Development Appraisal and Psychosocial Work Environment

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Johansson Hanse, J., & Westergren, H. Development Appraisal and Psychosocial Work Environment. Göteborg Psychological Reports, 2004, 34, No. 6. The aim of the study was to examine the relation between ‘development appraisal’ (DA) (a kind of ‘staff development talk’ or ‘development discussion’ in Sweden) and psychosocial job factors. Seven hundred and fifty four employees from one municipal district in Sweden participated in a cross-sectional study. All subjects answered a questionnaire including topics regarding demographic and employee-related variables, DA (both a realization and a qualitative dimension), and psychosocial job factors. Those who had had a DA (realization dimension) reported higher satisfaction levels in regard to social support and decision latitude, compared to those who had not had a DA. As regards the qualitative dimension of DA, the results indicate positive significant relations with all psychosocial job factors. DA as a continuing process in the organisations practical activities are discussed and further investigations are also suggested.

Key words: development appraisal, appraisal talks, development discussion, staff development talk, communication quality, psychosocial factors.

Organisations use systematic superior-subordinate talks in different ways and for different purposes. In the present study the focus was on a Swedish variant of superior-subordinate talks, which differs, in its emphasis on mutuality, from what is usually called ‘staff appraisal talks’ in England and the USA. This study focuses on Swedish ‘utvecklingssamtal’, a kind of staff development talk (or ‘development discussion’) (Engquist, 1990; Lindgren, 2001). In the following, ‘utvecklingssamtal’ will be referred to as ‘development appraisal’ (DA). The DA is a planned and structured discussion between the superior and subordinates for the purpose of discussing and developing work roles, co-operation, work tasks, efficiency, effectiveness etc. (Jönsson, 1995; Nyström, 1999). The DA may also be seen as a change tool. The aim of the present study was to examine the relation between DA and fundamental psychosocial job factors. Research in this field is lacking (Engquist, 1990; Lindgren, 2001). Collecting empirical data is essential to ascertain if and how DA is associated with psychosocial factors at work.

Some of the previous studies concern superior-subordinate communication that is taking place on a daily basis. A positive relationship has been reported between communication quality and job satisfaction (Muchinsky, 1977; King Jr, Lahiff & Hatfield, 1988) concerning both upward and downward communication in the organisation (Koike, Gudykunst, Stewart,
Ting-Toomey & Nishida, 1988; Orpen, 1995). Results indicate that this relationship between communication quality and job satisfaction may be stronger among highly job-involved employees (Frone & Major, 1988). Superiors and subordinates appear to be affected differently by the style of communication utilised during superior-subordinate talks (Downs, 1992). Furthermore, a communication style that supports discussion and makes the subordinate feel free to speak his mind increases the subordinate’s feeling of satisfaction with the communication. Subordinates who reported higher levels of satisfaction with the communication were associated with superiors using a less authoritarian style during the superior-subordinate talk.

Superiors, both males and females, seem to perceive the communication quality as higher than their subordinates do (Callan, 1993). There seems to be a difference in how individuals perceive the communication depending on their position in the organisation (Callan, 1993). The *quality* of the communication depends partly on the content of the communication (Engquist, 1990) and partly on the style of the communication leader (Downs, 1992).

Thus, previous studies support that there is a significant association between superior-subordinate communication and job satisfaction (Miles, Patrick & King Jr, 1996). The results imply that superiors generally reported higher job satisfaction compared to subordinates and that the association was higher between communication and job satisfaction among the superiors. In addition, Frone and Major (1988) showed that the relation between communication quality and job satisfaction becomes stronger among employees who are highly involved in their job.

Engquist (1990) has made a ‘definition’ as regards a Swedish variant of the superior-subordinate talk: ‘A prepared, regularly occurring discussion between manager and co-worker dealing with the means and ends of the activity, that is characterised by mutuality’ (ibid., p. 226). This definition serves the purpose of the present study and will be referred to as ‘development appraisal’ (DA) (in Swedish: ‘utvecklingssamtal’). It differs from the ‘appraisal talk’, which can be characterised in a more one-sided evaluative nature in favour of the management. In staff appraisals the superior acts more according to his/her authority (Lindgren, 2001).

In situations such as the DA, the communication quality is an important part of the communication satisfaction (Engquist, 1990). Engquist analysed recordings from six different DAs and interviews, carried out directly after the discussion, with each of the participants. The results showed that both the superiors and the subordinates regarded the quality of the DAs as higher if the communication was carried out on different levels of abstraction (i.e. communication concerning concrete as well as abstract matters). The DAs reported as ‘good’ consisted of confirmation between the participants. In these discussions, topics raised during the DA were followed through and discussed to a point of understanding/satisfaction. In the DAs reported as ‘bad’, there was a lack of confirmation between the participants. In contrast, Lindgren (2001) studied (audio- and videotaped) four DAs and did not find DAs as reciprocal or equal. Lindgren concluded that mutual interaction was found only on ‘the surface’, but under ‘the surface’ the superior was the dominating participant.

Schaller (1992) points out that the DA ought to take place in an atmosphere allowing problem solving at different levels. In order to create this atmosphere the participants must go into the DA with an open mind. Normally, the participants are well aware of the problems in
their relation, and in order to accept the communication as ‘good’ they must realise that they are allowed to talk about their problems. Moreover, it is of great importance to acknowledge or confirm one another and become ‘visible’ to one another (Engquist, 1990).

It is important to distinguish between the realization and the qualitative ‘thresholds’ (dimensions) concerning the DA (Schaller, 1992). The realization threshold concerns making the DA take place at all. The qualitative threshold concerns making the DA into communication that both participants recognize as ‘good’. The DA can be a tool for adding a dimension to the relation between superior and subordinates, which would not be likely to come about from daily work-related contacts.

DA about work roles, co-operation and work tasks may be seen as a way to create a basis for a good psychosocial work environment (Schaller, 1992). Having, or not having, a DA reflects an attitude within the organisation, an attitude that presumably can have an influence on the general psychosocial work environment. Engquist (1990) also pointed out in his thesis that it should be interesting to investigate the ability to communicate competently (the quality of the DA) and its relation to the ‘climate at work’. This connection is an area in which almost no research could be found.

In the present study the focus is not upon the outcome ‘job satisfaction’, but rather on the more general construct of psychosocial work environment (e.g. decision latitude, psychological job demands, social support). For example, stress at work may stem from role ambiguity (i.e. not being clear as to what is required) or role conflict (i.e. conflicting job demands) (Cooper & Marshall, 1976). One purpose of the DA is to discuss these things and the general roles in the organisation.

Increasing evidence suggests that exposure to adverse work organisation characteristics, such as high performance demands coupled with low levels of work control and social support, places individuals at increased risk of stress and illness (Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Johansson, 1995; Johnson & Hall, 1988). Individual control is increasingly recognised as a central concept in the understanding of the relationship between stressful experience, behaviour and health. When demands are matched by control possibilities, a healthy degree of challenge exists, which is a condition of growth and regeneration. This situation of active learning and motivation to develop new behaviour patterns increases skills and feelings of ‘mastery’ (Karasek & Theorell, 1990).

Social network refers to the totality of persons with whom an individual more permanently or occasionally is having some kind of interaction. The concept of social support refers only to those different forms of support that can be given when an individual is in interaction with other persons. Social support is the presence of one or several other persons (superiors or fellow workers) who are prepared to give support in different situations. Social support refers to the perceived comfort, caring, esteem or help a person receives from other people. Social support can be defined in different ways and the varying definitions imply that it is multidimensional. There is a growing literature on the importance of social support at work in reducing stress. Among others, House (1981) has shown that social support can moderate the effects of stress on the psychological well being of the employee. Social support at work is assumed to reduce work-related stress and to function as a moderator of psychological job demands (Johnson & Hall, 1988).
The purpose of the present study was to further illuminate the relation between DAs and psychosocial work environment among municipal employees. The specific aims were:

1) Is there a significant difference between those who participated in a DA and those who did not (i.e. the realization dimension) regarding psychosocial work environment and background variables (e.g. age, years in current position)?
2) Is there a significant association between how valuable a DA is experienced to be (i.e. the qualitative dimension) and psychosocial work environment?

Material and method

Design and procedure

One municipal organisation (district) in Gothenburg, Sweden, had agreed to participate in a cross-sectional study. The management provided the list of names of potential participants. A questionnaire was sent to the subjects’ homes by mail and a prepaid envelope addressed to the researchers was enclosed with the questionnaire. To limit the dropout rate, a reminder was sent directly to the employees’ homes as well as to the subjects’ superiors. All subjects answered the questionnaire anonymously. This study was part of a more general study in the municipality of Göteborg.

Subjects

Approximately 1200 worked in the municipal district, of whom 760 answered a questionnaire. However, six subjects were excluded due to internal missing data in the questionnaire. Thus, the remaining 754 employees (63 per cent response rate) constituted a study group (91 per cent females). Among the subjects, 82.5 per cent had more than two years experience of their present job and eight per cent less than one-year experience. The mean number of working hours per week was 36.1 (SD = 7.02) hours. The age of the participants was prearranged in the questionnaire in ten five-year classes. Approximately thirteen per cent were less than 30 years, twenty-eight per cent between 30 and 39 years, twenty-seven per cent between 40 and 49 years, and thirty-two per cent 50 years or more.

Measures

Demographic and employee-related variables. This selected part consisted of items concerning age (10-point response scale), gender, years of employment in current position (5-point response scale), working hours per week (open response) and in which department they worked (e.g. child care, school, pre-school, home care/nursing, individual and family care, internal service, personnel and economics, and the department for information, leisure and culture).
Development appraisal (DA). DA provides a regular and structured discussion between the manager and co-workers. The manager initiated the DA. Two questions focused upon the DA. One question was related to whether the respondents had had a DA during the past year (2-point response, i.e. ‘yes’ or ‘no’) and a follow-up question concerning the quality of the DA (4-point response scale).

Psychosocial work measurements. Workers’ attitudes to their job were assessed using a ‘demand - decision latitude (control)’ questionnaire mainly used in Sweden and developed by Theorell and co-workers (Theorell et al., 1988). It is shorter and does not have as many dimensions (factors) as the ‘Job Content Questionnaire’ by Karasek (1985). Questions about social support at work have been introduced in a study by Theorell et al. (1990) as well as reported in more detail by Theorell at al. (1991). The Swedish version includes the following factors and items:

1) Psychological demands, including five questions: ‘Does your work require you to work very fast?’, ‘Does your work require you to work very hard?’, ‘Does your work require a too great work effort?’, ‘Do you have enough time to get the job done?’, and ‘Do conflicting demands occur in your work?’.

2) Decision latitude (four about skill discretion and two about job autonomy): ‘Do you learn new things in your work?’, ‘Does your work require skill?’, ‘Does your work require inventiveness?’, ‘Do you do the same thing over and over again?’, ‘Do you have the freedom to decide how to do your work?’, and ‘Do you have the freedom to decide what to do in your work?’.

3) Social support at work (‘positive factors’) comprising six items: ‘There is a calm and pleasant atmosphere at work’, ‘There is a sense of solidarity’, ‘My fellow workers support me’, ‘They understand that I can have a bad day’, ‘I get on well with my superiors’ and ‘I get on well with my fellow workers’.

The questionnaire uses a four-point response for each question and a frequency based grading for the demand and decision latitude dimensions. Regarding social support at work the response categories range from ‘not at all’ to ‘completely true’. High values for social support and decision latitude indicate a high satisfaction level. High values for psychological job demands indicate high demands. Internal consistency (Cronbach alpha) (Cronbach, 1990) was calculated for the three psychosocial indices: social support = .83, psychological job demands = .75, and decision latitude = .69.

Statistical analyses

For comparisons between different groups the t-test (two-tailed) and $\chi^2$ statistics were used. A two-group discriminant analysis was used to estimate the way in which a weighted combination of independent variables serve to differentiate among different categories. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were used and partial correlations were calculated as third-order partials. The level of significance was set at $p<.05$. 
Results

The realization threshold of development appraisal (DA) and the relation to demographic variables and psychosocial job factors

Among the participants 54.1 per cent had had a DA during the past year. Examination of the differences between those who had had a DA and those who had not (i.e. the realization threshold), in relation to age, gender, years of employment and working hours per week, showed that only the variable ‘years of employment’ differed significantly. Those individuals who had a shorter period of employment had also had DAs to a lesser extent ($\chi^2 = 13.45$, $df = 4$, $p < .01$). Using a two-group discriminant analysis, a weighted combination of four background variables (gender, age, years of employment in current position and working hours per week) was tested to predicting the likelihood that an employee had had a DA. The summary of canonical discriminant functions showed that the association between the discriminant scores and groups (i.e. canonical correlation) was 0.14 and that the proportion of the total variance in the discriminant scores not explained by differences among the groups (i.e. Wilks’ Lambda) was 0.98. Moreover, the classifications results showed that only 58.5 per cent of original grouped cases were correctly classified (57.7 per cent in the cross-validation). In sum, a weighted combination of independent variables could not discriminate in a good way between a priori defined groups (i.e. the realization dimension of DA) in this sample.

In addition, calculations were also made in order to illuminate differences between occurrence and non-occurrence of DA, as regards the psychosocial work environment (see Table 1).

Table 1
Comparisons between the two groups, having and not having had development appraisals (DAs), with reference to social support, psychological job demands and decision latitude.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index</th>
<th>DA</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>403</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>734</td>
<td>&lt; .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no</td>
<td>333</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job demands</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>-1.02</td>
<td>735</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no</td>
<td>333</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision latitude</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>736</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no</td>
<td>334</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ns = non significant

Table 1 shows that there was a significant difference between those who had had a DA and those who had not, with regard to social support and decision latitude. In both cases, those who had had a DA reported higher satisfaction levels. In order to examine these results in
more detail, the observed (manifest) variables within the social support and decision latitude indices were analysed, see table 2.

Table 2
Comparisons between the two groups, having and not having had development appraisals (DAs), with reference to the observed variables (questions) within the social support and decision latitude indices.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>DA</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social support</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calm and pleasant atmosphere</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>399</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>724</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A sense of solidarity</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>398</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>726</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellow workers support me</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>397</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>725</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding for my having a bad day</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>396</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>718</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get on well with superiors</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>729</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get on well with fellow workers</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>397</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>726</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no</td>
<td>331</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Decision latitude:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn new things</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>733</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no</td>
<td>331</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work requires skill</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>730</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no</td>
<td>331</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Work requires inventiveness</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>732</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no</td>
<td>333</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do the same thing over and over again (inverted scale)</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>398</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>728</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom to decide how to do the work</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>403</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>732</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no</td>
<td>331</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Freedom to decide what work tasks to perform</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>399</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>728</td>
<td>ns</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no</td>
<td>331</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: ns = non significant

As can be seen, two of six questions contributed most to the significant result within the index ‘social support at work’ (i.e. ‘get on well with superiors’ and ‘calm and pleasant
atmosphere’), and within the index ‘decision latitude’ three of six questions contributed to the significant result (‘learn new things’, ‘work requires skill’ and ‘freedom to decide how to do the work’).

The qualitative dimension of development appraisal (DA) and the relation to psychosocial job factors

Calculation of correlation coefficients shows significant relations (all in the expected direction) between, on the one hand, how valuable a DA was perceived (i.e. the qualitative dimension) and, on the other hand, ‘social support’, ‘psychological job demands’ and ‘decision latitude’ among subordinates (see Table 3).

Table 3
Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients and partial correlation coefficients (third-order partials adjusted for the effects of gender, age and years of employment in current position). Correlations between, on the one hand, how valuable a development appraisal (DA) was perceived to be, and, on the other hand, social support, psychological job demands and decision latitude. Decimal points are omitted.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Social support (N = 402)</th>
<th>Psychological job demand (N = 403)</th>
<th>Decision latitude (N = 403)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DA</td>
<td>38***</td>
<td>-20***</td>
<td>13*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial correlations: (df=393)</td>
<td>(df=393)</td>
<td>(df=393)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DA</td>
<td>38***</td>
<td>-19***</td>
<td>13*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * p < .05 ; *** p < .001

Examination of the data demonstrates that the highest correlation was found between how valuable a DA was experienced to be and ‘social support’ (r = .38; p < .001), that is, the more valuable the DA was considered to be, the better the social support at work. The data also indicate that the magnitude of the partial correlation coefficients was approximately the same as for the correlations without any statistical adjustment.

Discussion
In the present study, attention was focused on the subordinates’ conditions and perceptions. In conclusion, the findings of the present study support the hypothesis that DA is significantly associated with psychosocial factors at work. The correlations between the quality of DA and psychosocial factors were all statistically significant. Adjustment for potential confounders such as age and gender did not decrease the strength of association. These results are consistent with one previous study by Schaller (1992). In Schaller’s study, the subjects were divided into two groups, depending on whether they experienced the DA as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ (i.e. the qualitative dimension). Both groups answered a questionnaire as regards eleven psychosocial factors at work (Rubenowitz, 1997). The results show statistically significant differences between the two groups for all eleven psychosocial factors and all differences were in the expected direction. Those who reported a good DA also reported a more satisfactory psychosocial work environment. This consistency (i.e. several studies yielding similar associations) supports the plausibility of a causal interpretation. However, the causal interpretation is not strong because, among other things, the criteria of temporality are not fulfilled. Moreover, the presence of significant associations between DA and psychosocial factors at work tells you nothing about either the presence or the direction of causality. One possible explanation is that a good DA and a good psychosocial work environment strengthen each other (Schaller, 1992). Therefore, in future studies it is imported with prospective designs, e.g. with cross-causal models (“cross-lag panel model”, “two-wave panel model”).

From both an economic and health point of view these significant associations are notable, as we can say with reasonable certainty that these particular variables do covary. It is important to recognize employee development as a beneficial pathway to profitability (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). This study clearly shows a high association between having had DA and for example co-workers possibilities to learn new things in their work. In addition, there is an international and political interest in psychosocial factors at work and their relation to ill-health, work-ability and early retirement (NIOSH, 1997; Johansson, 1994; Liira et al., 2000; Winn, 2000).

The reasons for not going through with the DA (i.e. the realization threshold), even if it is the company policy, could be (1) the manager (superior in the DA) is new on the post and does not know the subordinates well enough, (2) has not had the time, (3) has not been given any training concerning DAs, and (4) spends a lot of time together with the subordinates and therefore finds no use for the DA (Schaller, 1992). These reasons, among others, are often used as excuses and to justify, from the manager’s point of view, the choice to not go through with the DA. It is important though to remember that the purpose, among others, of the DA is to give the superiors and subordinates a means for creating an understanding that reaches beyond their professional positions. This in order to make it possible for them to get to know each other, enabling them to grow as individuals and develop the organisation.

The fact that a significantly fewer number of DAs have been carried out within the group that have been employed only for a short time (especially less than one year) appears at first sight to be reasonable. There are several possible explanations for this, which may be regarded as valid by both the superior and the subordinate. If, on the other hand, the DA is viewed in the light of Engquist’s (1990) definition and its aim, as described by him, the superior ought to have a discussion with the new recruit immediately at the start of the employment in addition to
the job interview. The DA is carried out for several reasons, one of which is for those taking part in the discussion to get to know each other and to enable an understanding between them that goes beyond work and job descriptions. It would therefore be valuable to carry out a DA as soon as possible after the start of the employment. The purpose of an early discussion is not only to talk about the job but also to provide the possibility for starting a relation between the new recruit and his or her immediate superior that goes beyond the daily work tasks. The DA can lead to a greater understanding of both the work tasks and interpersonal relations (including the relation to the superior).

The use of the self-reported work environment questionnaire is based on the fundamental principle that “people know their own problems best and they should be encouraged to speak for themselves” (Levi, 1987, p. 182). The individual’s own perception of the ‘objective’ working conditions must be considered if one is to obtain a correct picture of how the work influences his or her mental well-being and health (Gardell, 1987). An essential individual resource is control over task content, execution and decision-making. High levels of control over the work process have repeatedly been found to reduce or mitigate job stress and to be negatively associated with excess risk of disease. According to Karasek (1979), a job is ‘active’ and leads to the development of new behaviour patterns and opportunities to increase skills gained as a result of work experience, when job demands and decision latitude are simultaneously high.

Social support at work, i.e. the presence of fellow workers and supervisors who are prepared to give support in difficult situations, may reduce stress. Lack of support from fellow workers and supervisors is especially critical from the point of view of stress in connection with conflicts and jobs entailing a heavy responsibility (Johnson & Hall, 1988; Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Social support, especially from significant others, in the workplace meets basic human needs for companionship and group affiliation. The present study shows that the quality of the DA is most strongly related to social support. Assuming that social support may be enhanced through well-functioning communication between superior and subordinate, then the importance of DAs is considerable. In order to create a greater understanding of different types of social support, it would be interesting in future studies to investigate the different factors that social support can be divided into. For example, one factor can focus on the relation to the superior and another on the associations with colleagues at the work place, see e.g. Rubenowitz (1997) and Johansson (1995). Moreover, Westlander (1993) emphasises the importance of specifying the content of social support and divides measurement of social support into components such as source, content, disposition, description or evaluation and direction.

Labour market is often characterised by process control and customer focus. Companies also to a great extent choose to organise the work either in project form or in some form of more or less autonomous work teams. These ways of organising the work may have consequences for the communication between superior and subordinate. It would therefore be interesting in future studies to relate both the ‘realization threshold’ and the ‘qualitative threshold’ to organisational form, group dynamics and qualities of leadership.

To recapitulate, earlier research suggests that a successful DA is likely to advance the relation between the superior and the subordinate in a way that affects the subordinate’s view of the general work situation in a positive way. The experience of systematic superior-
subordinate communication is likely to affect the psychosocial work environment, or vice versa, the psychosocial work environment affects the communication between superior and subordinate. Since DA and psychosocial factors at work are measured at the same point in time in the present study, it is not possible to establish temporality, and therefore the evidence for causality is only suggestive. Although the findings of the present work are difficult to interpret in causal terms, due to the cross-sectional nature of the study, the finding of significant relations between DA and psychosocial factors at work merits attention. Therefore, organisations should put time and effort to develop the DA as a continuing process in the organisation’s practical activities.

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