Associations between age, leadership, sickness absence and job satisfaction

Clas-Håkan Nygård, Oili Niemelä, Anna Siukola

School of Health Sciences, FI-33014 University of Tampere, Tampere, Finland

1. Introduction

Age management is a tool to combat new challenges, arising due to increased numbers of aging workers in the industrialised countries. With age management, leadership practices are used for employees to utilize all the skills and knowledge of the members in the work community in all ages during their life course. The expectations towards leadership can be different during the life course. The supervisor should get the employees to work together by adapting values and cultures. Yet, the need for different forms of leadership for different ages has not been fully explored. The present study focused on the leadership of employees of various ages and on the relationship between leadership and employee health and well-being. First, the aim was to study if the employee experiences of their supervisor depend on age and if employees of various ages value different kind of leadership. Furthermore, the aim was to examine whether the perceived leadership is associated with employee's sickness absence and job satisfaction.

2. Methods

The data consisted of work well-being surveys carried out in a food company in 2007 and 2009 and data from the sickness absence register in the company from the years 2007–2008. Perceived experiences of their immediate superior and the perceived importance of leadership functions were based on the 2007 survey. Sickness absence days were based on the company’s personnel register and job satisfaction was asked in the 2009 survey. The participants (n=926) consisted of those blue- and white-collar workers who had responded to both surveys (response rate 71 % in 2007 and 72 % in 2009) and whose absence data were available. Written consent to participate in the study was gathered. The association between leadership and sickness absences was analyzed by negative binomial regression and the relation between leadership and job satisfaction by multinomial logistic regression. The analyses were done separately to the age groups of 20–34-, 35–49- and 50–64-years.

3. Results

Generally, supervisors were perceived to have succeeded in their work and no differences were perceived in the leadership experiences by age. Asked leadership functions were regarded as important on average. As compared to younger respondents, the 35 year-olds and older seemed to appreciate the supervisor encouraging her/his subordinates to participate and commit to work activities more. Incentive and participative leadership was associated with lower probability of sickness absence days only in the youngest age group after controlling for perceived health, gender and occupational status (RR 0.817). Instead, incentive and participative leadership was associated with high job satisfaction in all age groups after controlling for gender, occupational status and duration of employment (OR 2.141-2.873).

4. Conclusion

Leadership is worth developing since according to this study it seems to have favorable effects on sickness absence behavior of the youngest employees and on the job satisfaction, irrespective of age. However, leadership expectations may differ with the age of the employee. These results could be utilized in the training of the personnel in the company.