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Improving team-based ways of working to create functional teams and a sustainable quality culture

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Abstract

Purpose: To present the results of a research project aimed at developing and improving team-based ways of working and methods of creating functional teams and a sustainable quality culture (SQC).

Methodology: A department within a Swedish municipality was studied with an interactive research design. Both the management team (MT) and the workers participated in the study and engaged in parallel with activities to improve teamwork and strengthen their SQC. Baseline and follow-up measurements were obtained with a questionnaire, and the results were statistically analysed.

Findings: Comparison between the baseline and follow-up measurements revealed that the members of the MT generally agreed to a greater extent with the statements regarding SQC in both measurements, indicating that they believed the culture to be stronger than it may have been. However, the MT members' perceptions of statements regarding teamwork decreased in the follow-up measurement. One reason for this decrease could have been the reorganization of the MT during the project. Furthermore, the workers agreed to a greater extent with the statements regarding teamwork in the follow-up measurement than in the baseline measurement, but only a few factors measuring SQC increased in the follow-up measurement, namely, the pride and internal systems view. Interestingly, assessments of leadership commitment decreased in the follow-up measurement, indicating a decline in leadership quality.

Research limitations/implications: This research was limited to one department in one municipality. Its significance could be strengthened by applying the same interactive approach to other parts of the municipality or other municipalities or organizations.

Originality/Value: Working with an MT and workers of an organization in parallel and in an interactive way benefited both the studied organization, by creating a learning environment, and the research society, by bringing theoretical development into SQC and teamwork.

Keywords: Improvement, Functional team, Sustainable quality culture, Teamwork

Paper type: Research paper

1. Introduction:

In today's rapidly evolving and unpredictable landscape, organizations are continuously challenged by ongoing contextual changes, such as technological advances and shifting stakeholder expectations (Deleryd & Fundin, 2025, Fundin et al., 2018). One systematic approach that has been developed to meet this demand is to focus on the core values underpinning quality management (QM), e.g., focusing on serving customers, empowering workers, and developing committed leadership (Bergman et al., 2022, Mohammad & Rad, 2006).

The creation of a supportive culture is important when working with QM in an organization. Furthermore, a sustainable quality culture (SQC) must rest on a number of core values for quality. Bergman et al. (2022) present six core values for creating an SQC: focus on customers, base decisions on facts, focus on processes, improve continuously, let everyone take an active part and develop committed leadership. Other authors, such as Ingelsson et al. (2018), summarize important values for an SQC as follows: having committed leadership, giving all workers the opportunity to contribute and participate, having a focus on customers, adopting a more holistic view of organizations and society, and continuously working with improvements.

As a result of constant challenges and continuing needs for development, organizations have been forced to work more closely together. Therefore, teamwork has become more significant than ever since it makes organizations and workers more effective, flexible, and adaptable for solving complex problems (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). Teams and teamwork have been the subject of extensive research, and there are many different definitions and ways of examining these concepts (e.g., Katzenbach & Smith, 1993, Hackman, 2002, Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006, Wheelan, 2016). Based on previous research, Sten (2023) summarized success factors for creating 'real' teamwork and an SQC, aiming at increasing an organization's performance: (1) communication; (2) competences and learning; (3) composition and membership; (4) culture; (5) customer perspective; (6) emotional commitment; (7) leadership and decision-making; (8) purpose and objective(s); (9) reflexivity and continuous improvement; (10) structure—process, tasks, roles, responsibilities and tools; and (11) systems view (including flexibility, adaptability and context). One success factor is emotional commitment, which can, for example, involve feelings such as pride in one's individual work, the work performance of one's team, and the work performance of the entire organization (Sten, 2023). Ingelsson (2013) argues that the feeling of pride can promote worker satisfaction and deliver quality to customers. This is in line with research by Eriksen and Heimestøl (2017), who argued that the experience of making a positive contribution gives workers pride in work and can enhance their collaboration in interdisciplinary teams. Research also shows that successful organizations deliberately work to create a good public image to foster pride among workers

and leaders (Bäckström, 2009).

Organizational culture, work teams and team performance are influenced by leadership, leaders and management teams (MTs). The leaders' values, behaviours and attitudes influence the organizational culture, making the work of creating, developing, and maintaining an organizational culture leaders' main task (O'Reilly et al., 2025, Schein & Schein, 2017). This is also true for team effectiveness and performance, where leadership is an important element (Colbert et al., 2014).

Introducing new perspectives on organizational change can be a way of approaching problems and culture change. This can involve a balanced system of performance measurement that reflects both subjective soft measures and objective hard measures (Snyder et al., 2016). However, working systematically with an organizational culture is not easy (Ingelsson et al., 2018; Sten et al., 2021), and to know what to do, leaders need to understand the baseline, i.e., assess and monitor the culture (Bäckström & Ingelsson, 2016). Consequently, before you start to change or develop a culture, you need to know where you are (Fletcher & Jones, 1992); the work with QM requires ways of assessing and monitoring culture through qualitative and/or quantitative measures (Ingelsson et al., 2018). However, if an organization is to understand and build its culture, quantitative measures might need to be qualitatively analysed (Ingelsson et al., 2018).

The purpose of this paper is to present the results from a research project aimed at developing and improving team-based ways of working and methods to create functional teams and an SQC.

2. Methodology:

2.1 Research design

An interactive research design inspired by Ellström's (2008) model of knowledge creation, was used in the project, allowing for both interactions and development of the MT in parallel and in cooperation with the workers in the department. The first step was to develop a project plan in cooperation with project members from the municipality. This plan was then used as a basis for the overall model of the project. The project plan was built on an iterative process in which the actions taken in the project were developed based on the current organizational needs but always with a scientific focus and with the purpose of the project as a guiding star. However, the plan incorporated the challenge of working with both workers and leaders in parallel. Reflection and follow-ups were central elements in the project plan.

2.2 Research project and the organization of study

This research project is a collaboration between a municipality in the middle of Sweden and Mid Sweden University between February 2024 and June 2025. The purpose of the project is to develop and improve team-based ways

of working and methods of creating functional teams and an SQC. The project group consisted of four members: two researchers and two representatives from the municipality who were working in the department of study.

The department of study is a support function that consists of four subsections and was part of a reorganization in 2023, when two support functions that were assumed to have different cultures were merged into one unit. The participants from the organization included 72 workers and 5 leaders from the support function. The five leaders were all part of the MT, together with two experts, making the total number of MT members seven. However, over the course of the project, the MT was reorganized to consist of two MTs with eight members. Furthermore, three pilot groups of workers were chosen to work more deeply with team-based work to become functional teams and to create an SQC. These pilots were chosen by the MT and were intended to inspire other workers with respect to team-based working methods. Each pilot consisted of five to ten members. The pilot groups worked in parallel with the MT and with their own improvement activities.

Parallel to the project, another initiative was introduced to the organization. The aim of this initiative was to examine how agile working methods could be applied in the organization.

2.3 Actions taken aiming for a team-based approach and strengthening the SQC

A baseline questionnaire was distributed to the members of the MT and to all workers at the department in February 2024. This was the starting point for actions exploring how to enhance both the internal teamwork and the SQC within the MT. Two workshops were conducted in March and May 2024 to present the baseline results of a questionnaire and reach a shared understanding of the expectations of the project, as well as developing and formulating a shared vision of the desired state for the MT within three years. The MT was then assigned a reflective task to identify the key activities needed to realize this vision, determine appropriate initial steps, and propose methods of monitoring progress to ensure alignment with the intended direction. A third workshop was held in September 2024 to discuss the reflective task. A digital follow-up meeting with the MT was conducted in December 2024. The fourth workshop, held in April 2025, served as a follow-up session in which the MT members were asked to document their reflections on the current state of the team, as well as how they viewed the expectations they had at the beginning of the project. A follow-up questionnaire was distributed to the MT and all workers in May 2025, and the last workshop with the MT (Workshop 5) will be held in September 2025. The aim of this upcoming workshop will be to evaluate the progress of the project, as well as to reflect on the outcomes of the MT's work with a team-based approach. See Figure 1.

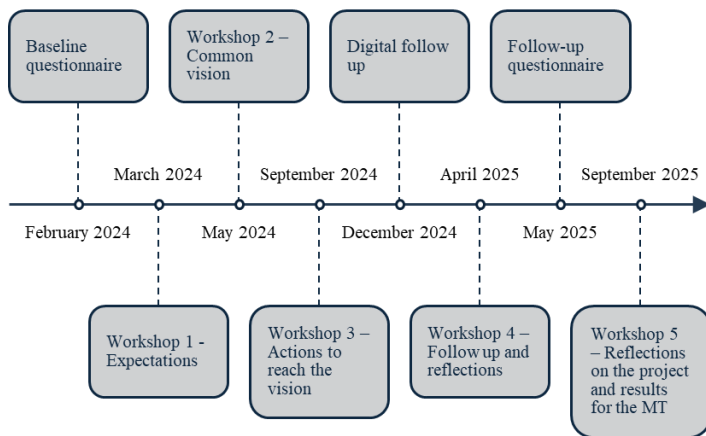


Figure 1: Actions taken during the project related to the MT.

The three pilot groups of workers included in the project were decided on in April 2024, and a baseline questionnaire (for the pilot groups) was handed out to the pilot group members by their managers in May 2024. A first workshop was held with the pilot groups in September, and they were then given a reflection assignment. During the autumn, the researchers held digital follow-up meetings with each pilot group, and the second workshop was held in May 2025. This workshop aimed to reflect on questionnaire results and what the next step would be for the pilot groups to become functional teams. Before this workshop, a follow-up questionnaire was sent to the members of the pilot groups. See Figure 2.

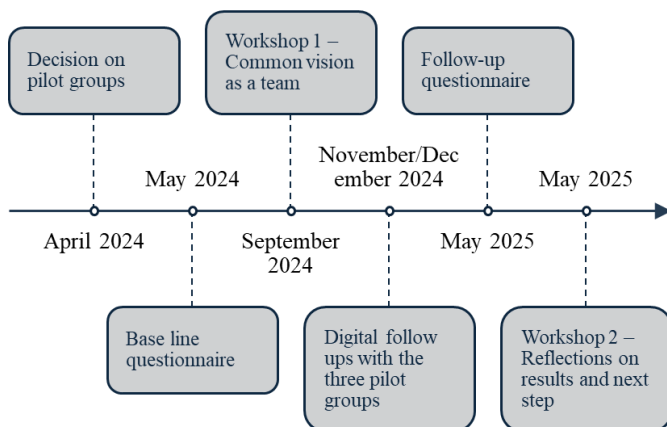


Figure 2: Activities taken during the project related to the pilot groups of workers.

2.4 Questionnaire

A questionnaire was used to assess the organizational baseline regarding SQC and teamwork. The part of the questionnaire assessing SQC consisted of 39

statements measuring 13 factors (3 statements/factor), and the part measuring teamwork consisted of 18 statements (see Table 1). Both parts of the questionnaire had previously been developed and tested (Sten et al., 2023, 2024).

Table 1: Factors assessing SQC and statements assessing teamwork.

Area	Factors ¹	
SQC	1. Empathy 2. Presence and communication 3. Integrity 4. Development 5. Influence 6. Being informed 7. Customer focus	8. Strengths-based approach 9. Pride 10. Internal system view 11. External system view 12. Continuous improvement 13. Base decision on facts
Area	Statements ²	
Teamwork	1. Pronounced purpose for the team 2. Long-term goals for the team 3. Outspoken team rules 4. Depend on each other 5. Knowledge about each other's competences 6. Membership based on competences 7. Mutually responsible for the outcome 8. Leadership differs depending on competence 9. Reflect regularly on how to improve teamwork	10. Reflect regularly on how the team achieves its goals 11. We trust each other 12. We have fun together 13. We show our appreciation for each other 14. Engaged and take part in team activities 15. Listen to each other 16. Show each other respect 17. Act in accordance with team decisions 18. Look forward to team meetings

The questionnaire was scored on a seven-point Likert scale, where seven corresponds to 'completely agree' and one corresponds to 'completely disagree'. Respondents could also reply with 'Do not know/do not want to answer'.

The questionnaire was distributed on paper as a baseline measurement and a follow-up assessment. The results of the questionnaires were documented in Microsoft Excel and exported into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software for further analysis.

2.5 Data analysis

¹ For the development and testing of factors, see, for instance, Bäckström and Ingelsson (2016); Ingelsson and Bäckström (2017) and Ingelsson et al. (2018).

² For the development and testing of statements, see Sten et al. (2023, 2024).

The results of the baseline and follow-up measurements were analysed with SPSS as follows:

1. Statements measuring SQC were statistically grouped into factors, and the means and standard deviations of the factors were calculated for both workers as a group and leaders, i.e., the members of the MT.
2. The means and standard deviations for teamwork were calculated for workers as a group as well as for leaders, i.e., the members of the MT.
3. Data from the statistical analysis were compiled to compare results from workers and the MT regarding SQC and teamwork.

2.6 Ethical considerations

Before responding to the questionnaires, all respondents were informed concerning the study, both in writing and verbally, and they were informed concerning confidentiality and their right to withdraw their participation without giving any reason.

3. Results:

3.1 Results for the MT

The MT consisted of 7 or 8 members during the project; almost all members answered all statements in the baseline questionnaire and all members responded to all statements in the follow-up questionnaire, resulting in a high response rate for both questionnaires. The results regarding SQC and teamwork are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Means and standard deviations for the MT Feb 2024 and May 2025.

	MT	Feb 2024			May 2025		
		N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
SQC	Customer focus	7	5.90	0.83	8	5.63	0.90
	Empathy	7	6.29	0.65	8	5.83	0.85
	Presence and communication	7	6.24	0.71	8	5.88	0.69
	Integrity	6	5.83	0.86	8	5.63	1.09
	Development	6	6.11	0.58	8	6.08	0.75
	Influence	7	6.10	0.85	8	6.08	0.58
	Being informed	7	4.81	1.00	8	4.38	0.97
	Continuous improvement	7	5.67	0.90	8	5.25	0.66
	Base decisions on facts	6	5.89	0.54	8	5.21	0.69
	Internal system view	7	6.29	0.71	8	6.21	0.71
	External system view	7	5.52	0.84	8	5.67	1.10
	Strengths-based approach	7	5.24	0.96	8	4.83	0.99

	Pride	7	6.33	0.67	8	6.17	0.36
	Statements	N	Mean	SD		Mean	SD
Teamwork	Pronounced purpose for the team	7	5.00	1.53	8	5.25	1.04
	Long-term goals for the team	7	4.71	1.70	8	4.13	1.55
	Outspoken team rules	7	4.86	1.57	8	4.38	1.69
	Depend on each other	7	6.43	0.98	7	5.71	1.11
	Knowledge about each other's competences	7	6.14	1.07	8	4.75	1.49
	Membership based on competences	7	5.14	2.27	8	4.13	1.55
	Mutually responsible for the outcome	7	6.43	0.53	8	6.00	1.31
	Leadership differs depending on competence	7	6.00	1.15	8	4.75	1.28
	Reflect regularly on how to improve teamwork	7	5.14	1.35	8	4.63	1.92
	Reflect regularly on how we achieve our goals	7	4.29	1.70	8	3.88	1.73
	We trust each other	7	6.29	0.76	8	5.38	1.19
	We have fun together	7	6.43	0.53	8	5.50	1.07
	We show our appreciation for each other	7	6.00	0.82	8	4.50	1.60
	Engaged and take part in team activities	7	5.71	1.38	8	5.00	1.51
	Listen to each other	7	5.86	1.07	8	5.00	0.93
	Show each other respect	7	6.00	0.82	8	5.63	1.06
	Act in accordance with team decisions	7	5.43	1.13	8	4.13	0.99
	Look forward to team meetings	7	6.43	0.98	8	6.13	0.83

All the SQC factors, with the exception of the external systems view, had lower values in the follow-up measurement. The same is true for statements regarding teamwork, except for the perception of a “pronounced purpose for the team”.

3.2 Results for all workers

The questionnaires by workers were completed to various degrees, with fewer responses from the teamwork part and more responses from the follow-up

questionnaire. The responses included all workers, including the pilot groups. See Table 3.

Table 3: Means and standard deviations for the workers, including the pilot groups, Feb 2024 and May 2025.

	Workers	Feb 2024			May 2025		
	Factors	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
SQC	Customer focus	47	5.75	0.97	54	5.81	0.66
	Empathy	45	5.27	1.55	55	5.21	1.41
	Presence and communication	43	5.65	1.16	56	5.54	1.04
	Integrity	39	5.68	1.52	50	5.65	1.16
	Development	41	4.95	1.63	43	5.10	1.31
	Influence	43	5.38	1.17	52	5.31	0.92
	Being informed	44	4.52	1.48	56	4.70	0.99
	Continuous improvement	42	4.64	1.32	52	4.85	0.95
	Base decisions on facts	39	4.63	1.40	49	4.61	1.28
	Internal system view	43	5.23	1.04	53	5.41	0.91
	External system view	40	4.98	0.90	52	5.02	0.96
	Strengths-based approach	38	4.32	1.29	48	4.26	1.16
	Pride	43	5.29	1.35	54	5.64	0.82
	Statements	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
Teamwork	Pronounced purpose for the team	38	5.26	1.33	51	5.63	1.30
	Long-term goals for the team	37	4.51	1.52	51	5.20	1.47
	Outspoken team rules	36	4.44	1.78	44	5.25	1.20
	Depend on each other	40	5.70	1.52	50	5.66	1.57
	Knowledge about each other's competences	40	5.55	1.36	52	6.04	1.08
	Membership based on competences	37	5.14	1.77	44	5.86	1.42
	Mutually responsible for the outcome	39	5.44	1.57	51	6.16	1.01
	Leadership differs depending on competence	38	5.03	1.94	49	5.76	1.30
	Reflect regularly on how to improve teamwork	36	4.44	1.93	50	5.18	1.27
	Reflect regularly on how we achieve our goals	37	4.19	1.70	49	4.92	1.50
	We trust each other	40	5.85	1.12	49	6.14	1.08
	We have fun together	40	5.58	1.50	52	5.90	1.29

	We show our appreciation for each other	40	5.58	1.43	52	6.02	0.78
	Engaged and take part in team activities	39	5.41	1.65	52	5.65	1.45
	Listen to each other	40	5.68	1.35	52	6.08	1.19
	Show each other respect	40	6.10	1.19	52	6.35	0.95
	Act in accordance with team decisions	38	5.34	1.40	44	5.86	1.09
	Look forward to team meetings	39	5.31	1.88	52	6.04	1.27

SQC factors related to leadership commitment (empathy, presence and communication, and integrity), participation of everybody (influence), factor-based decisions and strength-based approach had lower values in the follow-up measurement compared with the baseline. The only statement regarding teamwork with a lower value in the follow-up measurement was “depend on each other”; otherwise, all statements regarding teamwork were increased compared with the baseline.

3.3 Comparing results between the MT and workers

Table 4 presents a comparison of the results from the MT and workers for both the baseline and the follow-up measurements.

Table 4: Comparison of the means and standard deviations for the MT and workers in February 2024 and May 2025.

		MT			Workers			MT			Workers		
		Feb 2024			Feb 2024			May 2025			May 2025		
	Factors	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
SQC	Customer focus	7	5.90	0.83	47	5.75	0.97	8	5.63	0.90	54	5.81	0.66
	Empathy	7	6.29	0.65	45	5.27	1.55	8	5.83	0.85	55	5.21	1.41
	Presence and communication	7	6.24	0.71	43	5.65	1.16	8	5.88	0.69	56	5.54	1.04
	Integrity	6	5.83	0.86	39	5.68	1.52	8	5.63	1.09	50	5.65	1.16
	Development	6	6.11	0.58	41	4.95	1.63	8	6.08	0.75	43	5.10	1.31
	Influence	7	6.10	0.85	43	5.38	1.17	8	6.08	0.58	52	5.31	0.92
	Being informed	7	4.81	1.00	44	4.52	1.48	8	4.38	0.97	56	4.70	0.99
	Continuous improvement	7	5.67	0.90	42	4.64	1.32	8	5.25	0.66	52	4.85	0.95
	Base decisions on facts	6	5.89	0.54	39	4.63	1.40	8	5.21	0.69	49	4.61	1.28
	Internal system view	7	6.29	0.71	43	5.23	1.04	8	6.21	0.71	53	5.41	0.91
	External system view	7	5.52	0.84	40	4.98	0.90	8	5.67	1.10	52	5.02	0.96
	Strengths-based approach	7	5.24	0.96	38	4.32	1.29	8	4.83	0.99	48	4.26	1.16

	Pride	7	6.33	0.67	43	5.29	1.35	8	6.17	0.36	54	5.64	0.82
	Statements	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
Teamwork	Pronounced purpose for the team	7	5.00	1.53	38	5.26	1.33	8	5.25	1.04	51	5.63	1.30
	Long-term goals for the team	7	4.71	1.70	37	4.51	1.52	8	4.13	1.55	51	5.20	1.47
	Outspoken team rules	7	4.86	1.57	36	4.44	1.78	8	4.38	1.69	44	5.25	1.20
	Depend on each other	7	6.43	0.98	40	5.70	1.52	7	5.71	1.11	50	5.66	1.57
	Knowledge about each other's competences	7	6.14	1.07	40	5.55	1.36	8	4.75	1.49	52	6.04	1.08
	Membership based on competences	7	5.14	2.27	37	5.14	1.77	8	4.13	1.55	44	5.86	1.42
	Mutually responsible for the outcome	7	6.43	0.53	39	5.44	1.57	8	6.00	1.31	51	6.16	1.01
	Leadership differs depending on competence	7	6.00	1.15	38	5.03	1.94	8	4.75	1.28	49	5.76	1.30
	Reflect regularly on how to improve teamwork	7	5.14	1.35	36	4.44	1.93	8	4.63	1.92	50	5.18	1.27
	Reflect regularly on how we achieve our goals	7	4.29	1.70	37	4.19	1.70	8	3.88	1.73	49	4.92	1.50
	We trust each other	7	6.29	0.76	40	5.85	1.12	8	5.38	1.19	49	6.14	1.08
	We have fun together	7	6.43	0.53	40	5.58	1.50	8	5.50	1.07	52	5.90	1.29

We show our appreciation for each other	7	6.00	0.82	40	5.58	1.43	8	4.50	1.60	52	6.02	0.78
Engaged and take part in team activities	7	5.71	1.38	39	5.41	1.65	8	5.00	1.51	52	5.65	1.45
Listen to each other	7	5.86	1.07	40	5.68	1.35	8	5.00	0.93	52	6.08	1.19
Show each other respect	7	6.00	0.82	40	6.10	1.19	8	5.63	1.06	52	6.35	0.95
Act in accordance with team decisions	7	5.43	1.13	38	5.34	1.40	8	4.13	0.99	44	5.86	1.09
Look forward to team meetings	7	6.43	0.98	39	5.31	1.88	8	6.13	0.83	52	6.04	1.27

A comparison between the baseline and follow-up measurements revealed that the members of the MT generally agreed to a greater extent with the statements regarding SQC in both measurements, indicating that they believed the culture to be stronger than it might be. Furthermore, with respect to the results for the MT, values for all statements encompassing teamwork have decreased compared with the baseline measurement. The same is true for the SQC, except for the external systems view factor.

In general, all statements regarding workers' perceptions of teamwork increased in the follow-up measurement compared with the baseline. However, several of the factors measuring the SQC increased in the follow-up measurement, including customer focus, development, being informed, continuous improvement, internal and external systems view and pride. Interesting observations regarding workers were that statements concerning leadership commitment decreased in the follow-up measurement, indicating declining leadership quality.

4. Discussion and findings:

The purpose of this paper was to present the results of a research project aimed at developing and improving team-based ways of working and methods to create functional teams and an SQC. Results indicate that working continuously with and reflecting on team-based ways of working can positively increase important perspectives on teamwork. This is in line with previous research by Sten et al. (2023), who suggested that reflection on and continuous improvements in working methods are important for effective teamwork, as well as for a quality culture. One SQC factor of the results that increased in the follow-up measurement regarding the workers was "pride". Pride may be associated with emotional commitment (Sten, 2023), the emotion of being proud of what a team has accomplished, of individual performance, and of the performance of a whole organization. Pride can be important for collaboration in interdisciplinary teamwork (Eriksen & Heimestøl, 2017), and the feeling of pride can promote coworker satisfaction and the quality of work (Ingelsson, 2013).

An interesting finding was that measured factors concerning leadership commitment decreased in the follow-up measurement for workers. This may be explained by the fact that the MT failed to create a team-based approach, possibly partly because of a reorganization of the MT during the project. An important factor that may influence the emergence of SQC in organizations is how workers experience leadership commitment, clear communication, supportive approaches and the acknowledgement of good work. This points to how important committed leadership is in creating an SQC (O'Reilly et al., 2025, Schein & Schein, 2017). The leaders should act as role models

(Ingelsson, 2013). If the MT had succeeded in striving to work as a team, how would that have affected the SQC, both within the MT and for the whole organization?

5. Implications and future research:

As this study is limited to a single department within a municipality, its significance could be enhanced by applying the same interactive approach to other departments of the same municipality or to other municipalities or organizations. Future research can also focus on the creation of positive emotions, such as pride; on enhancing teamwork, SQC and performance; and on how negative emotions, such as stress, can be converted into drivers of team performance and organizational success.

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