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samspillet mellem strukturer og social praksis

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Summary

This thesis takes its point of departure in the experiences I gained through 15 years of environmental consultancy. Out of these experiences grew a hypothesis saying that sustainability requires both a systematic, structured approach and a focus on the social practices in the organisation's internal as well as external relations. Thereby, the research question is:

How can a company balance formalized structures and social practices, internally as well as externally, to enhance sustainability?

In the thesis, sustainability on a company level has been related to the concept of Life Cycle Management, LCM. A conceptual model for LCM is developed, see figure 1. Moreover, the thesis contributes to the understandings and further development of LCM based on the model.

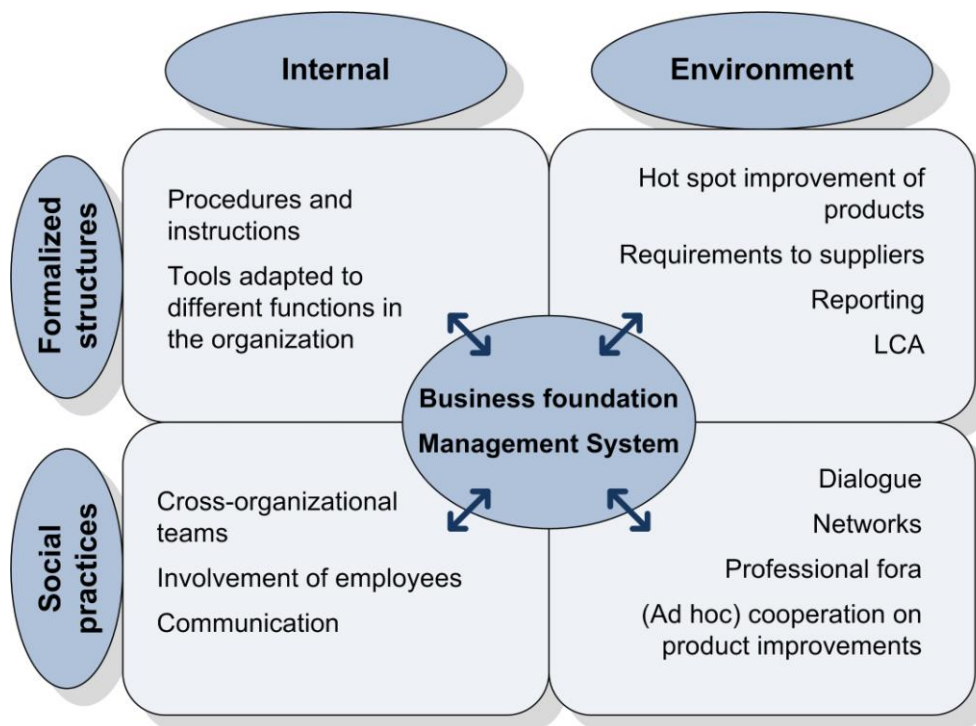


Figure 1 A conceptual model of LCM

Throughout the thesis, Coloplast serves as the empirical case. Coloplast, a producer of medical devices on a global scale, has more than 20 years of experience in working with aspects of sustainability and can thus provide both formalized structures and social practices for the investigation of LCM. The empirical data was collected throughout 2006 – 2007 and the analyses show the situation at that time.

Approaching the research question

As pointed out by Scott (2003) and Morgan (1998), organizations are complex and multifaceted and are developed in dynamic interaction with their environment. The analyses in the thesis are structured from two different set of lenses. One looks into the formalized structures of the organization, the other looks at the social practices in the organization. Moreover, the interaction of the two perspectives is discussed in a synthesis. The connection of the analytical perspectives is shown in figure 2.

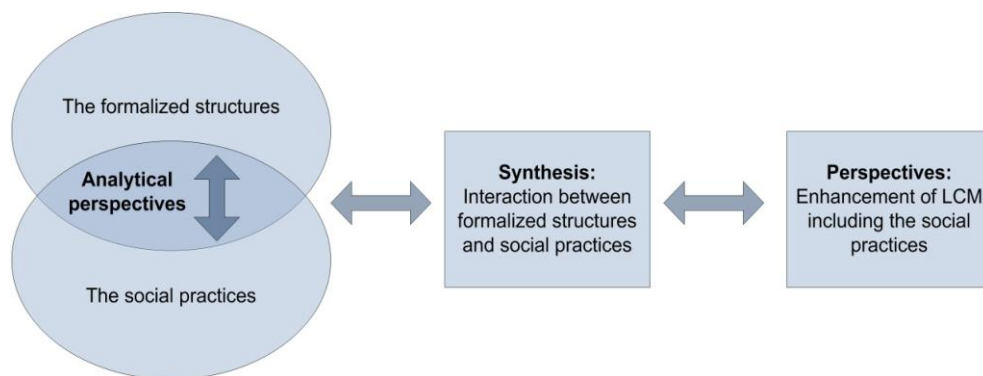


Figure 2 The analytical perspectives in the thesis

The formalized structures

Based on Henry Mintzberg's theory in "Structure in Fives. Designing Effective Organizations" (Mintzberg, 1983), a framework for interpretation of the formalized structures related to the sustainability effort on a company level was developed. Special attention was given to two aspects in relation to organizing, that is the division of labor and the coordination between the divided tasks.

Mintzberg separates the organization into the core, including related management; the technostructure and the support structure. Correspondingly, he distinguishes between different forms of coordination - three types of standardization, direct supervision and mutual adjustment.

From the Mintzberg framework, an overview of the formalized sustainability effort in Coloplast was established including the specific purposes of the single effort areas, and how the total effort is coordinated across these areas.

The results of the analysis show a rather comprehensive formalization of the sustainability effort in Coloplast managed through the Quality, Environmental, Health and Safety Management System. Corporate Environment, a section of the Corporate Quality department, has a vital role. Partly by developing procedures, tools etc., and partly by taking part in solving environmental related tasks. The primary coordinating mechanisms are thus standardization of processes and outputs and mutual adjustment by the direct intervention of the environmental specialists.

The social practices

The social practices include aspects like the behavior, motivation and development of meaning and relations among the employees (*Morgan, 1998*). I have found Etienne Wenger's social learning theory and his concept of Communities of Practice (*Wenger, 2004*) appropriate as a basis for developing a framework for interpretation of the social practices related to the sustainability effort.

The findings of the analyses of the social practices in Coloplast show a broadly anchored commitment to social responsibility, including environmental considerations, but also that the QEHS Management System determines which aspects the employees take into account. If there are no procedures, no practices are developed.

On the other hand, while the formalized structures point out the areas of effort, the practices around these areas vary between divisions and individuals. From a Wengerian point of view, the structures thus have a strong influence on the joint enterprise and the shared repertoire, but less influence on the mutual engagement.

The analyses also show that there is a gap of understanding among the different practices in relation to the environmental effort. While the corporate environmental department and the product developers have a common, technical language, this language is a barrier to the employees in marketing and sales.

The relations among the specific environmental effort areas are primarily based on boundary objects like documentation and fact sheets describing the substances and the products and how the waste should be handled – and by the active participation of the corporate environmental department in the execution of the environmentally related tasks.

Synthesis: Balancing structures and social practices

The core of the research question is the balance between the formalized structures and the social practices and this is discussed from three approaches: -

- A conceptual approach based on LCM.
- A theoretical approach based on the developed frameworks for interpretation
- An empirical approach based on the Coloplast case.

The *conceptual* LCM model (Figure 1) illustrates the sustainability effort as an entirety comprising the formalized structures and the social practices internally and in the interactions with the organizations' environment. The model also underlines the importance of understanding the interaction between the strategic and the operational levels of the organization.

The *theoretical* approach argues for understanding the “structures versus social practices balance” as a balance of handling on the one hand the structural organizational aspects related to the division of sustainability activities and the coordination among these – and on the other hand including the meanings, perceptions and ideas of the employees as well as the human relations developed over time.

Thus, the sustainability effort should be seen as a whole, or with a Wengerian understanding, as a constellation comprising both structures and social practices, since the employees develop their commitment and their daily activities from both perspectives.

The investigations in Coloplast contribute with an *empirical* answer to the research question. In a company like Coloplast who puts emphasis on the formalized structures, one should also take the social practices around the structures into account. If the company would like the employees to become actively engaged in developing the sustainability effort, space for negotiation of meaning is needed. With a view to the continuous development of the effort, the negotiation of meaning should balance the fulfillment of specified procedures, and participation, for instance by sharing knowledge and experiences. *Balancing* in this context is not necessarily a question of equilibrium in for example priorities or in the use of resources. Rather, it is a question of concurrency in creating spaces for mutual engagement while fulfilling specified procedures.

In a company where the sustainability effort is based on the initiatives of the individual employees, it could in reverse be relevant to consider the need for more formalization and coordination of the effort.

Discussion

The results from this thesis show the need for understanding the sustainability effort as a nexus of management concept, formalized structures and social practices – and it is exemplified in a specific company.

Formalized structures consolidate a systematic and on-going effort while the negotiation of meaning plays a role in developing and prioritizing the daily practices. Therefore, spaces should be created both for conducting established routines and for participation paving the way for innovation. In a highly formalized company, there will probably be a potential for further development of the sustainability effort by creating spaces for participation.

Spaces for participation can open for learning and sharing of knowledge within the company and with external parties. Among other things, such spaces can create a holistic approach to the sustainability effort and build an understanding of how the individual employee can see his own as well as concerted options.

Active participation is a source of innovation for developing new effort areas and for strengthening the existing ones. Therefore, the management should give priority to such innovation potentials in relation to sustainable development.