Responsible leadership, workforce diversity and decent work in hospitality and tourism in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic

Research problem:

This project addresses issues of responsible leadership, workforce diversity and decent work in the hospitality and tourism industry in Norway in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Central questions to be addressed are:

- What are the main challenges related to responsible leadership, workforce diversity and decent work in the Norwegian hospitality and tourism industry in the aftermath of the COVID-19 global pandemic, and how are these challenges understood and managed?
- What aspects of responsible leadership are perceived as salient by leaders and employees in terms of managing a diverse workforce, in light of amplified workplace challenges in the hospitality and tourism sector due to the global pandemic?
- To what degree has the COVID-19 experience led to wide-reaching and long-lasting changes in terms of responsible leadership and employment conditions in the Norwegian hospitality and tourism sector?

A multilevel analysis of both leaders and employees will be conducted in order to investigate different perspectives of responsible leadership in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, and to examine the role of responsible leadership in creating and sustaining decent work conditions in the hospitality and tourism sector. It is expected that the PhD-candidate will contribute to develop the research questions further, based on the issues addressed in this project description.

Background

Tourism is the third largest export sector of the global economy and provides jobs for millions of people worldwide (United Nations, 2020 a). International labor mobility and demographic changes have contributed to an increasingly diverse workforce, presenting both opportunities and challenges for the hospitality and tourism industry in terms of responsible leadership of a heterogeneous workforce with differing competencies and needs. According to Pless (2007), responsible leadership "requires leaders who care, who are morally conscious, open towards the diversity of stakeholders inside and outside the corporation and who are aware of and understand the responsibility of business in society" (p. 438). He, Morrison and Zhang (2019) further point out that responsible leadership views employees as important stakeholders and is thus concerned with topics such as employee benefits, knowledge sharing, employees' psychological safety and developing the organization in a sustainable manner. However, according to Robinson, Martins, Solnet and Baum (2019), research on tourism has to a large degree failed to consider the complexities and contributions of employees in the hospitality and tourism sector. Employment conditions in the hospitality and tourism sector are described as being characterized by "deep social cleavages and economic inequalities" (Robinson et al., p. 1009), by poor working conditions, and a general lack of respect in comparison with employment in other sectors.

Such difficult work conditions within the hospitality and tourism sector have been amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Baum et al (2020), the

consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for the hospitality workforce are an amplification of existing known challenges experienced by this group rather than the manifestation of something new, in terms of their precarious existence in the workforce, their low levels of remuneration and poor working conditions (Baum et al, 2020, p 2814).

This statement points toward central ethical and social challenges for responsible leadership in the hospitality and tourism industry. However, in order to address such challenges, it is necessary to increase knowledge about how leaders in the hospitality and tourism sector address ethical dimensions and manage values and resources in light of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for the industry. Furthermore, it is relevant to examine which aspects of responsible leadership that leaders and employees respectively perceive as especially salient in light of amplified workplace challenges due to consequences of the pandemic.

The hospitality and tourism industry is one of the sectors that has been most widely affected by the global pandemic. Accommodation and food service industries provided employment for 144 million workers worldwide in 2019 (United Nations, 2020 a, p. 11). This is due to the labor intensity of the hospitality and tourism industry, which also serves as a low threshold point of entry into the labor market for many job seekers with migrant backgrounds. The hospitality and tourism workforce consists of a high percentage of precarious and part-time workers on non-permanent labor contracts with high turnover rates. In Norway, statistics from 2019 show that 43 per cent of the total workforce in accommodation and foodservice had immigrant background, while 34 per cent consisted of young workers under the age of 24 (The Norwegian Hospitality Association). Many are employed in jobs requiring low host language competence, and little formal education or occupational training (Baum 2018; Linge, Furunes, Baum & Duncan, 2020). Women and migrant workers make up most of the low-wage part of the hospitality and tourism sector, and are more susceptible to informal working arrangements, seasonal work contracts, and weak regulations. These groups of employees have thus been hit especially hard by the consequences of COVID-19 on worklife (United Nations, 2020 a).

Many hospitality and tourism businesses have faced – and still face - challenging conditions due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Baum et al., 2020). This has had dramatic consequences for the industry and for a large number of hospitality and tourism leaders and employees, both in Norway and the rest of the world. It is expected that the economic decline will continue to affect the industry and its employees drastically in years to come (United Nations, 2020 a). Many of the workers who are most at risk consist of already vulnerable groups of employees such as women, migrant workers, young people, and informal workers. Several of these have limited access to social protection due to informal or casual employment and are among those who are most affected by the impact of COVID-19 on the hospitality and tourism industry. Responsible leadership thus entails providing and ensuring decent work conditions for these vulnerable groups of employees.

Theoretical positioning

The hospitality and tourism industry has up until now largely neglected to focus on sustainable outcomes in relation to employment and workforce issues (Baum, 2018). Such topics are integral to the concepts of responsible leadership, and there is a need for more research that addresses these issues in the context of the hospitality and tourism sector. Pless (2007) describes responsible leadership as "a values-based and through ethical principles driven relationship between leaders and stakeholders who are connected through a shared sense of meaning and purpose through which they raise one another to higher levels of motivation and commitment for achieving sustainable values creation and social change" (p. 438). According to Maak and Pless (2006), responsible leaders

ensure that employment standards are adhered to (worldwide, and also in the supply chain); that working conditions are humane, safe, healthy and non-discriminatory; that employees regardless of background (nationality, gender, age, etc.) are provided fair and equal employment opportunities and that the needs of employees for recreation, work-life balance and meaningful work are addressed (p. 100).

As such, responsible leadership has much in common with sustainable human resource management, here defined as the "adoption of HRM strategies and practices that enable the achievement of financial, social and ecological goals, with an impact inside and outside of the organisation and over a long-term time horizon while controlling for unintended side effects and negative feedback" (Ehnert, Parsa, Roper, Wagner, and Muller-Camen, 2016, p. 90). Key components of sustainable HRM are:

attracting and retaining talent and being recognized as an "employer of choice"; maintaining employee health and safety; investing into the skills of the workforce on a long-term basis by developing critical competencies and lifelong learning; supporting employees' work-life balance and work-family balance; managing aging workforces; creating employee trust, employee trustworthiness and sustained employment relationships; exhibiting and fostering (corporate) social responsibility towards employees and their communities; and maintaining a high quality of life for employees and communities (Baum, 2018, p. 879-880).

In light of the discussion of responsible leadership and sustainable human resource management, this project will examine how leaders contribute to create and sustain conditions of decent and sustainable employment in the hospitality and tourism industry in Norway as reflected in the United Nation's Sustainability Goal 8 which promotes "inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all" (United Nations, 2020 b). The aim is to work towards achieving decent work and improved living standards through sustained and inclusive economic growth and responsible leadership.

The concept of "decent work" generally includes aspects such as respect, fair, productive, safe and meaningful work (Baum, 2018). According to ILO, decent work includes employment creation, social protection, rights at work, and social dialogue (Winchenbach, 2019, p. 1028). Decent work in the hospitality and tourism industry is also closely related to the value of dignity in employment. Dignity at work has been associated with terms such as "value, worth, recognition, respect, self-respect, autonomy, freedom, rank and equality" (Winchenbach et al, 2019, p. 1030), or with "economic security, fair treatment, and satisfying work" (ibid.). Examples of undignified work may include issues such as racism, gender discrimination, low wages and low occupational standings (ibid.) According to Winchenbach et al. (2019), there is a need for a stronger conceptual grounding on the value of workplace dignity in hospitality and tourism employment seen in relation to the concept of decent work.

This project addresses how possible consequences of the pandemic on the hospitality and tourism workforce are addressed and managed in terms of responsible leadership and sustainable human resource management. These issues will be analyzed on three levels as suggested by Baum et al (2020, 2016):

- Macro level: This level consists of government, multinational organizations and international agency policies. The focus is on how structural features of the hospitality and tourism industry produce challenging conditions for responsible leadership through contributing to create and sustain precarious and vulnerable work conditions for hospitality and tourism workers, with large wage gaps and low job security.

- Meso level: This level consists of hospitality and tourism businesses and organizations. The focus is on responsible leadership, HRM-policies and practices, addressing issues such as temporary or short-term employment contracts, outsourcing, and worker unionization. The project will also address how intersectional effects of for instance gender, migrant status and other potential factors of disadvantage affect employment conditions and circumstances for practicing responsible leadership in the hospitality and tourism industry and investigate whether and how these conditions have been exacerbated in light of the global pandemic.
- Micro level: This level consists of individual leaders and employees, focusing on social and cultural impacts of the pandemic on leadership and employment conditions. Studies have shown that many workers in the hospitality and tourism sector are subject to precarious employment and poor working conditions (Baum et al. 2020). The project addresses how the COVID-19 crisis has further affected or amplified disadvantages of already vulnerable groups through economic decline in the hospitality and tourism industry, resulting in for instance lay-offs, shut down of businesses and exclusion from financial safety nets. Such factors necessitate an increased focus on ethical dimensions concerning how responsible leadership is defined and practiced in the hospitality and tourism sector.

Seeing that the proposed PhD-project will last up to 2024, it is also an aim to investigate whether the COVID-19 experience has led to wide-reaching and long-lasting changes with regards to responsible leadership and employment in the Norwegian hospitality and tourism sector.

Methodological positioning

The research questions addressed in this PhD project will be viewed through a multi-method approach, applying both qualitative (interviews/focus groups) and quantitative (survey) methods.

Contribution

The PhD-project aims to develop increased knowledge and a deeper understanding of responsible leadership in light of complexity and changes in worklife due to globalization, crises and increased diversity. In this project, these topics are addressed through focusing on and developing the concept of responsible leadership in the Norwegian hospitality and tourism sector in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The PhD-candidate will be a part of the WITH (Workplace Inclusiveness in Tourism and Hospitality) research group and contribute to develop the research expertise at the Norwegian School of Hotel Management in the area of responsible leadership and sustainable human resource management. WITH consists of the following researchers from the Norwegian School of Hotel Management: Associate Professor Tone Therese Linge (main supervisor), Professor Trude Furunes (co-supervisor), Associate Professor Kai Victor Hansen, Associate Professor Åse Helene Bakkevig Dagsland, Associate Professor Olga Gjerald and Professor Huseyin Arasli. In addition, the research group consists of Professor Tom Baum (Strathclyde University, Scotland), Dr. Tara Duncan (Dalarna University, Sweden) and Associate Professor Richard Robinson (University of Queensland, Australia).

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