

PARTICIPATIVE MANAGEMENT: A FUNDAMENTAL TOOL FOR A MOTIVATIONAL WELLBEING POLICY

1. Organisations involved



2. Description of the case

2.1. Introduction

Group TVH (Thermote & Vanhalst) is a Belgian company specialising in the industrial forklift and aerial platforms market. It is a well recognised global player in sales, rental, parts, maintenance and distribution of forklifts. TVH has its international headquarters in the West Flemish city of Waregem, Belgium.

This company has a reputation as an ambitious worldwide market leader in its field. In addition to its headquarters in Waregem, the group also has regional headquarters in Kansas (USA), as well as subsidiaries, branches and sales outlets in more than 30 countries worldwide. Due to its growth, Group TVH was forced to create different business units, such as the parts division (parts sales), the forklift division (sale of new and second-hand lift trucks), the handling equipment division (sale of smaller hand pallet trucks and warehouse trolleys), the rental division (rental of lift trucks and aerial platforms) and the service & repair division (maintenance and assistance work).

Since its beginning, Group TVH has grown from its original 96 employees (1989) to more than 400 (end of 90s) and presently has more than 2200 employees. Its turnover has grown equally strongly.

2.2. Aims

Group TVH achieved this growth by implementing and following a combination of different principles: respect for capital, fundamental respect for its employees, excellence and quality of service, and constant improvement and search for innovation. The company decided to implement a strong philosophy and corresponding principles of participative management, which established and motivated a good OSH management system.

A series of internal studies by Group TVH revealed that more than 50% of all accidents revealed in neck, shoulder and/or back injuries. Many of these injuries were not recorded as an accident because the link with work was less evident or there was no proof of a sudden event. Even with the high percentages associated with this type of incident it was difficult for the management to convince employees to ask for help when musculoskeletal problems occur. With this in mind TVH proposed to introduce an annual plan, which focused on eliminating back pain and related lifting issues as a top priority. The objective was to have more 'healthy people' by training lifting instructors. In order to take on this task, management implemented the concept of 'employer branding', improving the company's image to the point where it is now seen as a great place to work. Dedication combined with good communication on the part of the top management and all involved has been the driving force behind the success of employer branding in this case.

Initially the aim was to implement an open cooperation culture by creating a learning environment. This environment would promote a profound sense of shared responsibility not only for the line management, but also for the employees, since all are involved and responsible for a healthy and safe environment at work.

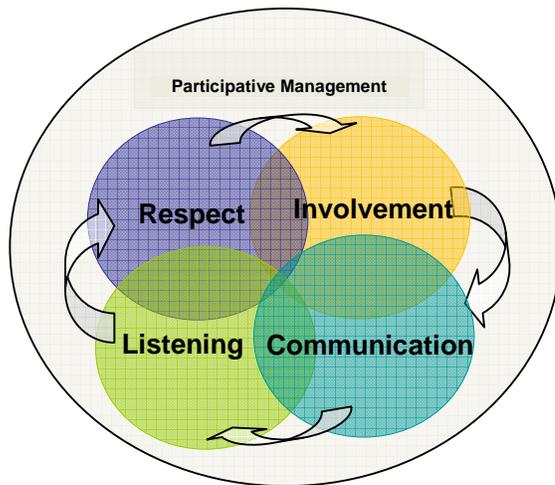
2.3. *What was done, and how?*

The implementation of a participative management concept (PM), which is still in force today at TVH, is the fruit of a long process that began in 1999, when the top management of the company decided to employ a new HR manager who would give attention to health and safety issues. This decision resulted in the appointment of Gerd Belleman as HR manager.

The close cooperation between all parties in the company led to the implementation of the desired PM concept. The PM concept is based on four fundamental pillars that interact with one other.

- Respect, implying involvement
- Involvement, implying communication
- Communication, implying listening
- Listening, leading to cooperation between employees and management.

Figure 1: Principles of Participative Management



Before management could implement this system it was necessary to create secondary goals. These goals are connected and equally influence each other:

1. Creation of a learning environment
2. Shared responsibility for Health, Safety, Quality and Environment Topics (HSQE)

Secondary goal 1: Creation of a learning environment

TVH's most challenging step was the transition to an open corporate culture. Such a management concept could only be implemented by introducing a policy of shared responsibility. This in turn could only be successful if the employees were equally involved in the company's safety, health and environment (SHE) policy. The main question was: To what extent can we involve our employees in the procedure of making the work process and the working environment safe, healthy and environmentally aware?

The first step in implementing this transition was to improve the communication between employees and management. Communication was accomplished in a series of different steps. The company believed in the importance of personal development, so management organised different training sessions to raise the employees' awareness. The selection of chosen themes was made after several surveys had been sent out to the employees involved. This way of working showed the employees that management listens to the needs of the employees, which proved successful.

After the surveys had been completed, the training sessions were organised during working time. The whole action resulted in the implementation of a training centre in the long run. During all training sessions the input came from different persons involved, such as supervisors, the SHE advisor and employees. The choice of an internal training centre has turned out to have a lot of potential for the future. The centre can give customised training sessions for the different functions, and also makes it possible to adapt different training courses in the light of changing technology.

The Human Resources (HR) Manager believed in the learning capacities of every employee. His belief was that each employee could perform different tasks. As a result, some of the tasks of the line management were transferred to employees. Consequently, selected employees received additional tasks and acted as intermediaries between the supervisors and their colleagues. They assisted the supervisor with the execution of some of his specific tasks as advisors. However they were not put into a position where they had to take decisions or to control their colleagues. They acted as an intermediary between supervisors and other employees. The advisors knew critical points in the organisation because they conducted the same work as other employees. The company recruited these individuals within the company based on their profiles including their commitment, motivation and social capabilities.

The main advantage of this approach was that the supervisor could focus on other important aspects of his functions while enabling the employees to present their ideas. It proved to be more socially accepted when certain ideas were presented by the employees instead of management. In addition, it was realised that valuable information would be lost if the ideas of employees were not involved in the process of brainstorming.

This resulted in greater cooperation between management, the supervisors, the SHE advisor and the employees, which led to a positive working environment. The term Flywheel [1] was chosen because initially there is a need for some extra effort by all to change, however once the change has been implemented, things evolve in a fluent and efficient manner. A pleasant work environment is created where people are motivated to learn from one other, work together and divide their tasks accordingly.

Secondary goal 2: Shared responsibility for HSQE topics

The creation of a learning environment was an advantage when new task descriptions were written. These new task descriptions required shared responsibility and were created by management using the following steps: introducing an ideology in a mission statement, creating a strategy and setting out different goals.

These goals were assigned to different function descriptions, which were exercised by the employees. The function descriptions were created together with the management, supervisors, employees and the HSQE manager. Every task description contains health, safety, quality and environmental topics in accordance with legislation. In this way, HSQE topics came to form a substantial part of each employee's daily tasks.

TVH opted for a course lasting 5 full days for 12 lifting instructors. The lifting instructors were company employees from the respective workplaces. The objective was not for them to become

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'controllers' in the workplace, but to be seen as consultants or advisors. Along with an introduction to the anatomy and biomechanics of the spine, the principles of ergonomics were illustrated with practical exercises in the workplace in the training. In addition to this, the lifting instructors learned how they could communicate their knowledge to their colleagues. In return, these lifting instructors gave practical training to more than 200 colleagues on healthy lifting and ergonomics. This training was just the beginning of a continuous and evolving process.

After training, the supervisors agreed to evaluate the coaching programme on a bimonthly basis to see what technical and organisational measures were necessary. During each step, the safety committee was consulted. The enthusiasm shown by the lifting instructors and the visible improvements in the workplace convinced the representatives from the trade union to support this transition. The lifting instructors perform a safety evaluation once a week, based on a checklist for their division of work. The report of this safety evaluation is sent to the supervisor and the HSQE advisor. Once a month each division has a meeting with its supervisor, the lifting instructor and the HSQE advisor, where they discuss different topics and solutions concerning ergonomics. These meetings have become platforms where the improvement process related to ergonomics is being monitored.

The same approach was followed for other topics such as first aid and fire-fighting. Thus within TVH employees often conduct other tasks in addition to their normal job. Besides their function as an instructor for a special issue (first aid, lifting, fire-fighting), they also produce reports of their evaluations and discuss them with their supervisors. In each division a poster was created with pictures of the different people who conduct the different functions. In this way, the line has created an environment where communication is plentiful and responsibility is shared. Although employees are actively involved in this approach, the supervisors and managers still perform the following tasks:

1. During every meeting they present a safety issue or question.
2. They listen to the safety concerns presented and frame their solution accordingly.
3. They provide the necessary and appropriate motivation in order to progress in a positive and safe way.
4. They address and correct all detected unsafe behaviour or situations.

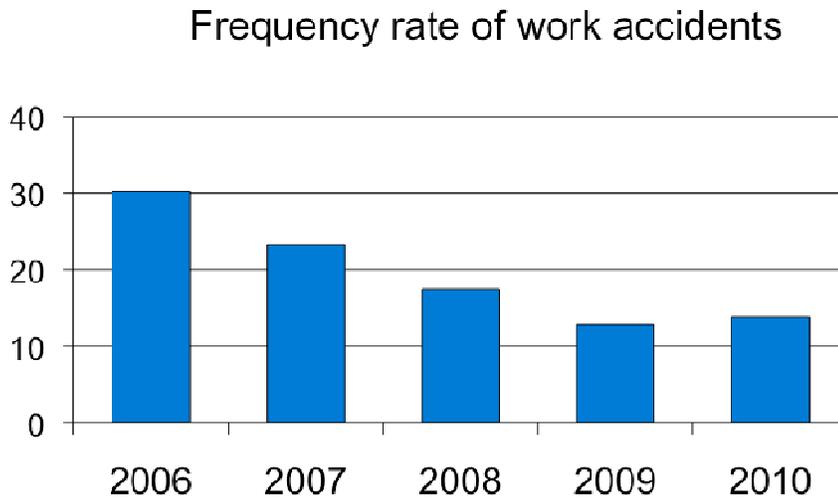
2.4. What was achieved?

The main advantage of training employees as lifting instructors was that they knew critical and practical points within the work process. Another advantage was that the communication was simplified. Since it is assumed that communication between employees is faster than between employees and supervisors, the chosen approach enabled practical solutions to be found easily, resulting in a more efficient way of dealing with musculoskeletal issues at the workplace.

This created a close relationship between the HR Manager, HSQE advisor, supervisors, lifting instructors and employees. The collaboration between these parties has improved the level of wellbeing at work. The task of the management is to maintain this balance, together with the HSQE advisor. In order to maintain this system, the management and the HSQE advisor are always available to the team-leaders, lifting instructors and employees. They coach the supervisors in order to enable correct communication between them and intermediaries. In this way, the management helps solving problems between the two parties. This allows management to concentrate on the bigger picture and continuously search for new solutions.

At Group TVH headquarters in Waregem, the number of accidents dropped from 35 in 2006 when the programme was implemented to 13 in 2009. This is despite an increase of staff in over 15%. The mentality has changed: whereas formerly an employee would be reluctant to ask for help lifting a heavy box, such a request has now become common. Other departments, with no lifting instructors, have been asked whether such training could be provided in their department. The final result is that there is now a continuous improvement process in connection with the lifting of loads.

Figure 2: Frequency rate of work accidents.



As Figure 2 shows, the number of occupational accidents involving back and shoulder injuries at TVH Waregem has dropped by more than 50% since 2006.

In the long run, keeping its workforce healthy is the main objective of Group TVH. At present there are many young workers at TVH who lift heavy loads every day and the intention is that these workers will remain healthy.

2.5. Success factors

The implementation of a PM was only possible because the top management, the owners of the company and its investors agreed to take the challenge of bringing about such a change in mentality. In order to achieve success it was also extremely important for the HR Manager to be able to motivate the employees and especially the lifting instructors to accept and participate in the new approach.

As a result of the implementation of the PM concept, it was possible to broaden communication and involve all affected parties. The implementation of such communication enabled the employees to feel that they had a place in the measures that had been decided on. Also, the actions taken were balanced in both theoretical and practical respects, ensuring their success and efficiency. Finally, this also created the necessary environment for a continuous and progressive method for development, and a proactive way of working towards problem-solving and solution-finding.

As a result of this established healthy and balanced communication environment, Group TVH successfully achieved its goal in a cost-efficient manner, obtaining more than 50% reduction in the accident rate.

2.6. Further information

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2.7. Transferability

The participative management system implemented by TVH can be used and adapted by any other company from other sectors. It creates the possibility of good communication and a healthy learning environment open to innovation. This management concept requires all parties involved to learn to delegate and assume responsibilities in a coherent and shared manner. It is easier to follow a company philosophy when everyone participates in the creation of the concept and problem-solving process. It also replaces a process in which orders are simply issued with one in which suggestions are discussed together (two heads are better than one).

4. References, resources

[1] Collins, J., *Good to Great*, HarperCollins Publishers Inc., New York, 2001.