

# BroadVoice

Broadening the spectrum  
of employee voice  
in workplace  
innovation

## **National report - Sweden**

Company case study The Municipality

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# The Municipality

## 1. The social partners work together on health and welfare

On 1 September 2023, employers and trade unions in municipalities and regions formed the Welfare Council of the Social Partners. The council will deal with strategically important issues for skills supply and the work environment. This collaboration between employers and trade unions is a clear example of the Swedish model. A joint investment in health factors in working life has been implemented. The Welfare Council addresses strategic issues and when it comes to operational work, the development arena *Suntarbetsliv* (Healthy Working Life) is used as a tool. The Municipality is an example of how a municipality has developed its operations with the support of *Suntarbetsliv*, a concept that has been developed in collaboration with the trade unions that are active in the public sector.

## 2. About *Suntarbetsliv*

*Suntarbetslivs* task is to collect knowledge about preventive, health-promoting and rehabilitative efforts in the area of work environment and to make this knowledge available and useful in the workplaces within municipalities and regions. The aim is to contribute to promoting well-functioning work environment management in collaboration between employers and employees. *Suntarbetsliv* consists of a broad set of methods that can be combined into analyses and initiatives in the workplace. See further in section 4.

## 3 The Municipality

The Municipality has just over 1,800 employees who are organized in three administrations: Municipal management administrations, social services administration and Children, education and cultural administration. In total, there are about 50 different occupations on the municipality's payrolls. There is a big difference between the different occupational groups, such as assistant nurses, firefighters, teachers. Most of the municipality's employees work in user-related activities, professions that do not require more than upper secondary education. The Municipality has a fairly high proportion of residents with a foreign background and unemployment is high among young people. In connection with the refugee crisis in 2015, the municipality received many immigrants who have now in many cases moved on. The municipality now has a declining population base and an increased proportion of elderly people.

## 4. The trade union representation in The Municipality

The municipality's broad activities mean that they have employees who belong to many different trade unions and there are many different collective agreements that regulate the activities.

Most of the collective employees are members of the trade union *Kommunal* while most of the white-collar workers are members of the trade union *Vision*, which is the dominant

organization on the white-collar side with 212,000 members in Sweden. On the academic side, there is AkademikerAlliansen (The Alliance of Professionals) consists of 16 unions. AkademikerAlliansen is a negotiation organization that represents approximately 65,000 academics. The trade unions do not have their own direct cooperation forums, but small working groups can arise on specific issues, such as a new agreement to be signed, but no formal cooperation.

The union representatives are not at the municipal management level, but there is a parallel structure at three levels for dialogue and collaboration with the various trade unions.

- Central collaboration group where issues at the municipality-wide level are addressed. Here, all trade unions are represented, but some of the smaller ones collaborate in the AkademikerAlliansen, which represents several trade unions with highly qualified members. It is the municipality's HR manager who leads these meetings.
- Administrative collaboration group is limited to issues linked to the three administrations but is still at a relatively overall administrative level
- Departmental collaboration group and in some cases Unitary collaboration group deal with business-related issues where the views of the trade unions are obtained. There are several local variations on how they organize.

The statutory security issues and co-determination issues are dealt with within the framework of this collaboration structure.

In addition, there are Workplace Meetings (APT) at the local workplace level that are held 10 times a year. The union is not involved, but the dialogue takes place directly with the employees. Such a meeting takes about three hours, a couple of hours for common issues and then divided into departments or units for business-related issues. If it is to implement a change, it is first raised here and then raised to the collaboration group at the administrative level.

According to the municipality's HR manager, HR issues have been strengthened over time, and the business has become more proactive from being mainly reactive. The union representative has the same view that relations with the HR department have improved significantly during the course of the project. A negative image of HR has been turned into a positive one, a change that started in connection with the appointment of the new HR manager. The union representative believes that you get better influence if the employer does not see the union as a counterparty but as a partner who can contribute with solutions. According to the municipality's HR manager, the municipality's goal is for all employees in The Municipality to feel good when they go to work or are at work. This benefits the business both financially and operationally.

## 5. The project

The project was started due to shortcomings in the work environment. The Swedish Work Environment Authority conducted an inspection in 2021 and found several shortcomings that the municipality had to address, and this became the starting point for extensive change work. There was a stated goal that The Municipality should have a systematic work environment management. The municipality's HR manager had to hire a work environment and rehabilitation specialist who would ensure that the systematic work environment management was coherent at all levels and that all supporting and governing documents should be in place.

At the same time, the union representative we interviewed was linked to the project as the chief safety representative. His role was to represent all trade unions in the work of change.

The Municipality contacted Suntarbetsliv, which had a support team that could come out and implement a discussion about health factors in an organization, and it was also free of charge. The Municipality wrote an application in which it points to high sickness rates, high staff turnover and high management turnover. The project was initially intended as a small pilot project, but the municipality's management decided that it should apply to all activities under the municipality's auspices. According to the union representative, there were shortcomings in the beginning of the project, not all unions were invited to the initial discussions, which led to not everyone being fully engaged.

The purpose of the project is to bring about a shift in perspective in the municipality. High staff turnover and high absenteeism should not be seen as a recruitment problem, but as a work environment problem. The focus should be on getting the already employed to stay in their workplaces and to attack absenteeism as a work environment problem that must be analysed and addressed. According to the union representative, it is about implementing a shift in perspective, where we see what is good and try to make it better.

A working group was formed that included representatives of HR and the three administrations of the business, as well as a representative of the big trade union Kommunal and our union representative as the chief safety representative. This group met and discussed both the process of Suntarbetslivs workshops and how to continue working, for example with work material for the workplace meetings (APT).

The year 2022 was spent training all the municipality's managers in health factors, with a number of workshops dealing with health factors and the tools developed by Suntarbetsliv. There is a large set of tools, mostly courses and analysis guides, that they can utilize as needed. In 2023, The Municipality began to work practically with health factors out in the business. Each department or unit chose its own variant depending on the problems they considered themselves to have. We will present the work of a social care unit in more detail below.

## 6. A group home for the disabled

The interviewee is the unit manager responsible for a group home consisting of 6 residents and 8 employees.

The six residents all have some form of disability and have a decision by the municipality's social welfare board on special housing according to *the Act on Support and Service for Certain Disabled People* (LSS). In addition to housing, the rights under LSS include that the disabled have the right to a good and independent life and have the opportunity to work, study or some other meaningful employment. The resident should also be able to participate in community life, for example be able to take part in the range of culture and leisure activities on the same terms as others

The staff consists of 8 people, one of whom is a group leader. The group leader is the unit manager's extended arm at the home. The unit manager sits with the other unit managers a few kilometres from the accommodation, but he tries to visit the accommodation every day. The unit manager believes that the daily contact with colleagues leads to a valuable exchange of knowledge and learning. The home is basically staffed with two people during the day and one during the night, but there is flexibility depending on the residents' care needs. All employees

have similar tasks, and most have upper secondary education as assistant nurses or childminders. The tasks do not differ between the employees. Most are women in their 30s, but there are a couple of older ones.

The employees are organized in the trade union Kommunal, which is Sweden's second largest trade union with half a million members in the public sector. At our workplace there is a union representative and a safety representative. The unit has a meeting for collaboration every five weeks that lasts about 3 hours.

The studied project is primarily about reducing an extremely high staff absence at the unit, which at sometimes was up to 40%, and to remove the uncertainty among both residents and staff that resulted from the large number of substitutes.

The problem was a short-term planning process that created conflicts. The employees had to shape their own work schedule once a month, which led to those who were best at helping themselves getting the best times and those who were quiet got the worst, a system that created major conflicts in the work group with high sick leave as a result.

The unit manager and the group leader analysed the need for care to see when the need for care was great and when it was a little easier. The results were presented and discussed with the staff at workplace meetings and when a reasonable consensus had been reached, the unit manager and the group leader formed a work schedule that applied for the whole year, something called a flexible basic schedule. The flexibility lies in the fact that the staff can switch with each other if there is a need for it.

The new schedule was met with both approval and disapproval. Liked because one could see far in the future how to work, and that the system was fair as everyone got to work the same amount. Disapproval because they have been deprived of the right to make the schedule themselves. After a while, the contradictions disappeared, and most people today think that the system is good and fair. The loss of influence over scheduling has been compensated by the fact that shifts can be swapped with each other if necessary.

In parallel with this restructuring of scheduling, The Municipality decided to engage Suntarbetsliv to increase health attendance. Although there was no direct connection to the work with the work schedule, Suntarbetsliv came to be a valuable complement. Suntarbetsliv broadened the perspectives on organizational change and the studied unit chose to work with the concepts and tools that Suntarbetsliv provided. With Suntarbetsliv, the previous efforts became measurable and seen.

The head of unit chose to start from the eight health factors (see section 4) that will provide a healthier working life. At the workplace meetings, a health factor was introduced and discussed each time, and the team suggested measures about what they can do at their own workplace. During the period leading up to the next workplace meeting (5 weeks), the employees themselves must think about what changes would be desirable. At the next workplace meeting, the experiences are summarized, and a number of changes may be agreed. When the question is solved, the unit manager introduces the next health factor that the team will work with over the next five weeks. After meetings, you describe what you have done in a digital form that goes to the HR unit.

## 7. How did it turn out

The results from the change at the group home are very good. According to the head of the unit, the previous absence, which could be up to 40 percent, is now down to 1-1.5 percent calculated over the past one and a half years. Relations between employers and employees have become much more open and better. The unit manager believes that there is now a feeling that they are a team.

The results for The Municipality as a whole are good, but do not reach the same extreme level as the group home. The Municipality has now reduced sick leave from 10% to 7.8 percent, which is seen as a direct consequence of the investment in health factors. On average, there were 200 sick days per day and staff turnover was particularly high among the new employees. This created major challenges for the supply of skills. Here there was a change of perspective, instead of focusing too much on recruitment, The Municipality is putting resources into getting the 200 who are sick back. They have been recruited once because they have the right skills.

One experience is that there are great differences in the managers' conditions depending on the type of business. If you have 10 employees, it is easy to get an overview and choose which issues you need to work on. If you are a manager in the home care service with maybe 50 employees that you rarely meet, it is much more difficult. Then there are no conditions for creating a good dialogue.

According to the union representative, the employees have gained greater direct influence, they work more transparently, which means that they can be more involved. He believes that participation often falls on not being transparent and not bringing things up at the right time to be able to influence. At the same time, the union representative points out that not everyone has taken on board the meaning of the change of perspective and takes on the health factors quite instrumentally, especially if the manager is stressed, " we can't handle it ", then it is easy to fall back on treating one health factor at a time, instead of taking on the more complicated perspective shift. It is important to include all health factors at the same time. It's fine to separate them in an introduction, but then you have to work with everyone at the same time.

According to the union representative the union has not had much influence on how the project is carried out in practice, it is largely based on how managers and employees have understood the importance of a change of perspective. Those who are good at seeing the union as a partner also see the employees as a partner, while those who see the union as a counterpart also see the employees as a counterpart, which the union representative sees as an old-fashioned way.

If you summarize the efforts so far, the project has yielded:

- Support, training and structure for the managers. Here, they initially took support from Sutarbetsliv.
- HR should be a partner that supports when needed. There has been a shift from individual issues to organizational issues.
- The project has so far focused to a large extent on management in order to give them instruments to work with.
- The various departments and units are now responsible for driving the continued work forward. There, the participants have the opportunity to disconnect from Sutarbetsliv and can choose how they want to proceed.
- The studied group home is a micro-case where the opportunities for improvement were extremely good - a bit of a golden case - but where the possibilities of generalizing to other similar workplaces should be done cautiously.



## 8. Case study 3 in brief

COMPANY CHARACTERISTICS	<b>Company context</b> Small municipality with approx. 1,800 employees and a declining population base and an increased proportion of elderly people. High staff turnover and high sickness absence
	<b>State of innovation</b> New mindset focused on work environment through developed workplace dialogues
INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS	<b>Trade union density rate at the company level</b> Many different unions with an average of just under 70% membership
	<b>Workplace labour representation structure characteristics</b> Follows the Swedish model for trade union participation in the public sector, i.e. no interference at the political level but great influence in the day-to-day operations
	<b>Company-level collective bargaining</b> Many unions, which means many central and local collective agreements
DIRECT WORKER PARTICIPATION	<b>Direct participation as the subject of organisational tools</b> Direct participation that follows a script supported by the central organizations.
	<b>Direct participation as a vehicle for workplace innovation</b> <i>Regulation:</i> Initiated by management without a collective agreement <i>Intensity:</i> Monthly planning meetings for bottom-up consultation or joint analysis <i>Scope:</i> Mainly health and work environment issues <i>Objectives:</i> For the management, reduced sickness absence and staff turnover; for the trade union, improved work environment and increased well-being
THE ROLE OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IN DIRECT WORKER PARTICIPATION	A framework was formed at the national level where both employers and the union support the basic principles of Suntarbetsliv. No collective agreement has been signed for the project

	<b>Model of integration b/w direct participation and industrial relations</b>  Democratic (participatory) model with the HRM model as a basic structure in the municipality
	<b>Breadth and depth of participation</b>  Varies between different parts of municipal operations depending on how the managers have accepted the concept. Both breadth and depth in the "golden case" we have studied in depth
DIFFICULTIES	Gain acceptance from the managers who will implement the changed way of working
IMPACTS	Reduced staff turnover and sick leave. Increased well-being and improved work environment at the unit we studied in depth
FUTURE PROSPECTS	Depends on whether the problems with high staff turnover and sick leave are solved in the long term, but the already implemented work environment improvements will persist and be deepened