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Master Thesis

The Role of Open-To-Learning Workshops in Reducing Sickness Absence

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Abstract

Purpose: As absenteeism in organizations has been shown to be both socially and financially costly, exploring methods to reduce this can be beneficial. This study explored the relationship between Open-To-Learning conversation (OTL) and sickness absence, with trust as a mediating variable.

Methodology/approach/design: A classic field experimental design was applied to investigate the effect of OTL workshops with the use of an online questionnaire. In order to measure OTL workshops, a longitudinal design with pre and post testing was conducted, including both a treatment group and control group. Randomly selected schools in Norwegian school districts were chosen to participate which consisted of 43 leaders and 73 teachers.

Findings: There were limited significant results in our study, however, the correlation matrix showed that there was a positive relationship between sickness absence and trust. Additionally, and surprisingly, our ANOVA analysis indicated that the control group experienced the lower percentage of sickness absence. Potential Explanations for these results are discussed.

Originality: Previous research has highlighted the importance of trust between leader and employee in relation to sickness absence, however this study is the first to introduce OTL conversations as a method to minimize absenteeism from work. As OTL conversations can be an important method in establishing trust between leader and employee, and leader-employee trust has been found to reduce sickness absence, OTL training might shed light on a new method in reducing absenteeism in organizations.

Keywords: Open-To-Learning conversations, sickness absence, relational trust, learning.

Introduction

It is important in every organization to maintain employees' well-being, as neglecting to do so can have both social and economic consequences. Sickness absence is not only costly for the organization but for society as well (Whitaker, 2001; Baker-McClarn, Greasly, Dale & Griffith, 2010). In addition, co-workers may suffer from increased workload and stress which in turn might create more sick leave within the organization causing a negative loop (Whitaker, 2001). Research exist on the relationship between leaders and subordinates and how this may affect sickness absence (Richardson & Vandenberg, 2005; Van Knippenberg , Van Dick & Tavares, 2016). Due to the cost of sickness absence to organizations and the society, it is relevant to investigate factors that may strengthen this relationship. One such factor is trust (Johnson & O'Leary-Kelly, 2003; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015; Meyer, Le Fevre & Robinson, 2017). Building trust between leader and subordinate has shown to increase employees' welfare within the workplace, which in turn could reduce sickness absence (Van Dierendonck, Haynes, Borrill & Stride, 2004; Ganster, Schaubroenck, Sime & Mayes, 1990).

Open to Learning conversations is a method developed to establish a trusting relationship between leader and follower by emphasizing leader's own role when communicating with employees (Robinson, 2015). As it particularly focuses on leaders' own thinking and understanding of problems in the workplace and seeks a mutual understanding of both problems and solutions, the leader and employees are encouraged to build trust in ways that strengthen the relationship and simultaneously solve problems. This also requires a mutual vulnerability between leader and employee.

A trusting relationship involves the willingness to make yourself vulnerable to another person (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). When vulnerability is acknowledged as positive it may reduce barriers between individuals and lead to improved communication and enhanced learning (Meyer et al. 2017; Gilson, 2014). Thus the OTL method may be particularly useful when handling challenging conversations that could possibly lead to conflicts or hurt the relationship between

leader and follower (Robinson, 2015). Considering these factors, we believe that using this method could increase trust between leader and follower and as a consequence reduce sickness absence. Building on this theory, our research question is

Can Open-To-Learning Workshops reduce sickness absence?

Theory and Hypothesis

Sickness absence

Most organizations are concerned and affected with sickness absence (Huijs, Koppes, Taris, & Blonk, 2012), as it may cause financial consequences as a result of increased medical expenses, productivity loss and employee's compensation (Huijs et al, 2012; Dekkers-Sanchez, Hoving, Sluiter, Frings-Dresen, 2008). Whitaker (2001) has highlighted some of the economic expenses caused by sickness absence. He argues that in addition to the cost of paying the employee who is absent, there is a high chance of other costs such as salary for a replacement if the employee is absent over a longer period of time. Social costs related to employees' sickness absence may also arise, which are associated with other employees' work overload to compensate for the sick co-worker, as well as reduced quality of services, and unproductive time allocation (Whitaker, 2001). Accordingly, some researchers have even shown that it is not only the organizations who experience economical expenses, but the general population and the government is also affected by sickness absence. Baker-McClarn, Greasly, Dale and Griffith (2010) presented the national costs of sickness absence through additional demand to the health service, including the government costs, with benefits and loss of tax income from the employees who are absent from work.

Statistics show that muscular pain, such as back pain and neck pain, and mental health are the most frequent causes of sickness absence in Norway (NAV, 2017). Considering these findings, it is thus crucial to develop an understanding of the underlying factors that cause sickness absence in organizations, in order to find mechanisms to reduce them. Gilbreath and Benson (2004) argues that subordinates perceive manager´s behavior to significantly impact their mental health. Additionally,

research indicates that withdrawal and absenteeism from work is reflected by the social context in which leadership is a central part (Richardson & Vandenberg, 2005). This is in agreement with other researchers who suggest that the relationship between leaders and subordinates is one of the most influential factors of stress in organizations (Landeweerd & Boumans, 1994; Tepper, 2000). Thus, Gilbreath and Benson (2004) believes that a way to positively develop the psychosocial environment and employees' well-being is through improving the supervision of employers. Focusing the attention on leaders' behavior and communication approaches towards employees may significantly change employees working conditions. Additionally, by improving leaders communicating skills there may be an increase in employers' health, as negative communication tactics from leaders, such as harsh criticism, is correlated with employee burnout (Martin & Schinke, 1998).

Nyberg, Westerlund, Magnusson, Hanson, and Theorell (2008) argues that there exists limited research on the association between leader attributes and the level of which subordinates take sick leave. However, several researchers have presented findings which contradicts this. Van Dierendonck et al, (2004) argues that characteristics such as lack of support, reduced quality of communication and low feedback between supervisor and subordinates' decrease employers' well-being and is significantly related to feelings of stress. A reduction of these factors has been shown to increase absenteeism for subordinates (Ganster et al, 1990; Van Dierendonck et al, 2004). In contrast, leader characteristics such as trust, recognition and feedback has been shown to enhance the well-being of employers (Van Dierendonck et al, 2004), which could consequently decrease absenteeism in the workplace. One study found that high use of authority or no pursuit to resolve differences were associated with health issues and more sick leave (Hyde, Jappinen, Theorell, & Oxenstierna, 2006). This is supported by Michie and Williams (2003) who found that sick leave could be associated with unsupportive management styles and work pressures. Thus, it is safe to say that the leader-follower relationship plays a major and significant role in relation to absenteeism in the organization.

Trust

The asymmetries of power and status between leaders and employee emphasizes the issues of vulnerability and dependency, which then enhances the need for trust (Yang & Mossholder, 2010). Trust can be defined as "a willingness to make oneself vulnerable to someone else in the belief that your interests or something that you care about will not be harmed" (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015, pp. 68). Although vulnerability may be recognized by negative feelings such as embarrassment and threat, which could lead to defensive behavior, vulnerability is also manifested in the willingness and openness to learn and accept our faults (Meyer et al, 2017). Gilson (2014) emphasized that positive vulnerability is what enables learning because it reduces ignorance. Therefore, being open to criticism and feedback despite its negativity, is particularly useful when reflecting on own actions and responsibilities. Meyer et al (2017) highlights that these abilities are significant in organizations and for organizational leaders as they shape the culture of communication and the organization as a whole. They additionally highlight the importance of organizational leaders' ability to demonstrate their own vulnerability to develop more trusting relationships (Meyer et al. 2017).

Open communication in relation to problems may contribute to more effective implementation of resolutions, greater organizational effectiveness, collaboration and commitment to solving issues (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Therefore, a shift in how organizations perceive vulnerability is necessary. Rather than seeing it as a constraint, it should be perceived as a basic human condition and an opportunity for learning (Meyer et al. 2017). Consequently, leaders are able to develop trust that are critical for "enhancing positive employee behavior and attitudes at work", according to Yang & Mossholder (2010, pp. 51). This is supported by Argyris` (1991) research, where the participants turned their negative feelings towards vulnerability into an opportunity of reflection around previous behavior. Hence, they began to put down the guard to solve problems and additionally understood the importance of their role in the company in enhancing organizational performance.

Concern for others is critical when establishing trust, and is additionally central to communication and reliability (Nyhan, 2000). Joseph and Winston (2005)

emphasize the importance of leaders´ behavior to gain and sustain trust. However, when dealing with uncertainty and concerns about performance or behavior, leader's struggle to have these conversations in an effectively manner (Meyer et al, 2017). Trust is primarily determined by whether or not the leader manages to perform communicative and supportive behaviors and it is an important tool for enhancing employee engagement (Braun, 1997; Haynie, Mossholder & Harris, 2016; Roberts, Williams & David, 2017; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Mayer, Davis and Schoorman's (1995) model of dyadic trust emphasize that trust experienced by followers is based on leader's behavior (Joseph & Winston, 2005). Thus it is the leader's responsibility to endorse the relationship with its subordinates, and consequently determine the outcome of the subsequent organizational performance (Robinson, 1996). Furthermore, Robinson (1996) suggests that if a trusting relationship between leader and subordinate is in any way broken, it cannot be easily repaired. Because trust represents the ability to make oneself vulnerable to another person, it is critical to focus on methods to overcome barriers that might damage the leader-employee relationship (Meyer et al, 2017). Therefore, developing methods for improving leadership behavior and communication skills could minimize the risk of damaging the trusting relationship and organizational performance.

Nyhan (2000) found that empowerment was the strongest predictor of trust, which means that trust is based on employee's participation in decision making and feedback to and from superiors. For the employees to take ownership in their work, it is crucial that leaders trust the subordinates' abilities, hence expresses this either by word or through support. Moreover, Argyris (1964) argues that trust is positively associated with openness, hence willingness to accept new behavior and feedback, which in turn may improve problem solving and innovation within an organization (Nyhan, 2000). Groysberg and Slind (2012) suggests that great leaders engage with employees through person-to-person conversations rather than "commands from above". Through conversations, they argue that leaders may contribute to higher levels of flexibility, employee engagement, and strategic alignment that in the long run may outperform rivals and become a strategic advantage. However, the possibility of damaging this relationship when confronting employees with work related issues is relatively high (Robinson & Le Fevre, 2011). This refers back to the vulnerability

aspect of trust, which involves taking risks and acknowledge that something meaningful is at stake (Meyer et al. 2017). Thus leaders role in conversations with their employees can be seen as crucial.

Leaders are considered as a key influence on employees' voice perceptions and behavior. That is, their willingness to address issues raised in the organization and their desire to continue their employment (Detert & Treviño, 2010). More specifically, some researchers argue that in order for leaders to be perceived as competent communicators they need to exhibit an openness and responsiveness to information presented through actively listen to their employees' points of view (Salacuse, 2017; Shaw, 2005). Furthermore, leaders' ability to generate an open communication platform has been shown to influence employees job satisfaction (Madlock, 2008). Madlock (2008) found in his study that leader's ability to communicate towards employees was the best predictor of employees' job satisfaction, compared to leadership style. Thus, it is important to emphasize the value of leaders' communication competence, because potential negative outcomes of employee job satisfaction has been associated with absenteeism (Iverson & Deery, 2001). Considering this research, welcoming conversations which attempts to create a more open and accepting environment may be a method to improve leader's behavior towards subordinates.

Open to Learning Conversations

"Open to learning" (OTL) conversations is a model of interpersonal effectiveness that emphasize the value of information, the thought processes when making judgements of situations, and creating strategies to solve them (Robinson, 2015). According to Robinson (2015) one can distinguish between open- and closed to learning conversations.

A closed-to-learning conversation (CTL) is experienced when leaders assume that their own perspective is correct and enforce it, even with good intentions, on their employee. On the contrary, an OTL conversation assist in improving and controlling "the quality of their thinking and decision-making" (Robinson, 2015, pp. 1). This is found when leaders confirm that their own perspective is aligned with the employees views, creating a common understanding of the situation. The two conversation methods may result in the same conclusion, however the OTL process suggest that

leaders build trust with their subordinates, which is in contrast to a CTL approach where applying this method will reduce the likelihood of behavioral change in both superiors and subordinates (Robinson, 2015). As previously mentioned, trust between leaders and subordinates has shown to increase effectiveness, positively enhance the working environment, organizational performance, (Schockley-Zalabak, Ellis & Winograd, 2000; Nyhan, 2000;Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998) and reduce sickness absence (Ganster et al, 1990; Van Dierendonck et al, 2004).

Robinson (2015) argues that there are three important values that drive an OTL conversation. The first value, increasing the validity of information, includes thoughts, opinions and reasoning. This value assists leaders in being open to feedback and treating one's own view as a hypothesis. The second, increasing respect, means that leaders should "treat others as well intentioned, as interested in learning and as capable of contributing to your own" (Robinson, 2015, pp. 4). The third, increasing commitment, involves leaders' ability to foster ownership of decisions through transparency. Implementing these three values may help leaders develop a relationship based on trust and respect, which in turn could reduce sickness absence (Ganster et al, 1990; Van Dierendonck et al, 2004). In addition, employees may feel more committed to the results of the conversation due to leaders' ability to receive feedback and being open to change (Robinson, 2015; Meyer et al. 2017).

One of the most crucial factors for leaders to make a positive difference in organizations, is building trusting relationships with employees (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). A critical element in building trust is leaders' capability to handle difficult problems respectfully. Failing to do so may disrupt the development of creating a trusting and respectful environment (Robinson, 2015). Difficult conversations often address concerns with a personal nature, and might be related to subordinates' behavior or performance. This could induce negative emotions such as feelings of threat or embarrassment particularly due to the power difference between leader and employee (Meyer et al. 2017) Indeed, difficult conversations such as performance quality could be perceived as a challenge for the leader because it can potentially threaten the relationship between the leader and follower. Negative feedback may be necessary for future learning and development. However, because of the exposed vulnerability

employees display when building a relationship with their supervisor, they may find such conversations uncomfortable and therefore act defensive (Meyer et al, 2017; Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Gilson, 2014). Consequently, these conversations can create an internal struggle for leaders as they address the performance issue and simultaneously try to maintain a good relationship with the subordinate (Argyris & Schon, 1974). Additionally, engaging in OTL is believed to strengthen the trust between leader and employee, hence reducing the internal struggle for leaders when facing difficult conversations (Robinson, 2015).

Given these aforementioned studies, relationships between leader and employee seem important when considering sickness absence in organizations. Lack of feedback, communication, and support are characteristics which may decrease employees working conditions, and thus create absenteeism within an organization (Benson, 2004; Ganster et al, 1990; Van Dierendonck et al, 2004; Landeweerd & Boumans, 1994; Tepper, 2000). As previously mentioned, OTL conversations can be a tool for leaders when dealing with difficult conversations. According to Robinson (2015) using this method may develop leaders to be more open to feedback, and also to establish a common ground between leader and subordinate which in turn may increase the quality of communication. Consequently, using this communication technique could increase trust between leader and subordinate, which in turn may enhance employees working conditions, interpersonal trust and reduce sickness absence.

Our hypothesis is thus as follows:

H: *OTL conversations will increase trust between leader and subordinate which in turn will reduce sickness absence*

Method

Design

To investigate whether OTL leadership training has a role in reducing sickness absence, this study was designed as a randomized, classical field experiment with quantitative collection of data from Qualtrics (an online survey tool; Bryman & Bell, 2015). Our hypothesis was reached through deductive reasoning (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Deductive theory is a common view of the relationship between theory and research and represents a top-down approach where researchers work from a more general perspective towards the more specific (Bryman & Bell 2015). This type of reasoning is common in quantitative research designs and emphasize quantification in collection and analysis of data, and the testing of hypotheses (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

The purpose of this study was to measure possible changes in trust and sickness absence with the participation in OTL workshops, and the mediating effect of trust on sickness absence. In our study we measured the leaders' and employees' perceptions of the quality of difficult conversations before attending the workshop (time 1), and again after attending the workshop (time 2), which created an experimental condition. A quantitative research design is therefore appropriate as it is a consistent tool for analysis, which is important when measuring variables over time (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This is particularly critical in our study because we want to make sure that we test the same construct in the first (time 1) and second test (time 2), thus exhibiting high internal reliability (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Additionally, quantitative research allows fine differences and details in individual characteristics in questions, and detect small variations and more precise estimates of the "...degree of relationships between concepts" (Bryman & Bell, 2015, pp. 164). Because a third group was tested without treatment (control group) the research fulfil a classical experimental condition (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The main purpose of a control group is to eliminate the possible effect of conflicting explanations of causal findings and in addition erase threats to internal validity (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Threats to internal validity may involve maturation or testing, and allows us to better understand the possible differences between the treatment and control group (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Because this study seeks to establish possible differences in behavior before and after OTL workshops, it was essential to compare OTL workshop participants with individuals that did not participate in the workshop (Bryman & Bell, 2015). When establishing pre- and post-tests between two groups we can be more certain that if there are no differences in the pre-tests, changes in the post-tests is a result of the OTL workshop (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Participants and Sample

In order to investigate the role of OTL leadership training, participants from a county in Norway were randomly selected to attend the two-day OTL workshop. Participants in this study were leaders such as principals, vice principals, and department/group/team leaders from different schools. All participants received a questionnaire in advance of the workshop (time 1). When completing the first survey the participants were asked to nominate five teachers with the longest seniority who were then invited to evaluate their leaders' behavior in advance, and subsequent the OTL leadership training. In addition, the survey completed by subordinates was used as a tool to evaluate trust between themselves and their leaders. The same questionnaire used in time 1 was later distributed to the participants in time 2, post workshop.

Procedure

The data has been conducted from a previous study, therefore, the study design, samples, procedures and studies had already been evaluated and approved by The Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD). Data collection was divided in two waves, "before" and "after" the OTL workshop, approximately two months apart. Participants received an email with an electronic link to the survey, and information about the terms of agreement by participating in the study. It was clearly highlighted that participation was voluntary and that all confidential information would be anonymous by the end of the study (most likely in May 2021). The survey was additionally sent to a control group to increase the internal validity of the study.

To examine if the OTL leadership training had a role in reducing sickness absence, statistics in the participating schools were extracted from the county the

schools belonged to. The sick leave statistics were also collected in two waves (time 1 and time 2) with one year apart (June 2016 and June 2017).

Intervention: Workshop

Open-to-Learning is a method used in organizations daily activities. The workshop that is aimed to train leaders in communication techniques is therefore emphasized in both theory and practice. Day one of the workshop focused primarily on theories related to OTL conversations while the second day had a more practical approach. The first day focused on building an informative theoretical base of OTL conversations with an emphasis on trust. Participants were given activities in form of acting out problematic scenarios, recording them, and listening to the tapes to get a deeper understanding of their communication techniques. Additionally, the participants had to analyze video clips which showed both closed and open to learning conversations. The second day also involved activities, however, these were more focused towards leaders' ability to approach difficult conversations, and how employees perceived this approach. Although their intentions are good, leaders may struggle to communicate their message appropriately. Consequently, followers may experience the message quite differently from the leader, which could lead to misunderstandings and lack of trust. The workshop is therefore a tool to make leaders more attentive to the difficulties that may arise from these conversations.

Measures

All items were scored on a 7-point likert scale, with a range from 1= Strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree, or 1=not at all to 7= to a great extent.

The questionnaire used in this study consisted of four themes; OTL behavior and conversation outcomes, principal effectiveness, relational trust, and control variables.

OTL behaviors and conversation outcomes (OTL). A scale developed by Robinson, Sinnema, and LeFevre's (2014) was used to investigate the effect of the OTL workshop and was created to assess leaders ability to use OTL in their baseline

and real conversations. The scale included 16 items which outlined advocacy, inquiry and problem solving behaviors which were consistent with the governing variables of OTL. The items related to advocacy included behaviors such as open considerate statements about one's concerns, and a clear reasoning for one's point of view. Indicators of inquiry that were consistent with OTL, included investigating into other's reasoning, doubts and disagreements. Items associated with problem solving included items which explicitly investigated the assumptions around the problem cause and possible solutions. It also welcomed the other person to assist, to be able to get a better overview of the situation. Additionally, there was a 9 item agreement scale, which was used to determine task and relationship outcomes of the conversation (e.g. "The outcome of the conversation is satisfactory to both parties") (Robinson et al, 2014, pp. 53).

Principal effectiveness (PE). To assess principal effectiveness, a 16 item PE scale created by Sinnema, Robinson, Ludlow, and Pope (2015) was used. The questions included in the scale was specified towards the employees, allowing them to rate their leaders' effectiveness on "decision making, problem solving, leading instructional improvement, leading teacher learning, and gaining the respect of staff and the parent community" (Sinnema et al, 2015, pp. 288). The leaders in this research were asked to rate themselves on the same items. The items were drawn from a theory of student-centered leadership that gives an overview of leadership capabilities that are considered necessary for school leaders to possess in order to be effective in their practice (Robinson, 2011).

Relational Trust. The relational trust scale consists of nine items, and asks employees to give indications of how they perceive their relationship with their leader. It is assessed using Bryk and Schneider's (2002) scale on trust which is expressed by questions like: "My leader respects me", "I respect the leader as a professional" and "In this department, the leader pays attention to the well-being of employees."

Liking (LMX). Liden and Maslyn (1998) emphasize that Leader-Member Exchange theory is a concept that involves the style where leaders choose to establish a relationship with subordinates. Consequently, leaders develop different sorts of

relationships or exchanges with their subordinates, and some of these relationships are mainly contractual while others are grounded in respect and mutual trust (Liden & Maslyn, 1998). In order to control for the differences in relationships between leaders and employees, and thus how employees may rate their leaders, the LMX multidimensional scale developed by Liden and Maslyn (1998) was used. The LMX scale has 12 items which measures affect, contribution, loyalty and professional respect. However, in this study, it was only the three items related to affection that was used, to control for personal liking.

Analytical Procedure

All tests were conducted in IBM SPSS Statistics version 25. In addition we used the PROCESS macro for SPSS, developed by Hayes (2012), to conduct a mediation analysis with bootstrapping. To test our hypothesis, we conducted a two-tailed test with significance level of .05 within all relevant analyses (Hayes, 2012).

First, to check the reliability and internal consistency of each of the scales, we performed a Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient test, and in advance reversed the scales that had negative wording (Pallant, 2010). Furthermore, we applied an Exploratory Factor Analysis with principal component and promax rotation to test the inter-relationships between the items (Pallant, 2010). In addition, we investigated the bivariate Pearson correlation matrix to uncover and describe linear relationships between the variables (Pallant, 2010).

To examine a possible mediating relationship between participation in OTL workshops, trust and sick leave, we used Hayes PROCESS macro for SPSS to bootstrap the dataset. The PROCESS macro allows for a smaller participation sample, as it bootstraps the sample thousands of times (Hayes 2013). As suggested by Hayes (2012) we conducted the analysis using 5,000 bootstrap samples. In order to uncover a potential difference in participants before and after the workshop we calculated a variable that entail the difference between the before and after measures (Problem solving T2 − Problem solving T1). PROCESS is a tool that generates bias-corrected confidence intervals for indirect effects (m) (Hayes, 2012). The tool, which uses

bootstrapping, is a method that works by resampling the original sample thousands of times with the replacement and integration of statistics of interest included in the new sample size (Hayes, 2017). This method avoids making assumptions about the shape of the sampling distribution and the bootstrap intervals more accurately respect the variability of the sampling distribution, in difference from the normal theory approach. Consequently, the program is more likely to produce more authentic results in contrast to the normal theory approach (Hayes, 2017). Finally, an ANOVA analysis was additionally conducted to examine the variance between groups (follow up, no follow up and the control group) in relation to sick leave.

Results

As we only had one hypothesis, all of the analysis below is conducted to reveal that particular relationship.

Participation sample.

Due to a low response rate related to the nomination of teachers, and the lack of responses from teachers, the sample did not consist of five teachers for each leader. The sample included (time 1) in total 43 school leaders and 73 employees from schools in the selected county in Norway. Among these, 21 school leaders and 23 employees represented the control group which did not participate in any OTL workshop. Several of the leaders and their employees did not answer the second time, therefore the sample in time 2 consisted of 34 leaders and 48 employees, whereas 16 school leaders and 15 employees represented the control group. Additionally, the sample were divided between leaders who received follow up sessions after the workshop and those who did not receive follow up sessions after the workshop. Table 1 presents the mean age and years of experience, and also the percentage of males vs females of the leaders and their employees in the three experimental groups.

	Control		No follow up		Follow up	
The mean of:	Leader	Employee	Leader	Employee	Leader	Employee
Age	50.95	49.30	49.20	49.80	45.62	49.59
Years of experience	2.57	4.00	2.50	3.68	2.60	3.90
Male	47.62%	52.17%	42.86%	35.71%	50%	40.91%
Female	53.38%	47.83%	57.14%	64.29%	50%	59.09%

Table 1. The average mean of age and years of experience, and percentage of gender.

Reliability and Correlation Matrix

One of the first analyses conducted was Cronbach's alpha, which is a commonly used statistics when investigating internal consistency for items on a scale. Moreover, Cronbach's alpha "provides an indication of the average correlation among all of the items that make up the scale" (Pallant, 2013. pp. 6). That is, it aims to uncover if all the items in a scale measure the same underlying construct. In order to explore the interrelationship among the variables, we conducted a correlation coefficient analysis between the groups of our variables. Using correlation coefficient analysis allows an investigation of whether the variables have a positive (increase in one variable indicates an increase in the other) or negative (increase in one variable indicates a decrease in the other) correlation with each other (Pallant, 2013).

Table 1. Pearson correlations among the research variables for Time 1 and Time 2

Variables	M	SD	N	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1 SPE (T1)	5.53	.38	55	(.85)												
2 SPE (T2)	5.58	.30	41	.45**	(.73)											
3 SOTL (T1)	5.02	.38	55	.31*	.13	(.80)										
4 SOTL (T2)	4.94	.45	41	.55**	.41**	.62**	(.87)									
5 EPE (T1)	5.58	.62	50	-.01*	-.03	-.003	.26	(.94)								
6 EPE (T2)	5.49	.76	33	-.37**	-.26	.24	-.10	.75**	(.95)							
7 EOTL (T1)	4.93	.78	50	.08	.07	.12	.31	.67**	.45*	(.95)						
8 EOTL (T2)	5.16	.69	33	.10	.05	.25	.17	.69**	.61**	.68**	(.95)					
9 TRUST (T1)	5.97	.78	50	.08	.10	.05	.27	.87**	.70**	.64**	.56**	(.90)				
10 TRUST (T2)	5.91	.87	33	-.13	-.20	.23	-.18	.52*	.78**	.32	.65**	.66**	(.90)			
11 LIKING (T1)	5.66	.62	50	.12	.25	.05	.16	.71**	.46*	.51**	.53*	.71**	.51*	(.79)		
12 LIKING (T2)	5.69	.64	33	-.32	-.13	.33	-.08	.49*	.55**	.34	.61**	.52*	.71**	.65**	(.83)	
13 SICK_LEAVE (2017)	5.25	1.66	109	-.07	.09	.16	.001	-.30*	-.40*	-.18	-.22	-.22	-.36	-.12	-.20	-

Note: The Cronbach's alphas are in parentheses along the diagonal. Significance at: *p<0.05 and **p<0.01 (one-tailed). Explanation for the abbreviations: Supervisor Principal Effectiveness (SPE), Supervisor OTL Behaviors and Conversation Outcomes (SOTL), Employee Principal Effectiveness (EPE), Employee OTL Behaviors and Conversation Outcomes (EOTL), Relational Trust (TRUST), Leader-Member Exchange (LIKING).

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and correlation among the variables for both time 1 and time 2. Half of the scales have a Cronbach's alpha which are considered excellent (equal or above .90), while the rest are considered to be within good to acceptable region ($.80 > \alpha \geq .70$) (George, 2011).

Initial analyses did not provide an extensive amount of significant correlations. However, the data still revealed some interesting results. A significant positive correlation exists between employees perception (EOTL_T2) of their leaders ability to use OTL after attending the workshop, and the trust (TRUST_T2) they experience towards their leader. This supports previous findings that OTL can increase trust between leader and employee (Robinson, 2015). Furthermore, the correlation matrix provides information on the relationship between trust and sick leave. There is a small negative significant relationship between trust (TRUST_T2) and the sick leave statistics (Sick_leave 2017). This may indicate that a decrease in trust between leader and employee may result in higher sickness absence within the school. However, as will be shown in further results, the correlation analysis is not sufficient enough to hold when statistically testing the relationship between the variables.

Exploratory Factor analysis

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) is a tool to explore underlying relationships between items. Research suggest that EFA is a large-sample procedure due to unlikeliness of generalizable or replicable results if the sample size is too small (Costello & Osborn, 2005). Despite the warnings, we decided to run an exploratory factor analysis on all items. Research suggests that item communalities are considered high if they are .8 or greater. However, this is a result that is unlikely to occur (Costello & Osborn, 2005). More common levels are low to moderate communalities .40 to .70 (Costello & Osborn, 2005). In the output, we chose to remove all loadings below .5. However, only a few items were removed from the output, which indicates that most of the communalities were moderate to high. The results from the EFA on all items indicated relatively strong loadings on one factor (see appendix 2), which differ from our initial implication. Because the items are constructed to measure four concepts (PE,

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OTL, Trust, Liking) we assumed that the items would load on four factors. Consequently, we extracted four "fixed factors" without significant difference in results. It could however be argued that the items were slightly more nuanced than without a fixed number of factors. A possible explanation to our results is the occurrence of cross loadings between items, which could indicate poorly written items (Costello & Osborn, 2005).

From the output we see that some of the items on the Trust scale loads with the Principal Effectiveness (PE) factor, and most of the Liking items loads on the Trust factor. When examining the items from the questionnaire there are certain indications of cross-loadings. For example: "I respect the leader as a professional" within the Trust-scale, may relate to "How effective is the principal in your school in earning respect of all of the staff?" or "How effective is the principal in your school in showing both personal and professional respect for staff?" which are items within the Principal effectiveness-scale. Other examples, such as, "I admire my supervisor's professional skills" within the Liking-scale, and "I really respect my manager as a professional" within the Trust-scale may additionally justify the observation of cross-loadings. Despite an observation of cross-loadings, which could be related to trust and liking being highly correlated variables, the documentation of the scales we have used in our study are well-known and repeatedly used in organizational psychology. It is therefore relatively safe to conclude that their reliability and validity is sufficiently documented (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Liden & Maslyn, 1998; Robinson et al,, 2014;Sinnema et al., 2015).

PROCESS Trust and Its Mediating Effect

To assess the mediating role of Trust between OTL and sickness absence, we used Hayes PROCESS plugin in SPSS. We ran analyses for both the experimental and control group to test the impact OTL workshops have on sickness absence in organizations. However, neither of the analyses displayed any significant results: b = -.13, t(18) = -.25, p > .05 for the experimental group, and b = -.6652, t(5) = -1.32, p > .05 for the control group. For the results to be significant, zero should not lie in between the confidence intervals (LLCI and ULCI) (Hayes & Preacher, 2014). In our case zero was between the numbers for both the experimental 95% CI(-1.1618, .9061) and the

control group 95% CI(-1.9626, .6322). This means that although the OTL workshop may be a predictor of trust, it does not necessarily mean that the trusting relationship built between supervisors and employees leads to lower sickness absence.

ANOVA analysis

An ANOVA analysis with an independent group design was conducted in order to investigate if any difference appeared between the three participant groups; group 1: control, group 2: no follow up and group 3: follow up (Pallant, 2010). A two-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to examine what impact the different OTL participation levels had on sickness absence (see appendix 3). There was a statistically significant difference at the $p > .05$ level in OTL participation for the three age groups: $F(2, 95) = 29.7$ $p = .00$. Despite reaching statistical significance, the actual difference in mean scores between the groups was considered medium. The effect size, calculated using eta squared, was .06. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for Group 1 ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.82$) was significantly different from Group 2 ($M = 6.22$, $SD = .86$) and Group 3 ($M = 5.63$, $SD = .76$). Group 2 and Group 3 did not differ significantly from each other. Considering these findings one may argue that there is a decrease in sickness absence for the control group, while the experimental groups had an increase of sickness absence after attending the workshops. These findings contradict our hypothesis, and will be discussed below.

Discussion

Based on previous research we assumed that OTL workshops and trust would impact the level of sickness absence in organizations. This paper therefore attempts to explore the effect of OTL, and make contributions for future research. Sickness absence is a serious issue in organizations and tools to reduce it is therefore valuable in order to achieve organizational effectiveness, and to avoid a negative loop of absenteeism (Whitaker, 2001; Huijs et al. 2012; Dekkers-Sanchez et al. 2008). Although previous studies have highlighted the role trust has on sickness absence, our study is the first to introduce OTL to the equation. The results are unfortunately limited, it gives however

some small indications of the role OTL plays to individuals and organizations, which is important for future research.

There may be several reasons for the limited results, such as the low response rate. However, some interesting findings may be meaningful to discuss and open up for future studies to explore. In support of previous research, and our hypothesis, it was found that employees' perception of their leaders' ability to use OTL after attending the workshop and the trust they experienced towards their leader was significantly correlated. This may therefore indicate that implementing OTL workshops for leaders can strengthen the trust between leaders and employees, which support former research on OTL and trust (Robinson, 2015). Moreover, the data revealed a significant negative relationship between trust and sickness absence. This supports previous findings that employees' level of trust towards their leader can influence the sickness absence within an organization (Ganster et al, 1990; Dierendonck et al, 2004).

Liden and Maslyn (1998) argues that leaders tend to develop different types of relationships with different employees, some more personal than others. In our study, the intended participation number was 5 employees per leader as this would give a clearer assessment of changes in leader behavior, however, several leaders were only evaluated by one or two employees. Since there was a lack of responses, the ones who responded to the questionnaires may have done this mainly because of their personal relationship with their leader causing sampling bias or non-probability sampling (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In that case, the trust between leader and employee would already be strong, which may have motivated the employees to rate their leaders more beneficially. On the other hand, sickness absence was based on the statistical numbers provided by the county, meaning that the employees could not have altered these numbers because of their personal relationship with their leaders. Additionally, the sickness absence statistics for the control group schools, had initially lower sickness absence compared to the schools who participated in the workshop. Thus, it is only logical that when the statistics where extracted a year later, the control groups schools still had lower sick leave statistics. Moreover, the relationship between trust and sickness absence was small, which could have been a result of the small participation sample, thus it would be interesting to see if this relationship was stronger with a larger

sample. It is however important to notice that the statistical data could be influenced by a number of other factors which will be discussed below.

Even though our correlation matrix showed some interesting results regarding trust, OTL and sickness absence, the ANOVA analysis displayed contradictory data. However, it is important to highlight that by coincident the control groups, had overall lower sickness absence than the two other groups; follow up and no follow up which may have affected the results. In the analysis, the control group had a significantly negative relationship with sickness absence, compared to the other two groups, no follow up, and follow up. Meaning, that the schools where leaders did not attend the OTL workshop experienced a decrease in sickness absence, compared to the schools where leaders attended the workshop both with and without follow up. This is not in line with our hypothesis nor with previous research as OTL has been shown to create trust between leaders and their employees (Robinson 2015). Moreover, trust has also been presented as an important factor in relation to levels of sickness absence within organizations (Ganster et al, 1990; Dierendonck et al, 2004). Thus, it could be argued that these results do not support previous findings. There are different reasons as to why our findings displayed contradictory results. As this was a field experiment there existed limited levels of control to aspects such as extraneous variables. Indeed, there could be several other factors which affected the sickness absence in the different schools, than implementing OTL workshops (Bryman & Bell, 2015), including work-home conflicts, burnout and organizational changes etc (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Van Rhenen, 2009). Additionally, there were several leaders who did not participate in the study. This means that we cannot be certain of what type of trusting relationship they initially had with their employees, nor how it evolved during the time period of the study. Thus the non-participatory leaders may have been a factor in affecting the sickness absence at the schools which we could control for.

Another explanation for these results could be related to issues with transfer of training (Blume, Ford, Baldwin & Huang, 2010). Transfer of training concerns the ability to transfer skills, abilities and knowledge into real life events and situations, which can be considered a critical element when introducing training to enhance people's' working skills (Blume et al, 2010). Blume et al (2010) argues that leadership

training can be seen as a method to "inculcate generalizable rules, concepts, and principles" (pp. 1069). Meaning, to allow the trainees to define their own strategy in order to apply those rules, and customizing the training in order to fit their personal needs (Blume et al, 2010). This has been characterized by Yelon and Ford (1999) as open skills, where the goals of adapting open skills is to learn principles. In contrast, closed skills has been explained as learning skills in a context which can be transferred identically in a working environment (Yelon & Ford, 1999). As training in OTL conversations can be argued to be a method in learning communication principles, this form of workshop can be considered to be an open skill. Blume et al (2010) argues that open skills provide more freedom to the trainee in relation to transferring these skills. Additionally, motivation has been considered as an important aspect when learning an open skill. Indeed, those who experience a strong motivation have a higher chance of pursuing opportunities and individuals at work where they can employ their training (Ford, Quinones, Sego, & Sorra, 1992). In light of these findings, there may be several factors as to how, and how fast, the participants transferred their OTL training to their work, and if they managed to maintain them.

As previously mentioned, closed skills are taught to train on a set of rules which are implemented in a specific way. Indeed, compared to open skills, training for closed skills are simpler to transfer in a working environment. This is also because open skills does not require one single correct way to train and transfer, but rather the opportunity to perform (Yelon & Ford, 1999; Blume et al, 2010). Additionally, with closed skills there is a more straightforward and obvious reward and reinforcement system for transferring the skills (e.g. the employee learns to use a machine or software that he/she previously could not use). This is in contrast with open skills as these rely on the trainee discovering the potential to implement the trained principles and guidelines at work, as well as supporting these opportunities as a leader (Blume et al, 2010).

Considering this in relation to OTL training, one can argue that these skills requires time and work. The time period between the first and second time of answering the questionnaire was approximately 2 months, which may not have been sufficient enough to capture the transfer of training for OTL skills. Additionally, the leaders may have been able to transfer some of the skills to their work environment, however, the

outcome of building a trusting relationship, using the newly implemented conversation method may not have emerged this early in the process for the employees. Building trust between leaders and employees takes time and effort (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), thus it may have been premature to evaluate the trusting relationship after 2 months.

To be able to test our hypothesis with trust as a mediating factor, we used the PROCESS plugin in SPSS, where bootstrapping is initiated to identify the indirect effect (Hayes, 2012). The sample size in this study was a fairly small sample, thus we believed that initiating PROCESS with bootstrapping would allow us to obtain more accurate and significant results. However, this did not turn out to be the case. Since bootstrapping multiplies the original sample we collected thousands of times, a possible explanation is that the sample collected was not representative to our analysis. The employees who were asked to participate in the study may have been selected for personal reasons such as level of relationship and levels of motivation at work. As the sickness absence statistic did not show which individuals who were absent from work, we should consider the possibility that some of these employees were not included in the study. Additionally, although OTL training has been shown to build a trusting relationship between leaders and employees (Robinson, 2015), it does not mean that this form of trusting relationship aids in reducing sickness absence.

LIMITATIONS

The study has several limitations that should be considered. First, it is important to highlight that our overall response rate was relatively low, which may have influenced the generalizability. Moreover, only a small number of participants remained during the second phase of the study. Our intention was to have five employees connected to each leader. However, the lack of responses inflicted these intentions. Consequently, we were not able to link all the supervisors to his or her employees, or all the employees to a supervisor in both phases, which led us to a small number of remaining participants during the second phase. Some of the leaders were only rated by one employee, which may have caused subjective scores on principal effectiveness and trust. Hence it could be assumed that our results are subject to personal bias. In addition, the participants that chose to contribute in the study may

differ from those who did not, producing non-response bias, which could influence the research question significantly (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Not all leaders within the participating schools contributed in the study. Therefore, it is important to highlight that this may have inflicted the results. In particular, because we were unable to separate the sickness absence data in groups containing individuals that participated in the study, and those who did not. We cannot be certain if the individuals that contributed in increasing the sickness absence where those with leaders who did not participate in OTL workshops.

Furthermore, the possibility of misleading results such as type II errors should be considered (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This is particularly important in our study due to the low response rate and lack of significant results from the analyses. Type II errors involves confirming the null hypothesis when it in fact should be rejected (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The presence of type II errors is expected to decrease with the increase in sample size (Farnell & Larcker, 1981). Therefore, it could be suggested that more participants should be considered for future research, despite the fact that we used PROCESS to bootstrap our sample.

Although bootstrapping through PROCESS was useful in our analysis due to few respondents, some limitations may additionally apply. When analyzing the mediating effect of trust on sickness absence PROCESS resampled the original sample thousands of times through bootstrapping meaning that any errors in the original sample may consequently influence the results (Hayes, 2013). If the condition of a trustworthy sample, the representative for the population it was drawn from, is absent, we may not trust the bootstrapped inference (Hayes, 2013). Despite the fact that our sample size is small, it is based on a random selection from the population, which strengthens the assumption that it is representable (Bryman & Bell, 2015). On the other hand, it is recommended that future research should apply a greater sample size to enhance generalizability and reliability (Bryman & Bell, 2015). As this is a field experiment we cannot be certain that the participants did not interact and communicate about their experiences. This may consequently have contaminated the results (Bryman & Bell, 2015). However, if the experiment is entirely controlled for it may hurt the

ecological validity of the study (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This is particularly relevant due to the nature of what we are measuring, namely relationships between people.

A longitudinal design is used to map change over time, usually more than twelve months (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The workshop and OTL was implemented during fall 2016, while sickness absence statistics was conducted summer 2016 and 2017. Pettigrew (1990) argues that time frames of longitudinal studies are crucial. The time sets a frame of the observations and changes that is seen during the study and additionally how these are interpreted (Pettigrew, 1990). Although we had a limited time frame for our master thesis and became restricted by this, it has also been shown that it is difficult to know when the change begins and when to stop collecting data (Pettigrew, 1990). To find the exact time of transfer is challenging, in our case when the supervisors had sufficient time to process the information learned at the workshop and implement the changes in practice. The time-span between the two waves (pre- and post-tests) of data collection was two months. Research implies that two months is not necessarily sufficient time to transfer skills and build trust, which emphasize that our data is not necessarily measured at the most appropriate time in relation to our hypothesis (Blume et al, 2010).

On the other hand, it is in our case rational to begin the collection of data before and after the workshop had been conducted. Yet, it could be argued that more time and measures could have been made (Pettigrew, 1990). Consequently, it could be claimed that the time between implementing OTL practices and measurement of sickness absence was too short, and with more time and measurements the results may have differed.

Future Research

The study did unfortunately not reveal a significant relationship between OTL, trust and sickness absence. We suggest that the time frame in addition to transfer of training is possible explanations to the disappointing outcomes. Therefore, it is suggested that future research explore the relationships in more depth to better understand the potential underlying factors of sickness absence. Applying qualitative

research to the study could enhance the understanding of the quantitative data, and in addition provide insights which are not possible to access through quantitative methods (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This includes aspects such as individual thoughts and opinions of the workshop, and experiences involving the implementation of OTL in the organization. Consequently, this may lead to new hypotheses and research questions. In combination with qualitative data, it is possible to uncover details about employees' relationship with supervisors, absenteeism and whether or not these are connected. One year may be insufficient to implement an entirely new concept, which strengthen the assumption that frequent and in depth exploration could be important.

As previously mentioned, the sample size, time and the ability to transfer training has been discussed as possible explanations as to why there were a lack of significant differences in trust, OTL workshop and sickness absence. Indeed, as discussed in Bryman and Bell (2015) " the less sampling error one is prepared to tolerate the larger a sample will need to be" (pp. 198). Although our sample size may have been acceptable pre workshop, there was a big decline in respondents post workshop. Thus, future research should consider the problem of non-responses and be aware that the sample who are asked to take part in the study should be 20 percent more than the sample goal (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Moreover, OTL conversations has been argued to train open skills (Blume et al, 2010), therefore future research may need to expand the time lapse between time 1 and time 2, to uncover a trusting relationship between leader and employees.

Drawing on this, we suggests that by allowing a longer time period between pre- and post- workshop or allowing for a third evaluation test (Time 3), could have revealed relational trust between leader and employee. Additionally, there was no opportunity to investigate the possible existence of a correlation between the participants who took part in the study and the employees who were absent from work. Moreover, if we had been able to separate the two groups we could have more easily investigated the relationship between participation in OTL workshops and sickness absence. Thus it would be interesting to examine this relation more deeply.

Conclusion and implications:

This study has attempted to shed light on the importance OTL conversations has on organizations, especially with regards to sickness absence, through building trusting relationships between leader and employees. Regrettably, because of the limitations discussed in this paper, there was an insufficient limited amount of significant findings which supported our hypothesis. Although the study did not uncover a significant relationship between OTL workshops, trust and sickness absence, previous research has found evidence that supports the relationship between OTL and trust, and the importance of the leader-subordinate relationship to reduce sickness absence (Van Dierendonck, et al. 2004; Ganster et al. 1990; Robinson, 2015). As research uncovers that appropriate supervision of employees and improved communication skills could enhance employees well-being (Benson, 2004; Martin & Schinke, 1998; Groysberg & Slind, 2012), we assume that with more participants and an in depth exploration of the topic, one may find evidence that supports our hypothesis.

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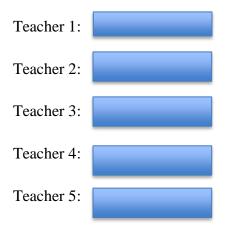
Appendix – 1 survey questions and scales.

Contact information and teacher nominations.

(Sent to leader)

Please provide the email to the leader who is attending Open-To-Learning workshop.

Leader email: School:

Please nominate five teachers who has the longest the longest seniority and educational responsibility. Please provide their emails:

Teacher 1:

Teacher 2:

Teacher 3:

Teacher 4:

Teacher 5:

Survey questions translated to English.

(These questions were distributed to both leaders and employees, pre- and post-workshop.)

1) Gender
   - Male
   - Female

3) Age

4) Position
   - Teacher
   - (Leader)

5) For how long have you had your current position?
   - Less than 1 year
   - 4 years
   - 5-9 years
   - 10-14 years
   - 15-19 years

- More than 20 years

Open-To-Learning conversation scale.
(The questions below are presented like the follower received the survey, and is formulated so that the follower evaluates their leader's competence in managing problems. The questionnaire distributed to the leaders was a self-evaluation survey where they rated their own ability to managing problems.)

Think about the different challenges that you and your leader had in the previous semester. Then think about the conversations you had with your leader that involved these challenges. In what degree did the following occur in these conversations?

1. My leader explicitly asked me to help him/her to understand the situation.
2. My leader expressed their real concern in an open and respectful way.
3. My leader was clear around the grounds for his/her point of view.
4. My leader indicated that there was a possibility of differing points of view.
5. My leader investigated the underlying grounds for my point of view.
6. My leader investigated if he/she really had understood my point of view by summarizing regularly.
7. My leader explored my expressed considerations and objections.
8. My leader made sure that we both tried to understand the cause of concern before we tried to find a solution.
9. My leader revealed and checked his/her initial assumptions about the cause of concern.
10. My leader suggested a solution that accommodated the interest of all parties.
11. My leader was responsive around my feelings.
12. My leader explicitly asked about my reaction on his/her point of view.
13. My leader explicitly checked if I shared his/her concerns or not.
14. My leader discovered and checked the assumptions of how the problem could be resolved.
15. My leader treated causes and suggested solutions as assumptions which were going to be evaluated.
16. My leader explicitly investigated for areas where there was an agreement about.
17. The two parties worked well together.
18. The conversation built trust between the parties.
19. The conversation contributed to a higher mutual understanding.
20. The conversation damaged rather than improved the relation between us.
21. The problem was thoroughly investigated.
22. The legitimate interests to each of the parties was weighted equally.
23. It was achieve a high degree of agreement around what needed to be done.
24. It was a clear progress in solving the problem.
25. The outcome of the conversation was satisfying for both parties.

Principal effectiveness.

How effective is your leader in…
How effective are you in…

1. using educational research as information source when making important decisions
2. learning alongside teachers about how to improve teaching and learning
3. serving the schools interests above the interest of certain groups
4. leading useful discussions in how to improve educational work
5. identifying and resolving conflicts quickly and fairly
6. promoting and communicating the schools values
7. maintaining integrity in difficult situations
8. showing personal and professional respect for staff
9. earning respect from all employees
10. earning respect from the local community
11. earning respect among ethnic diverse groups that are connected to the school
12. seeking high quality information before making the final decision
13. being open to new information and admitting mistakes
14. expressing opinions and explain why
15. actively seeking other peoples views/opinions
16. making difficult decisions when necessary

Relational trust scale.
(only for followers)

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

1. In this school/department we are allowed to discuss feelings, concerns, emotions, and frustration with the leader.
2. In this school/department the leader take care of the employees well being.
3. I believe in what my leader says
4. The leader is effective and manage the department in a good way
5. The leader puts the pupils before his/her own political interests.
6. The leader believes in the skills of the employees
7. The leader is personally involved in the professional development of the employees
8. I really respect my leader as a professional
9. My leader respects me

Liking scale.
(only for followers)

To what extent do you agree or disagree on the following statements:

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1. I really like my leader as a person.
2. My closest leader is the type of person who you want as a friend.
3. My closest leader is fun to work with.
4. My closest leader would defend me if I was "attacked" by others.
5. My closest leader defends my work to his/her superior, even without full knowledge of the concerning case.
6. My leader would defend me to other in the organization if I did an honest mistake.
7. I do work beyond my specified work description for my leader.
8. I am willing to go the extra mile, beyond what is normally required, to promote the interest of my workgroup.
9. I do not mind working as hard as I can for my closest leader.
10. I am impressed over my closest leaders knowledge of his/her job.
11. I respect my closest leaders knowledge and competence at work.
12. I admire my closest leaders professional skills. ¨

Appendix 2 – Exploratory Factor Analysis

Pattern Matrix[a]

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
E_PE_1_T1				
E_PE_2_T1		,621		
E_PE_3_T1		,617		
E_PE_4_T1		,738		
E_PE_5_T1		,843		
E_PE_6_T1				
E_PE_7_T1		,997		
E_PE_8_T1		,544		
E_PE_9_T1		,719		
E_PE_10_T1				
E_PE_11_T1		,604		
E_PE_12_T1		,748		
E_PE_13_T1	,501			
E_PE_14_T1		,755		
E_PE_15_T1		,582		
E_PE_16_T1		,818		

E_OTL_1_T1	,645			
E_OTL_2_T1	,551			
E_OTL_3_T1	,827			
E_OTL_4_T1	,686			
E_OTL_5_T1	,736			
E_OTL_6_T1	,810			
E_OTL_7_T1	,632			
E_OTL_8_T1	,687			
E_OTL_9_T1	,808			
E_OTL_10_T1	,846			
E_OTL_11_T1	,514			
E_OTL_12_T1R	-,730			
E_OTL_13_T1	,760			
E_OTL_14_T1	,921			
E_OTL_15_T1	,872			
E_OTL_16_T1	,785			
E_OTL_17_T1	,858			
E_OTL_18_T1	,893			
E_OTL_19_T1	,967			
E_OTL_20_T1				
E_OTL_21_T1	,881			
E_OTL_22_T1	,834			
E_OTL_23_T1	,998			
E_OTL_24_T1	,949			

	1	2	3	4
E_OTL_25_T1	1,002			
E_Trust_1_T1			,754	
E_Trust_2_T1				
E_Trust_3_T1		,580		
E_Trust_4_T1		,535		
E_Trust_5_T1		,580		
E_Trust_6_T1			,751	
E_Trust_7_T1		,596		
E_Trust_8_T1		,898		
E_Trust_9_T1			,622	
E_Liking_1_T1			,786	
E_Liking_2_T1			,574	
E_Liking_3_T1				
E_Liking_4_T1			,588	
E_Liking_5_T1				
E_Liking_6_T1			,582	
E_Liking_7_T1				,548
E_Liking_8_T1				,772
E_Liking_9_T1				,679
E_Liking_10_T1		,893		
E_Liking_11_T1		,744		
E_Liking_12_T1		,923		

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
 Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalization.[a]

a. Rotation converged in 6 iterations.

Appendix 3 – Anova analysis

Descriptives

Sick_2017

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Control	41	3,9163	1,82791	,28547	3,3394	4,4933	,75	6,29
No follow up	34	6,2259	,86163	,14777	5,9252	6,5265	4,29	6,66
Follow up	23	5,6309	,76316	,15913	5,3009	5,9609	2,13	5,79
Total	98	5,1200	1,69276	,17099	4,7806	5,4594	,75	6,66

Test of Homogeneity of Variances

		Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
Sick_2017	Based on Mean	28,447	2	95	,000
	Based on Median	14,507	2	95	,000
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	14,507	2	75,352	,000
	Based on trimmed mean	29,648	2	95	,000

ANOVA

Sick_2017

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	106,984	2	53,492	29,724	,000
Within Groups	170,963	95	1,800		
T					

Multiple Comparisons

Dependent Variable: Sick_2017

Tukey HSD

(I) Follow up, no follow up, Control	(J) Follow up, no follow up, Control	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Control	No follow up	-2,30954*	,31116	,000	-3,0504	-1,5687
	Follow up	-1,71453*	,34948	,000	-2,5466	-,8824
No follow up	Control	2,30954*	,31116	,000	1,5687	3,0504
	Follow up	,59501	,36218	,233	-,2673	1,4574
Follow up	Control	1,71453*	,34948	,000	,8824	2,5466
	No follow up	-,59501	,36218	,233	-1,4574	,2673

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Robust Tests of Equality of Means

Sick_2017

	Statistic[a]	df1	df2	Sig.
4	2	60,966	,000
6	2	74,699	,000

...tributed.

Sick_2017

Tukey HSD[a,b]

Follow up, no follow up, Control	N	Subset for alpha = 0.05	
		1	2
Control	41	3,9163	
Follow up	23		5,6309
No follow up	34		6,2259
Sig.		1,000	,195

Means for groups in homogeneous subsets are displayed.

a. Uses Harmonic Mean Sample Size = 30,839.

b. The group sizes are unequal. The harmonic mean of the group sizes is used. Type I error levels are not guaranteed.

Appendix 4 – Preliminary Master Thesis Report.

Preliminary Master Thesis Report

The role of Open-To-Learning Conversations in reducing sickness absence

Date of submission:
15.01.2018

Campus:
BI Oslo

Examination code and name:
GRA 19502 Preliminary Master Thesis Report

Supervisor:

Ide Kathrine Birkeland

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Master of Science and Organizational Psychology

Table of Contents

Executive summary:

This paper addresses the consequences related to sickness absence in organizations, with regards to both social and economic outcomes. The relationship between leader and subordinate has been shown to impact sickness absence, in particular neck and back pain and mental health. Specifically, low levels of trust between leader and subordinate have been shown to negatively affect sickness absence in an organization. Open-To-Learning (OTL) conversations are a tool used to improve leaders communication skills, especially with difficult conversations between managers and employees. Thus, this paper suggest that by implementing OTL conversations, trust will increase between leaders and subordinates, which in turn will reduce sickness absence within the organization. An intervention study will be used to investigate the impact OTL conversations have on sickness absence. Finally, a tentative plan is presented in the paper, which displays an intended timeline of the project.

Introduction to thesis

It is important in every organization to maintain employees' well being, as neglecting to do so can have both social and economical consequences. Sickness absence is not only costly for the organization but for society as well (Baker-mcclearn, Greasley, Dale, & Griffith, 2010; Whitaker, 2001). In addition, co-workers may suffer from increased workload and stress which in turn might create more sick leave within the organization causing a negative loop (Whitaker, 2001). Research exists on the relationship between leaders and subordinates and how this may affect sickness absence (Richardson & Vandenberg, 2005; Tavares, Van Knippenberg, & Van Dick, 2016). Due to the cost sickness absence cause to the organization and the society, it is interesting to investigate tools to strengthen this relationship. Research shows that a factor that could positively influence the relationship between leader and subordinate is trust (Johnson & Leary-Kelly, 2003; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998). Building trust between leader and subordinate has shown to increase employees welfare within the workplace, which in turn could reduce sickness absence (Ganster, Schaubroeck, Sime, & Mayes, 1990; Van Dierendonck, Haynes, Borrill, & Stride, 2004).

Open to Learning conversations is a model that seeks to establish a trusting relationship between leader and follower by emphasizing leader's own role when

communicating with employees. It may be particularly useful when handling challenging conversations that could possibly lead to conflicts or hurt the relationship built between leader and follower (V. M. J. Robinson, 2015). Considering this research, investigating methods to build trust between leader and employee could be useful in the process of reducing sickness absence. Research on OTL conversations has hypothesized that this method of communicating may strengthen the trust between leader and employees (V. M. J. Robinson, 2015). We therefore believe that using this method could increase trust between leader and follower and as a consequence reduce sickness absence. Building on this theory, our research question is

What is the role of Open-To-Learning Workshops in reducing sickness absence?

Sickness absence

Most organizations are affected and concerned about sickness absence (Huijs, Koppes, Taris, & Blonk, 2012). It can cause financial consequences as a result of medical expenses, productivity loss and employee's compensation (Dekkers-Sánchez, Hoving, Sluiter, & Frings-Dresen, 2008; Huijs et al., 2012). Whittaker (2001) has specified some of the economical expenses regarding sickness absence. He argues that in addition to the cost of paying the employee who is absent, there is a high chance of other costs such as salary for a replacement if the employee is absent over a longer period of time. Social costs related to employee's sickness absence may also arise. These are associated with other employees needing to do extra work to compensate for the sick co-worker, as well as reduced quality of services, and unproductive time allocation (Whitaker, 2001).

Some researchers have even shown that it is not only the organizations that experience economical expenses but the general population and the government. Baker-McClarn, Greasly, Dale and Griffith (2010) presented the national costs of sickness absence through additional demand to the health service, and also the government costs with benefits and loss of tax income from the employees who are absent from work. Statistics show that muscular pain, such as back pain and neck pain,

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and mental health are the most frequent reasons for sickness absence in Norway (NAV, 2017). Considering these researches, it is thus crucial to develop an understanding of the underlying factors that cause sickness absence in organizations, in order to find mechanisms to reduce them.

Benson and Gilbreath (2004) argues that subordinates perceive manager´s behavior to significantly impact their mental health. This is in line with other researchers who suggests that the relationship between leaders and subordinates is one of the most influential factors of stress in organizations (Landeweerd & Boumans, 1994; Tepper, 2000). Thus, Benson and Gilbreath (2004) believes that a way to positively develop the psychosocial environment and employees' well-being is through improving the supervision of employers. Focusing the attention on leaders' behavior and communication approaches towards employees may significantly change employees working conditions. Improving leaders communicating skills could increase employers' health, as negative communication tactics from leaders such as harsh criticism is correlated with employee burnout (Martin & Schinke, 1998).

Dierendonck et al, (2004) argues that characteristics such as lack of support, reduced quality of communication and low feedback between supervisor and subordinates decreases employers' well-being and is significantly related to feelings of stress. A reduction of these factors has been shown to increase absenteeism for subordinates (Ganster et al., 1990; Van Dierendonck et al., 2004). In contrast, leader characteristics such as trust, recognition and feedback has been shown to enhance the well-being of employers (Van Dierendonck et al., 2004), which could consequently decrease absenteeism in the workplace. Nyber, Westerlund, Magnusson Hanson and Theorell (2008) argues that there exists limited research on the association between leader attributes and the level of which subordinates take sick leave. One study found that high use of authority or no pursuit to resolve differences were associated with health issues and more sick leave (Hyde, Jappinen, Theorell, & Oxenstierna, 2006). This is supported by Michie and Williams who found that sick leave could be associated with unsupportive management styles and work pressures (2003). Thus, the leader-follower relationship plays a significant role in relation to absenteeism in the organization.

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Trust

Luhmann (1979) argues that trust relies on the confidence between individuals, and their belief that the other person will act fairly, predictable and ethically right. Concern for others is critical when establishing trust, and it is additionally central to communication and reliability (Nyhan, 2000). Joseph and Winston (2005) emphasize the importance of leaders behavior to gain and sustain trust. Trust is primarily determined by whether or not the leader manages to perform communicative and supportive behaviors and it is an important tool for enhancing employee engagement (Braun, 1997; Haynie, Mossholder, & Harris, 2016; Roberts & David, 2017; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Schoorman, Mayer, Roger, and Davis' (2007) model of dyadic trust emphasize that the trust experienced by followers is based on the leader's behavior (Joseph & Winston, 2005), and it is thus the leader's responsibility to endorse the relationship with its subordinates, and consequently determine the outcome of the subsequent organizational performance (S. Robinson, 1996). Furthermore, Robinson (1996) suggests that if a trusting relationship between leader and subordinate is in any way broken, it cannot be easily repaired. Developing methods for improvement of leadership behavior and communication skills could therefore minimize the risk of damaging the trusting relationship and organizational performance.

Research have suggested that high organizational trust creates greater effectiveness and enhanced organizational performance (Nyhan, 2000; Shockley-Zalabak, Ellis, & Winograd, 2000). Additionally, high levels of trust may positively impact the amount of overall conflicts, deriving from good communication and information flow (Nyhan, 2000; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998). As productive relationships is a contributing factor to effective organizations, trust is arguably important both for the employees well-being and for the organizational performance (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998). Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998) found that trust between leader and subordinates primarily depends on the behavior of the manager. It is therefore the leader's own activities that determines leader-follower trust and that leader-follower communication and interaction are fundamental to these findings (Nyhan, 2000). Several studies have investigated the relationship between trust and

organizational performance, and a common denominator is the importance of high quality relationships between the supervisor and employees as a facilitator of trust (Nyhan, 2000; Shockley-Zalabak et al., 2000; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998).

Nyhan (2000) found that empowerment was the strongest predictor of trust, which means that trust is based on employee's participation in decision making and feedback to and from superiors. For the employees to take ownership in their work, it is crucial that leaders trust the subordinates abilities, hence expresses this either by word or through support. However, empowerment is not easy to implement and requires thorough planning and implementation (Nyhan, 2000). Although difficult to implement, empowerment is important for an employee's well-being which has been shown to decrease sickness absence in organizations (Ganster et al., 1990; Van Dierendonck et al., 2004)

Moreover, Argyris (1964) argues that trust is positively associated with openness, hence willingness to accept new behavior and feedback, which in turn may improve problem solving and innovation within an organization (Nyhan, 2000). Considering this research, OTL conversations could be a method to improve leader's behavior towards subordinates, and to create a more open and accepting environment.

April (1999) sees communication and conversations as tools for announcing the effects, both positive and negative, of change. Preparing employees for change enhance the understanding which in turn may reduce the likelihood of resistance and conflict (April, 1999). Polito, EEG, RPSGT, RST, and MHA (2013) suggests that difficult conversations often is avoided due to fear of uncomfortable situations and ruin relationship to employees. Struggling to perform such conversations may have fatal outcomes, particularly in sectors where human lives are central. One example of this is how teachers that continuously perform their tasks wrongly/incompetently could in the school sector impact students performance, and without confrontation from a leader the teacher may be unable to change (Le Fevre & Robinson, 2015).

Open to Learning Conversations

"Open to learning" (OTL) conversations is a model of interpersonal effectiveness that emphasize the value of information, and the thought processes when making judgments of situations and creating strategies to solve them (V. M. J. Robinson, 2015). According to Robinson (2015) one can distinguish between open- and closed to learning conversations. A closed-to-learning conversations (CTL) is found when leaders assume that their own perspective is correct and enforce it, even with good intentions, on their employee. On the contrary, an OTL conversation assist in improving and controlling "the quality of their thinking and decision-making" (V. M. J. Robinson, 2015). This is found when leaders check that their own perspective is aligned with the employees views, creating a common understanding of the situation. The two conversation methods may result in the same conclusion, however the open to learning process suggest that leaders build trust with their subordinates. On the contrary, using a CTL approach reduce the likelihood of change in both superiors and subordinates behavior. Trust between leaders and subordinates has shown to increase effectiveness, positively enhance the working environment, and organizational performance (Nyhan, 2000; Shockley-Zalabak et al., 2000; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998) and reduce sickness absence (Ganster et al., 1990; Van Dierendonck et al., 2004).

Robinson (2015) argues that there are three important values that drive an OTL conversation. The first value, increasing the validity of information, which includes thoughts, opinions and reasoning. This value assists leaders in being open to feedback and treating one's own view as a hypothesis. The second, increasing respect, means that leaders should "treat others as well intentioned, as interested in learning and as capable of contributing to your own" (V. M. J. Robinson, 2015). The third, increasing commitment, involves leaders ability to foster ownership of decisions through transparency. Implementing these values may help leaders develop a relationship based on trust and respect, which in turn could reduce sickness absence (Ganster et al., 1990; Van Dierendonck et al., 2004). In addition, employees may feel more committed to the results of the conversation due to leaders ability to receive feedback and being open to change (V. M. J. Robinson, 2015).

One of the most crucial factors for leaders to make a positive difference in organizations, is building trusting relationships with employees (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). A critical element in building trust is leaders capability to handle difficult problems respectfully. Failing to do so may disrupt the development of creating a trusting and respectful environment (V. M. J. Robinson, 2015). Additionally, difficult conversations such as performance quality could be perceived as a challenge for the leader because it can potentially threaten the relationship between the leader and follower. The employee may find such conversations uncomfortable and therefore act defensive. Consequently, these conversations can create an internal struggle for leaders as they address the performance issue and simultaneously try to maintain a good relationship with the subordinate (C Argyris & Schon, 1974). However, engaging in OTL is believed to strengthen the trust between leader and employee, hence reducing the internal struggle for leaders when facing difficult conversations (V. M. J. Robinson, 2015).

Reviewing the research above it is evident that to evaluate the relationship between leader and subordinate is important when considering sickness absence in organizations. Lack of feedback, communication and support are characteristics that may decrease employees working conditions, and thus create absenteeism within an organization (Ganster et al., 1990; Gilbreath & Benson, 2004; Landeweerd & Boumans, 1994; Tepper, 2000; Van Dierendonck et al., 2004). As previously mentioned, OLT conversations can be a tool for leaders when dealing with difficult conversations. Robinson (2015) believes that using this method may develop leaders that are more open to feedback, and also establish a common ground between leader and subordinate which in turn may increase the quality of communication. Consequently, using this communication technique could increase trust between leader and subordinate, which in turn may enhance employees working conditions and reduce sickness absence.

Our hypothesis is therefore as follows:

H: *OTL conversations will increase trust between leader and subordinate, which in turn will reduce sickness absence*

Method

To adequately investigate whether OTL leadership training has a role in reducing sickness absence we use an intervention study (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The method of this study measures the participants ability to have difficult conversations before attending the workshop (time 1), and again after attending the workshop (time 2), which creates an experimental condition. However, it does not fulfill the classical experimental condition, as there is not control group (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Using an intervention study or a quasi-experiment allows for stronger ecological validity compared to an experimental design (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This research allows for the participants to interact regarding OTL conversations in a more natural setting, compared to lab experiments. In addition, the environment in which the questionnaires are to be completed can be argued to strengthen the ecological validity of the study. It could sometimes be difficult to implement randomized experiments due to ethical and practical reasons (Reichhardt, 2009). Therefore the participants within this research are not randomly assigned.

In order to investigate the role of OTL leadership training, participants from Larvik municipal were selected to attend the two-day OTL workshops. Participants in this study were leaders such as principals, vice principals, and department/group/team leaders from different schools. All participants received two questionnaires in advance of the workshop (time 1). When completing the first survey the participants had to nominate five teachers with the longest seniority who were then invited to evaluate their leaders behavior in advance, and subsequent the OTL leadership training. In addition the survey completed by subordinates was used as a tool to evaluate trust between themselves and their leaders. The second survey distributed to participants was a self-completion questionnaire to reflect over own behavior. Approximately two months after the leaders attended the workshop both the nominated followers and the leaders had to complete a second questionnaire (time 2).

Both questionnaires used for leaders and followers were created in collaboration between Ide Katrine Birkeland who is assistant professor at BI in the

department of communication and culture and Viviane Robinson who is professor in the faculty of education at the university of Auckland and the founder of OTL conversations. The questionnaire distributed to the leaders focused on the leader's own perception of their communicating and conflict solving skills. While the questionnaire distributed to the followers focused on the follower's perception of their leaders communication and problem solving skills. The questionnaires used in time 1 and time 2 was identical. This was done to investigate if there was a difference in communication and conflict-solving skills after the leaders attended the workshop.

Day one of the workshop focused primarily on theory of OTL conversations and day two had a more practical approach. The first workshop day focused on building an informative theoretical base of OTL conversations with an emphasis on trust. Participants were given some activities in form of acting out problematic scenarios and recording them, and analyzing video clips which showed both closed and open to learning conversations. The second day also involved activities, however, these were more focused towards leaders methods to convey the right message to employees. In addition to making leaders more aware on how employees perceive their approach in conveying the message. Sometimes the leaders intentions are good, however they may struggle to communicate their message appropriately. Consequently, followers perceive the message quite differently from the leader, which may lead to miscommunication and lack of trust. The workshop may therefore make leaders more attentive to the difficulties that may arise from these conversations.

To examine if the OTL leadership training had a role in reducing sickness absence, statistics in the participating schools were extracted from SSB (Statistics Norway) and were measured from June 2017 to June 2018. In order to increase the validity of OTL workshops a control group was implemented using sickness absence statistics from a municipal that is similar and borders to Larvik (Sandefjord/Porsgrunn).

Sample

An invitation to participate in the research project was sent out to all municipalities in Norway. Several of the districts wished to attend the workshops, however, this research concentrates on different schools in Larvik municipal. The

leaders in 24 schools in Larvik attended the workshops. A nomination form were sent to all the leaders in advance, where they had to nominate 5 teachers with the highest seniority at their school. These teachers were then included in the study, where they had to complete a questionnaire (time 1 and time 2) regarding their leader. This is to better investigate if OTL conversation workshops for leaders have an effect on followers. It was clearly stated that participation was voluntary, even if they attended the workshops.

Tentative plan for completion of thesis

<u>Month</u>	<u>Action</u>
October (2017)	1. Theory research. 2. Distribute time 1 surveys (both leader and follower) and nomination form 3. Leaders attend OTL workshop.
November (2017)	1. Send reminders to the participants who have not answered. 2. First draft of preliminary (3rd of November).
December (2017)	1. Distribute time 2 surveys (both leader and follower)
January (2018)	1. Submit preliminary (15th of January)
February (2018)	1. Analyze data from questionnaires
March (2018)	1. Analyze data from questionnaires

April (2018)	1. Analyze data from questionnaires
May (2018)	1. Analyze data from questionnaires
June (2018)	1. Collect SSB statistics of sick leave. 2. First draft of the thesis completed
July (2018)	1. Finalise thesis
August (2018)	1. Finalise thesis
September (2018)	Hand in thesis

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