Mälardalen University

This is a published version of a paper published in *International Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Change Management*.

Citation for the published paper:

Johansson, I. (2008)

"The Significance of Age When the Manager is Young and the Subordinates Are Much Older"

International Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Change Management, 8(3): 77-80

Access to the published version may require subscription.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:mdh:diva-5093>

<http://mdh.diva-portal.org>

The International
JOURNAL

of

KNOWLEDGE, CULTURE
& CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Volume 8, Number 3

The Significance of Age When the Manager Is
Young and the Subordinates Are Much Older

Ingrid Johansson

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF KNOWLEDGE, CULTURE AND CHANGE MANAGEMENT
<http://www.Management-Journal.com>

First published in 2008 in Melbourne, Australia by Common Ground Publishing Pty Ltd
www.CommonGroundPublishing.com.

© 2008 (individual papers), the author(s)
© 2008 (selection and editorial matter) Common Ground

Authors are responsible for the accuracy of citations, quotations, diagrams, tables and maps.

All rights reserved. Apart from fair use for the purposes of study, research, criticism or review as permitted under the Copyright Act (Australia), no part of this work may be reproduced without written permission from the publisher. For permissions and other inquiries, please contact
<cg-support@commongroundpublishing.com>.

ISSN: 1447-9524
Publisher Site: <http://www.Management-Journal.com>

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF KNOWLEDGE, CULTURE AND CHANGE MANAGEMENT is a peer refereed journal. Full papers submitted for publication are refereed by Associate Editors through anonymous referee processes.

Typeset in Common Ground Markup Language using CGCreator multichannel typesetting system
<http://www.CommonGroundSoftware.com>.

The Significance of Age When the Manager Is Young and the Subordinates Are Much Older

Ingrid Johansson, Mälardalen University, SWEDEN

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to present some results of an interview study of younger managers and older subordinates in Sweden. An aim of the study was to increase the understanding of the significance of age in working life and the relations between younger managers and older subordinates. Data have been collected through semi-structured interviews with 23 younger managers who had experience of managing subordinates who were 20 years older or more. Furthermore, 19 older subordinates who had experience of being managed by managers who were at least 20 years younger were interviewed. Male and female interviewees have been selected from different kinds of organizations, lines of business and management levels. The results showed that many younger managers stressed the importance of listening to older subordinates, both in order to make them feel involved in the daily work and in order to utilize their extensive experience and knowledge. Most of the older subordinates were satisfied with the way they were being managed but some told about situations when the younger managers carried out changes too fast, were insecure or concerned about their prestige. A conclusion was that both younger and older people have much to learn from each other and that generally age was not seen as being of determinant importance in management.

Keywords: Age, Management, Younger Managers, Older Subordinates

Introduction

MAJOR CHANGES IN human lives have been occurring over the past century and there are researchers who maintain that social structures, norms and situations have failed to adapt to these changes in life. This tendency of social structures and norms to lag behind people's changing lives is called structural lag. An example is 65 as the expected age of retirement (Riley & Riley, 1994).

The impact of values and norms can also be talked about in terms of cultural lag (Anbäcken, 1997). Some cultural elements change faster and some more slowly. Norms and values, traditions, customs and social institutions do not change as fast as for example, technology, industrial products and machines. Some traditions and attitudes keep on existing when new dimensions are developed in society.

The structural and cultural lag was a source of inspiration for studying younger managers with much older subordinates. Another source of inspiration was the American writer Betty Friedan, who died in 2006 on her 85th birthday. She wrote the following in her book *The Fountain of Age* (1994):

But those 'human resource managers' in their forties simply do not see men and women over sixty as people like themselves in a new stage of development. (Friedan, 1994, p. 174)

If younger managers see older people as very unlike themselves they may fail to earn their trust. Kanter (2004), who stresses the importance of trust and confidence in successful management, points out that leadership is not about the leader but about how he or she builds confidence in everybody else.

Younger managers may feel uneasiness in their relations to older workers, and a reason may be that older workers have for many years built up a certain position in the organisation and therefore are not easily impressed by younger managers (Schabracq, 1994). Older employees may also be critical of managers in general (Glover and Branine, 2001a). On the other hand, Glover and Branine (2001b) point out that older people can feel very comfortable working as subordinates of younger managers whom they have reason to respect and appreciate.

Aim of the Study and Research Question

One aim of the study was to increase our understanding and knowledge of the significance of age in working life and the relations between younger managers and older subordinates as seen from the perspectives of both sides. The main research question was:

- What is the significance of a considerable age difference between younger managers and their subordinates according to their own experiences and perceptions?

Methods

A qualitative approach was chosen for the study. Reasons for this were the explorative character of the study, the purpose to obtain as many different and varied answers as possible and the intention to collect and analyse subjective viewpoints of the studied phenomena (Flick, 1998).

Data Collection, Data Analysis, Interpretation and Ethical Issues

In 2002 and 2003 semi-structured interviews were carried out with 23 younger managers, aged 22–34, who had experience of managing subordinates who were 20 years older or more. Ten of the interviewees were men and 13 women.

In order to capture the perspectives of both younger managers and older subordinates, another 19 interviews were carried out in 2006 and at the beginning of 2007. Now the interviewees were older subordinates with experience of being managed by at least 20-year younger managers. Twelve of the older interviewees were women and seven men. The interviewees were 50–63 years old with an average age of 60. Their younger managers were 30–40 years old.

As it was an aim of the study to obtain varied examples of experiences and perceptions, the interviewees have been selected from different kinds of organisations, lines of business and management levels. The younger managers and the older subordinates were two separate groups and did not know each other. The 42 interviewees worked in 27 different organisations. The sample strategy was non-random and purposive and the goal was to find information-rich interviewees. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed word for word.

During the analysing process, data were scrutinised for patterns, themes, and regularities as well as contrasts and irregularities and then interpreted. The research project belongs to the interpretive/constructivist paradigm and the data have been interpreted from a hermeneutical perspective. A hermeneutical approach means holding the view that a phenomenon can be looked at from different aspects (Ödman, 1979).

Ethical criteria compiled in *The ethical recommendations of The Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences* (HSFR, 1990) have been followed. The interviewees were informed of the aims of the study, that participation was voluntary and could at any time be interrupted, that the material would be treated in a confidential way and that it would not be used for other purposes than research. All names of the interviewees in the text are fictitious.

Results

The presentation of the results starts with two examples of younger managers as described by older subordinates. Then some characteristics, advantages and disadvantages of younger managers are described.

Examples of Younger Managers Described by Older Subordinates

Lisa

Lisa, is a woman, aged 33, who worked as a care manager in the home help service of a municipality. Three of her female subordinates, here called Ella, Maria and Annika, were interviewed.

Ella, aged 62, described Lisa's way of leading as very democratic because of her ambitions to make sure that decisions were supported by the team and because she often asked the team not only once but several times before she came to a decision.

Maria, aged 60, talked about Lisa's ability and willingness to listen and added that 'there is no wall between us.' She explained that 'she is not that kind of a person who must manage all on her own. Instead she asks us for our opinion.' Maria also said that Lisa did not direct her every step but was there for her when she needed her help.

Annika, aged 58, described Lisa as being very supportive, encouraging and good at listening. Annika felt included and enjoyed participating in solving problems. Whatever suggestions the members of the team had, Lisa's attitude was generally positive and she often reacted by saying 'Have a try'.

In summary, the three interviewees were all very pleased with their manager Lisa. Among other things they described her as being very democratic. By Lisa's way of leading, she gained her subordinates' trust and she inspired them to actively participate in solving problems.

Anna

Anna is a female manager, aged 37, who had three children aged two, five and six. She worked as a manager in administration and finance at a private company. One of her subordinates, Katarina aged 60, was interviewed.

Katarina described Anna as being dominant and controlling and Katarina declared that she very much disliked Anna's way of interfering with details in her tasks. In Katarina's view, the controlling management style of her manager had nothing to do with Anna's age or the age difference between them. Instead she thought that her controlling style might be a result of Anna's personality. Anna's insecurity could also reinforce her need to show who the manager is and who decides. Katarina felt that Anna did

not respect her as a mature, autonomous and competent person. An effect was that Katarina tended to try to keep Lisa out of her work sphere and to withhold information from her.

The fact that Anna had three small children meant that she had to stay at home quite often when they were ill, and this made Katarina question whether it was right of Anna to work full-time and whether it was fair to the company and to the subordinates to have accepted a management role.

In summary, Anna was perceived as having a controlling management style and lost in respect and trust when she interfered in her older subordinate's tasks. Being a mother of three young children was seen as a disadvantage.

Characteristics of Younger Managers

The above two examples of younger managers show some characteristics that older subordinates appreciated, such as a democratic management style, or disliked, such as a controlling and interfering management style. Generally, the older interviewees seemed to have a very positive experience of younger managers and many maintained that managers' age and a big age difference were of little importance at work. Other things mattered more, for example the managers' personality and characteristics such as humility and courage to ask for help when needed, readiness to listen and mutual respect. Many older interviewees also confirmed that their younger managers did listen to them.

The interviewed younger managers were of the same opinion concerning the importance of listening. A male manager, aged 32, said that listening was the key to successful management. However, there were also examples of when and why age could matter. A female manager, aged 30, talked about younger and older people having different values and a male manager called John, aged 28, expressed the view that it was easier to manage people who were his age.

It may be easier for me to manage a younger person. Older people may have other views on how to handle things. A younger person is easier to tell to do anything, to use, maybe. He or she wants to do a good job in order to progress. (John, male manager, aged 28)

According to a woman, aged 60, a manager who listened was also easy to talk to. A man called Ola, aged 50, held the view that a manager who listens to his subordinates and allows everybody to make themselves heard gains confidence. He added that there was a risk that a manager failed to listen because today everything happens so quickly.

We are going to reorganise now and it will be done at a speed of 180 km/hour. As a consequence there will be many mistakes. In my view the money could have been spent in a better way. (Ola, male subordinate, aged 50)

Another man called Carl, who was 62 years old, also talked about his manager as being quick and said that 'there is more stepping on the gas than on the brake.' He added that 'younger managers are like a breath of fresh air.'

Other examples of characteristics of younger managers frequently mentioned by the older subordinates were that they were creative, hungry, enthusiastic, good at IT matters, had new knowledge, much energy and many ideas. On the negative side was lack of humility, being concerned about their own prestige and defending their preserves, having difficulties in admitting that they were wrong or needed help, pretending to know everything or to have more experience than they actually had. Carina, a woman aged 59, said this:

I lose confidence in a person who pretends to have more experience or knowledge than he has. It is so easily revealed. (Carina, female subordinate, aged 59)

One of the most frequently mentioned disadvantages of younger managers, according to older subordinates, was their family and life situation when they had small children. No distinction was made between male and female managers. Carina, aged 59, said that these managers had very hard lives and it was especially difficult for them when their children were repeatedly ill. Then meetings and other planned activities at work had to be put off and the manager worked at home. Carl, aged 62, called it a handicap to have a young family. On the other hand, several interviewees stressed that the young managers did their very best to handle the situation. To be a young manager and parent also meant that they more easily put up with subordinates being in the same situation staying home when a child was ill. Carl, aged 62, looked back to the time when he had young children.

When I was that age and had young children it was not possible for me to stay at home. If I had, I would have been looked upon as a deviant and not very interested in my work. So, maybe people my age have missed something in the contact with their children. (Carl, male subordinate, aged 62)

None of the interviewed younger managers mentioned having young children as being a disadvantage.

Discussion and Conclusions

The generally very positive attitude to each other from both older subordinates and younger managers was striking and also their emphasising that age was not very important. The results confirm the statement by Glover and Branines (2001b) that older people can be very comfortable working as subordinates of younger managers when there is a mutual trust and respect. An interesting result was the many statements by older subordinates concerning younger

managers' handicap, as they called it, when they had to struggle to combine work and being a parent of young children. A conclusion is that this may be an example of a cultural lag (Anbäcken, 1997). In spite of older people being healthy and vital longer, young people are still today expected to make a career when they are young. That this coincides with the period in their lives when their responsibilities for young children consume the most time and energy does not seem to have had any effect on traditions and attitudes.

References

- Anbäcken, E.-M., (1997), *Who Cares? Culture, Structure, and Agency in Caring for the Elderly in Japan*. Doctoral thesis. Department of Japanese Studies, Stockholm University.
- Flick, U., (1998), *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Friedan, B., (1994), *The Fountain of Age*. London: Vintage.
- Glover, I. and Branine, M., (2001a), Introduction: the challenges of longer and healthier lives. In I. Glover and M. Branine (eds), *Ageism in Work and Employment*. Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 3–21.
- Glover, I. and Branine, M., (2001b), 'Do not go gentle into that good night': Some thoughts on paternalism, ageism, management and society. In I. Glover and M. Branine (eds), *Ageism in Work and Employment*, Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 47–64.
- HSFR (Humanistisk-samhällsvetenskapliga forskningsrådet/The Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences), (1990), *Forskningsetiska principer (Ethical recommendations)*, Stockholm.
- Kanter, R.M., (2004), *Confidence: How winning streaks and losing streaks begin and end*. London: Random House.
- Ödman, P.-J., (1979), *Tolkning, förståelse, vetande: Hermeneutik i teori och praktik. (Interpretation, Understanding, Knowledge. Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice)*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell.
- Riley White, M. & Riley, W. J. Jr. (1994). Structural Lag: Past and Future. In M. White Riley, R.L. Kahn & A. Foner, A. (eds.), *Age and structural lag. Society's failure to provide meaningful opportunities in work, family, and leisure*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Schabracq, M.J., (1994), Motivational and cultural factors underlying dysfunctioning of older employees. In J. Snel and R. Cremer (eds), *Work and Aging*. London: Taylor & Francis, pp. 235–249.

About the Author

Dr. Ingrid Johansson

I completed my doctoral thesis in 1997 and it is called Age and Work. Before that I worked in a private company for 27 years and most of the time as a personnel manager. In 1999-2000 I was an academic visitor at the University of Sheffield in the UK. Since 2000 I have been a senior lecturer at Mälardalen University, Eskilstuna, Sweden and there I have been teaching, doing research and worked with the internationalization of the university.

EDITORS

Mary Kalantzis, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA.

Bill Cope, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA.

EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD

Verna Allee, Verna Allee Associates, California, USA.

Zainal Ariffin, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia.

Robert Brooks, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia.

Bruce Cronin, University of Greenwich, UK.

Rod Dilnutt, William Bethway and Associates, Melbourne, Australia.

Judith Ellis, Enterprise Knowledge, Melbourne, Australia.

Andrea Fried, Chemnitz University of Technology, Germany.

David Gurteen, Gurteen Knowledge, UK.

David Hakken, University of Indiana, Bloomington, Indiana, USA.

Sabine Hoffmann, Macquarie University, Australia.

Stavros Ioannides, Pantion University, Athens, Greece.

Margaret Jackson, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia.

Paul James, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia.

Leslie Johnson, University of Greenwich, UK.

Eleni Karantzola, University of the Aegean, Rhodes, Greece.

Gerasimos Kouzelis, University of Athens, Greece.

Krishan Kumar, University of Virginia, USA.

Martyn Laycock, University of Greenwich and managingtransitions.net, UK.

David Lyon, Queens University, Ontario, Canada.

Bill Martin, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia.

Pumela Msweli-Mbanga, University of Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa.

Claudia Schmitz, Cenandu Learning Agency, Germany.

Kirpal Singh, Singapore Management University, Singapore.

Dave Snowden, Cynefin Centre for Organisational Complexity, UK.

Chryssi Vitsilakis-Soroniatis, University of the Aegean, Rhodes, Greece.

THE UNIVERSITY PRESS JOURNALS

International Journal of the Arts in Society

Creates a space for dialogue on innovative theories and practices in the arts, and their inter-relationships with society.

ISSN: 1833-1866

<http://www.Arts-Journal.com>

International Journal of the Book

Explores the past, present and future of books, publishing, libraries, information, literacy and learning in the information society. ISSN: 1447-9567

<http://www.Book-Journal.com>

Design Principles and Practices: An International Journal

Examines the meaning and purpose of 'design' while also speaking in grounded ways about the task of design and the use of designed artefacts and processes. ISSN: 1833-1874

<http://www.Design-Journal.com>

International Journal of Diversity in Organisations, Communities and Nations

Provides a forum for discussion and builds a body of knowledge on the forms and dynamics of difference and diversity.

ISSN: 1447-9583

<http://www.Diversity-Journal.com>

International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability

Draws from the various fields and perspectives through which we can address fundamental questions of sustainability.

ISSN: 1832-2077

<http://www.Sustainability-Journal.com>

Global Studies Journal

Maps and interprets new trends and patterns in globalization. ISSN 1835-4432

<http://www.GlobalStudiesJournal.com>

International Journal of the Humanities

Discusses the role of the humanities in contemplating the future and the human, in an era otherwise dominated by scientific, technical and economic rationalisms. ISSN: 1447-9559

<http://www.Humanities-Journal.com>

International Journal of the Inclusive Museum

Addresses the key question: How can the institution of the museum become more inclusive? ISSN 1835-2014

<http://www.Museum-Journal.com>

International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences

Discusses disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to knowledge creation within and across the various social sciences and between the social, natural and applied sciences.

ISSN: 1833-1882

<http://www.Socialsciences-Journal.com>

International Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Change Management

Creates a space for discussion of the nature and future of organisations, in all their forms and manifestations.

ISSN: 1447-9575

<http://www.Management-Journal.com>

International Journal of Learning

Sets out to foster inquiry, invite dialogue and build a body of knowledge on the nature and future of learning.

ISSN: 1447-9540

<http://www.Learning-Journal.com>

International Journal of Technology, Knowledge and Society

Focuses on a range of critically important themes in the various fields that address the complex and subtle relationships between technology, knowledge and society. ISSN: 1832-3669

<http://www.Technology-Journal.com>

Journal of the World Universities Forum

Explores the meaning and purpose of the academy in times of striking social transformation.

ISSN 1835-2030

<http://www.Universities-Journal.com>

FOR SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT

subscriptions@commonground.com.au