

O-128

From commitment to exhaustion - Risks of overcommitment in a humanitarian NGO

Lysiane Rochat, Viviane Gonik, Brigitta Danuser

IST, LAUSANNE, Switzerland

Background & Aim

Organizational commitment, as defined by Meyer and Allen (1997), represents an increasing issue in today's working world. Workers are expected to share the values and interests of their organization. We also know that an excessive commitment has negative health effects (Siegrist et al., 2004). It is however not yet clear where the limit between work engagement, which should "energize" the employee, and overcommitment, which might drive him to professional exhaustion, is.

Methods

We conducted a study at a humanitarian NGO headquarter, where engagement is considered the core of the activity. Using methodological triangulation, we conducted two questionnaires, 20 interviews and 26 days of non-participative observations.

Results

Employees are highly motivated and committed to the ambitious goals of the NGO, and overcommitment is largely present in the structure. Employees do a lot of overtime, often work on week-ends and have few extra-professional activities.

Conclusion

Since the organization needs a high commitment from its employees to function, the limit between engagement and overcommitment becomes very tenuous. Although there is a general consciousness of the risks of exhaustion in this structure, it nevertheless remains implicit that one has to involve himself completely into his work. These contradictory messages create tensions which may lead to health deterioration and which have organizational effects as well, in terms of turnover for example. Furthermore, this leads people to think it is their own responsibility to be strong and resistant.