Reviewer’s report

Title: Leading during change: the effects of leadership on sickness absence in a Norwegian health trust

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Reviewer: Carin Staland-Nyman

Reviewer’s report:

The importance of managers’ influence on employee’s health in times of organizational change is a highly relevant topic. This is an interesting study on how the line managers’ leadership style relates to employee sickness absence and the findings show a need for more awareness concerning the manager’s role in the change process.

I do, however, have some comments related to the manuscript that needs to be addressed.

Major Compulsory Revisions

- Since the outcome is sickness absence the prerequisites for being on sick-leave have to be further recognized in the paper. A prerequisite for sickness absence is illness, disease or injury that have consequences for a person’s ability to work. However, there is very little focus in the study on the importance of ill-health in a person’s decision to be on sick-leave and sickness absence is foremost discussed from an absence behavioral point of view, including the employees’ motivation to attend work. References addressing absence or absence behavior in general are used also in relation to sickness absence without any further discussion. The importance of subjects’ ill-health for sick-leave is not addressed or adjusted for in the analysis and this needs to be considered when interpreting the findings.

- The information about the respondents is limited. No information is given related to division level. A discussion of the findings in relation to the distribution of respondents´ characteristics (i.e. gender and age) would have been interesting. In particular the importance of gender is interesting since 86 % of the respondents were female. A review by Bekker et al. (2009) Sickness absence: A gender-focused Review might be of interest.

- The response rate was 40%. No information is given about the response rate for different departments/divisions although the separate divisions are taken into account in the analyses (table 3, 4). The implication of the low response rate needs to be discussed when interpreting the results.

- Information about the questionnaire is limited. It is not clear if the questionnaire was new or earlier validated for other sectors. Were some of the 91 items created only for this study or did the questionnaire include validated instruments? What is meant by ...“some other topics of interest during the change process”?
No information is given on how the answers were distributed according to the 5-point Lickert (neither for the total study population nor regards different divisions), or how the response alternatives were treated in the analysis.

- The description of the outcome variable needs to be further developed. The unit of analysis was the average of all registered sickness absence days. The sickness absence days were then aggregated at department level in order to protect the anonymity of the participants’. Was there any differences regards the average sickness absence rate between the divisions? More information on the average rate of sickness absence days (for the total study population and for the divisions) at the two different times of measurement would have been valuable. Furthermore, was full-time and part-time absence days treated as equal? What information is available on the distribution of sickness absence? The distribution of sickness absence is usually skewed i.e. a small number of persons generate a majority of sickness absence days. This needs to be taken into account and further be discussed in relation to the results.

- Information on informed consent is lacking.

- Limitations of the study and implications for the interpretation of the result need to be further discussed. This relates in particular to the outcome variable and low response rate.

Discretionary Revisions

- On page 4 the authors refer to the work by Steers and Rhodes from 1978. The Illness flexibility Model by Gun Johansson from 2007 may give valuable additional knowledge.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

Declaration of competing interests:

'I declare that I have no competing interests'