Coping with stress at work: An interview study in a downsizing organization

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Introduction

Working life of today is characterized by continuous, and often extensive, changes. This restructuring process is due to different factors such as global competition, economic recession, new technology and transition from manufacturing to service production. In order to handle the situation, organizations are keen on minimizing their costs, and this has often resulted in organizational downsizing (Sverke & Hellgren, 2002). The consequences of downsizing are manifold, some employees lose their jobs, and those who keep their jobs (survivors) are expected to work harder/effectively and to cope with uncertainty about their future employment. Several studies indicate that downsizing can influence employees' health and well-being in a negative way (Hertting & Theorell, 2002; Isaksson & Johansson, 2000; Torkelson & Muhonen, 2003b). Stressful working conditions are considered as one of the underlying causes for the dramatic increase regarding long-term sickness absence in Sweden during the last five years. Several researchers have also suggested that women suffer more from work related health problems than men (Alexanderson & Östlin, 2001; Bildt, 2001; Davidson & Fielden, 1999). Women are also confronted with additional stressors such as conflicts between work and family responsibilities.

Coping strategies can be categorized into problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies (Folkman & Lazarus 1980). While problem-focused strategies focus on solving the problem or changing the stressful situation, the aim of the emotion-focused coping strategies is to adjust the emotions that are aroused by the situation. It is often considered more effective to use the problem-focused strategies since they aim to eliminate the stressor rather than only modifying the negative effects of stress as in emotion-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Endler & Parker, 1990).

However, it appears that problem-focused strategies may not be efficient in situations where the individual has little control, like in organizational downsizing. There are some indications that problem-focused coping can even increase rather than decrease stress during organizational change (Ashford, 1988). The emotion-focused strategies can therefore be adaptive in handling the feelings of powerlessness in an uncertain situation (Callan, 1993).

Studies of workplace stress have often been performed in organizations where women have been employed in different positions than men, which makes comparisons difficult. In studies where gender differences are found, the results may be due to the fact that the women and men were working in different types of jobs and at different levels in the organizations. The purpose of the present investigation was to gain understanding of stress and coping at work for women and men working in similar positions and with same type of jobs.

Method

Interviews, based on the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954), were conducted with 40 employees in a Swedish telecom company. The studied company has been subjected to organizational changes, which have resulted in the reduction of staff. The organizational change and reconstruction process is still in progress.

The total group of 40 interviewees consisted of 10 female managers, 10 male managers, 10 female non-managers and 10 male non-managers since the aim was to include both women and men working in similar positions and with same type of jobs. The mean age of the participants was 41.5 years (SD = 8.7) and they had been working in the same company for approximately 15 years.

The interviews lasted about 45 minutes in general. All informants consented to our request to audiotape the interviews. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and formed the basis for the analyses.

Results and discussion

The content analysis of the data revealed that organizational change and downsizing were the major sources of stress for both women and men irrespective of the organizational level. The work-family/leisure conflict was also a prevalent theme among the female managers.

The results showed that the participants used several strategies in order to cope with the organizational change and downsizing process. The most commonly used coping strategies were both different active strategies, seeking instrumental as well as emotional social support, acceptance, denial and resignation.

In a way it is surprising that participants reported using different problem-focused strategies, since this stressor was not under their control. The participants could probably handle the stressor momentarily, but there was no guarantee that the same situation would not appear again. When one can not influence the process one can try to subdue one's anxiety by using emotion-focused strategies, such as seeking emotional social support, acceptance and resignation. The organizational reconstruction process in the company has been going on for a long period of time. In view of the fact that there have been frequent organizational changes and the efforts to influence the process have been fruitless, many of the participants have decided to simply accept or resign to the situation.

The results also revealed that the work-family/leisure conflict was a source of stress mainly for the female managers. This is in line with other studies that have showed female managers to be more stressed than male managers by greater responsibilities for home and family (Lundberg & Frankenhaeuser, 1999) and by stress caused by the work/family interface (McDonald & Korabik, 1991).

No clear-cut gender differences nor differences between organizational levels could be found concerning coping. This might be due to the fact that the overriding source of stress was downsizing, a factor that even the managers could not influence or have control over. In our initial quantitative study the men and the women used basically the same coping strategies at a managerial level, whereas at a non-managerial level traditionally conceived coping patterns were evident (Torkelson & Muhonen, 2001). Even though few gender differences in perceived stress were found (Torkelson & Muhonen, 2003a) there were some gender differences concerning factors predicting health problems (Muhonen & Torkelson, 2003; Torkelson & Muhonen, 2003a).

It seems that the labor market will continue to be characterized by increasing flexibility and frequent organizational changes (Burke & Cooper, 2000). Further research is needed with the focus upon gender aspects of stress and coping, with special attention to downsizing and job insecurity at different organizational levels.

Acknowledgments

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