Critical Perspectives on Accounting 19 (2008) 544–571

CRITICAL
PERSPECTIVES
ON ACCOUNTING

www.elsevier.com/locate/cpa

'Blaming oneself': Examining the dual accountability role of employees

Thomas Riise Johansen *

Department of Accounting and Auditing, Copenhagen Business School, Solbjerg Plads 3, C4, 2000 Frederiksberg, Denmark

Received 22 February 2006; received in revised form 20 September 2006; accepted 30 October 2006

Abstract

The employee has a dual accountability position: on the one hand accountable to higher-level management, on the other hand the employee is said to be a beneficiary of social accounting initiatives established to ensure stakeholder accountability. This paper presents a case study of this dual accountability role in a Danish Savings Bank. The focal point is a clash observed between a self-management programme, established to develop autonomous employees, and a social accounting cycle, claimed to develop a collective employee voice and the accountability of management. Drawing upon the concept of governmentality, the case study data are analysed in order to understand how and why the self-management programme hampered the exercise of employee voice in the social accounting cycle. The paper suggests that neo-liberal forms of government, such as self-management, can align employer and employee interests in a way that marginalizes the impact of social accounting from an employee perspective.

Keywords: Accountability; Employees; Employee voice; Empowerment; Governmentality; Self-management; Social accounting; Stakeholder engagement

1. Introduction

In 1991, the newly appointed CEO of a Danish Savings Bank made a spectacular entry as the new boss, holding a meeting with all employees to emphasize that the principles

* Tel.: +45 3815 2329; fax: +45 3815 2321.
E-mail address: trj.acc@cbs.dk.

1045-2354/$ – see front matter
doi:10.1016/j.cpa.2006.10.002

of leadership were about to change. In the first part of the meeting, he presented how the Savings Bank had been run in the past, and to mark what he believed was a radical change in leadership style, he switched off the light for 10 min, leaving the employees in darkness and in silence. After this symbolic demonstration, he switched on the lights and began the second part of his presentation: an outline of how he would lead and change the Savings Bank in the future.

Two initiatives emerged out of this leadership change: a self-management programme and a social accounting cycle. In contrast to the leadership style in other Danish banks, the CEO envisioned a self-management programme that empowered employees and removed bureaucratic standard procedures. Simultaneously, he was inspired by the, at that time, emerging wave of social and ethical accounting. Thus he decided to introduce a yearly social accounting cycle where he claimed that management would be accountable and responsive to employee concerns. This paper explores the intersection of the self-management programme and the social accounting cycle. The social accounting cycle is supposed to provide an opportunity for employee voice, to identify employee interpretations of workplace 'realities' and finally to request an account from management. Notwithstanding steps taken towards the protection of employee voice, including voice exercised anonymously of management, it was observed that employee voice was silenced and that the critical potential of the social accounting cycle was limited. This is explained by the operation of the self-management programme, which induces employees to appear loyal and take responsibility for issues that could have been raised in the social accounting cycle. Through the lens of governmentality, the objective of the paper is to explore how and why the self-management programme hampered employee voice in the social accounting cycle.

The paper is structured in eight sections. The research objective is related to the literature in the next section and followed by a section describing case context and research methods. The distinction between rationalities and technologies is drawn upon in Sections 4 and 5 in order to outline the self-management programme. The relationship between self-management and employee voice in the social accounting cycle is then demonstrated in the sixth section. The seventh section discusses the findings and the control style of the self-management programme. Finally, some concluding remarks are provided.

2. Social accounting, employees and self-management

It is a popular conception that organizations should be accountable to stakeholders beyond their accountability relationship with shareholders or other direct constituencies. This stakeholder-orientation has provided fuel for considerable interest in social accounting for non-financial matters to a wide range of stakeholders (KPMG, 2005; Standard and Poor's et al., 2004). In order to integrate stakeholder voices with these new forms of accounting, practitioners and standard setters appear to rely heavily on stakeholder engagement (AccountAbility, 2005; AccountAbility et al., 2005; GRI, 2002; Owen et al., 2001; SRA et al., 2005). Social accounting researchers have observed this development, and acknowledged the potential of the increased interest in stakeholder engagement, but suspected such engagement processes emphasize stakeholder management as opposed to stakeholder accountability (Owen et al., 2001; Thomson and Bebbington, 2005). Therefore, the social