams explore the problem and modify solutions. Finally, the students prepare a presentation for a meeting, where Anna, the HR manager, presents the case to the management group, shop stewards, and supervisors of Takomo. Thus, the main differences between the original teaching plan and this alternative are the amount of student work, the student presentations, and the greater time allowed for mutual discussion.

Table 2: Alternative pedagogical approach.

Steps	Content	Timing
Step 1. Preparation	Students familiarize themselves with the case material	One week before the first lecture
Step 2. Lecture for theoretical framing	A concept of work wellbeing Antecedents of work wellbeing Job Demands-Resources model Autonomy as a factor for wellbeing Perspective of autonomy in decision making and participation of employees in work organizations Managing employee relations in practice: how to nurture good dialogue and cooperation between managers and employees Forming and instructing teams	A lecture of 90 minutes
Step 3. Teamwork	Teams collaboratively explore the problems at Takomo and develop solutions	4-6 hours over one/two weeks
Step 4. Presentations and final discussion	Teams present their findings and solutions Discussion, conclusions, and wrap-up	10-20 minutes / team 30 minutes

2.8 Analysis

1. How are social sustainability and work wellbeing featured in the case?

Employers have noticed that a healthy and happy employee is a productive employee, and therefore they seek to develop HR practices that will improve employees' wellbeing and, thus, capability to perform, and thereby reduce occupational health costs. Moreover, according to the ILO, employers have a social responsibility to ensure the work wellbeing of their employees, and this includes, among other things, protecting their employees from health risks.

Work wellbeing has been defined as "the overall quality of an employee's experience and functioning at work", including employees' psychological, physical, and social dimensions (Grant et al. 2007, 52; Warr 1990). Studies have revealed that employees with high levels of wellbeing are more efficient, committed, helpful, and cooperative, and show better performance than those with lower levels of wellbeing (Harter et al. 2002; Sawitri et al. 2016; Wright and Cropanzano 2000). Problems with work wellbeing can cause inefficiency, underperformance, decreased quality, and lost innovation (Baptiste 2008; Page and Vella-Brodrick 2009).

The topic has also emerged in the light of companies' social sustainability. It includes taking responsibility for the wellbeing of employees and ensuring that they are treated fairly and with respect (Dahlsrud 2008). At best, the company creates an organizational culture of inclusion, where everyone can contribute and be heard, and ensures that all employees are treated with dignity (Winters 2013).

An important dimension of a company's social sustainability is maintaining an organizational culture where everyone feels safe, respected, and heard. In doing so, employers have to follow certain laws and rules, and ensure the company's financial success for the owners and reliable operation for the customers. Thus, employers have to balance a complex set of requirements when using their authority to guide and direct employees' actions so as to take care of work wellbeing and safety. Even though the employer may have good intentions and justifications for decisions, employees can feel that they are not heard or respected, and that their individual freedom is being restricted. In addition, the perception of what is good for wellbeing can vary between an employer and their employees. This can sometimes result in a

contradictory result: the physical safety of the employees improves, but their overall wellbeing deteriorates. Thus, management should take a broad look at social sustainability related to employees, considering different perspectives.

2. What would have caused the employees' reactions? How would you explain the situation in the light of the Job Demands-Resources model and/or in the light of Self-Determination Theory?

Work wellbeing has often been approached from the psychological perspective in recent research. One of the most popular frames of reference is the JDR model developed by Bakker and Schaufeli (2008). In the model, work-related stress factors are divided into two categories, namely demands and resources. *Job demands* refer to the physical, psychological, social, and organizational burdensome factors of work, such as an unfavorable physical environment, high work pressure, or emotionally demanding interactions between people at work. *Job resources*, in turn, are work-related empowering aspects that promote self-actualization, learning, and development at work. They may relate to tasks, work arrangements, social interaction, and organizational factors. Job resources have a motivating effect, helping people to cope with the job demands, and they result in high work engagement, low cynicism, and good performance (Bakker and Demerouti 2007).

Poor circumstances at work exhaust employees' mental and physical resources, which can lead to disgust and even to health problems. Thus, in the long term, job resources should exceed job demands. In that situation, an employee may feel work engagement (or job absorption), which according to the JDR model includes three positive aspects: vigor, dedication, and absorption. *Vigor* shows as the experience of energy, as the desire to contribute to work, and as the willingness to make an extra effort if necessary. *Dedication* shows as an experience of meaningful work, as well as enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge at work. *Absorption* is a state of deep concentration, dedication to work, and perceived enjoyment (Bakker and Schaufeli 2008).

Studies have revealed that work autonomy and the possibility to participate in decision making concerning one's own work and work environment are important factors not just for psychological work wellbeing (Wheatley 2017), but also for employees' health (Liu et al. 2020). Thus, the autonomy of an employee in relation to job wellbeing activities is an important factor that should be taken into consideration (Niemic et al. 2010).

Deci and Ryan (2012) have described autonomy as “a feeling of choice” as opposed to being controlled or forced. They developed the SDT, which describes human motivation by dividing it into autonomous and controlled motivation. They characterize autonomously motivated people as “engaged in an activity with a full sense of willingness, volition, and choice” (Deci et al. 2017).

Interpreting the case through the lenses of the SDT, employees’ felt that their autonomy over a personal issue (smoking) had been violated and therefore the managerial decision led to unfavorable outcomes. One of the main issues was that employees did not have the possibility to influence the content of the wellbeing agenda, or even discuss it. Consequently, different points of view were not made visible and it was not possible to create a solution that satisfied both parties. However, the smoking decision was obviously only the last straw that triggered the situation. Evidently, there was a broader problem related to wellbeing at work. In the light of the JDR model, due to the many organizational changes and negligence in the management of employee relations at Takomo over recent years, several burdensome factors had exceeded the employees’ job resources. Wellbeing had deteriorated overall, and this last “stone” in their burden caused them to openly and strongly stand against this one decision made by the employer. The new generation of management was still trying to find its place; they differentiated themselves from the workers and did not pay enough attention to listening to them. The team spirit and overall atmosphere had worsened and the employees were unable to achieve a situation that would have allowed them to find vigor, dedication, or absorption, the dimensions that make up work wellbeing.

3. How could Anna and Otto balance employee autonomy and employer authority? How should they better take the different expectations into consideration and make the shared interests more visible in relation to work wellbeing and company performance?

In the context of work wellbeing, employee autonomy could mean, for example, employees having the possibility to choose the wellbeing activities they want to participate in and to customize the wellbeing activities to suit their individual needs. Moreover, it could manifest as employees having the possibility to take the initiative and suggest job wellbeing activities that would suit them and benefit the organization. Autonomy is an important factor

in job satisfaction, which is a core issue in psychological work wellbeing (Rodríguez et al. 2016).

Overall, studies have revealed that including employees in the decision-making process in a company will result in their higher engagement and motivation, in turn leading to better productivity and enhanced performance for the company (Park 2015). Participation requires good dialogue, which means a conversation between the two parties that is intended to foster mutual understanding and collaboration. Dialogue should be used to discuss workplace issues, such as the expectations of both parties, employee job satisfaction, and workplace practices and policies.

Anna and Otto have to adopt a more holistic view of work wellbeing including, all three of its aspects: physical, psychological, and social. Thus, prioritizing or emphasizing only one aspect is not sufficient, and can lead to unfavorable outcomes in other aspects. Unfortunately, they tried to tackle only the physical aspect of work wellbeing, resulting in a situation where the other two aspects were neglected and, thus, violated. Moreover, they exercised their employer authority too directly. They should take a couple of steps back and start having an open conversation with the employees. They should ask and genuinely listen to what is upsetting the employees and what their own views are regarding how to support their wellbeing and the company's performance at the same time. Both parties should dispassionately state their positions and reasons, and listen to one another. The discussion should concern, broadly, the cooperation between the management and employees, and the needs and means for its development. Regarding smoking restrictions, the target should be a solution which both parties see as feasible. In terms of restricting smoking, it could mean, for example, formulating common rules of the game. Now, Anna and Otto should take the time to arrange meetings, workshops, and other occasions where employees can discuss and develop the practices with them and their supervisors. In this process, the shop stewards should be rather heavily involved, especially when decisions and agreements are being made.

4. What are your developmental suggestions for Anna and Otto? What would an employee wellbeing agenda for the next year include and why?

All in all, how employers can support their employees' wellbeing and, at the same time, still respect the individual health-related choices of their employees, is an important matter. It is important that they are careful about intervening with, for example, employees'

individual choices regarding their lifestyle. Having said that, employers can take steps to encourage healthy behaviors among their employees. They can do this, for example, by offering information and education about health, and giving financial support and incentives for employees to make healthy choices (e.g., discounts, memberships, sport facilities and equipment, healthy food options).

The agenda should broadly include the issues affecting employee wellbeing in the company, smoking rules being one of them. At the core of the plans should be employees' chance to participate and be heard in the drawing up and implementing of the wellbeing agenda. Participation by employees can happen through committees or work groups, in formal meetings, through surveys, or through other methods of gathering employees' ideas and feedback, and involving the stewards. Giving employees a voice in the development and decision-making process both increases the amount of knowledge available as a foundation for the decisions, and commits the employees and motivates them to abide by the decisions.

Anna, as the HR manager, can take ownership of the process. However, she needs to ensure all stakeholders participate in order to reach a fruitful and favorable outcome. By discussing the options with supervisors, for example in workshops, she will give them the chance to discuss things further with their subordinates.

2.9 *Common misunderstandings*

The teacher should be especially mindful of two common misunderstandings that could take place when implementing this case. The students might focus too narrowly on only solving the case of smoking, even though the smoking issue was only the final straw that broke the camel's back. Overall, this case is not only about smoking, but a greater violation of trust and autonomy.

Additionally, students might feel that the case questions can be answered without any theoretical background, based on people's everyday experiences and knowledge, although the answers would then be too shallow and only partial. Thus, the teacher should encourage the students to focus on theoretical underpinnings rather than jumping to conclusions and solving only the practical side of the challenges. This is the main reason we suggest and encourage that general discussions be held with the students at the end of the teaching session to

strengthen their learning and ability to see the intertwined nature of the case and what actually happened in Takomo.

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