

Cutting costs and improving services in Sweden

By Brendan Martin

Introduction

When the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, was looking for help to overcome years of neglect of its water services under the Soviet Union, it seemed yet another new market opportunity had emerged for the French and British transnationals which dominate the privatised water service sector globally. But Vilnius found a partner much closer to home and with a much better financial and service record than those transnationals.

It found a company with a better record of financial efficiency than any in privatised British water had managed over 10 years of putting shareholders first; a company without the habit of renegotiating concession contracts as soon as control of public assets has passed into its hands; and a company with a string of recent successes in fighting pollution and improving drinking water quality. And on top of that, Vilnius's new partner was just across the Baltic Sea in Sweden.

The record of Stockholm Water spoke for itself. A few years earlier, the municipally-owned company had faced its own challenges of raising water quality and meeting ever more demanding environmental standards while operating within increasingly tight public finance. It made some false starts, but found keys to its organisational transformation among its own workforce.

Since then, Stockholm Water has outperformed the privatised British water companies financially in the course of coming in at 15% below budget projections; reduced leakage from pipes to the lowest level for two decades; exceeded by a good margin higher drinking water quality targets set by the National Food Administration; and produced its best-ever purification results while reducing nitrogen and phosphorus levels.

How did Stockholm Water do it? We shall tell the story by visiting some other beautiful Swedish places where the same methods have achieved just as much in health and social care. First, though, some background.

This is a remarkable success story.

Over the last 20 years, the Swedish public service workers' union Kommunal has shown employers how to use public money more productively.

Its approach has cut costs, improved quality and protected jobs. Moreover, it has proved sustainable.

This article was researched and written in 1997. We publish a slightly edited version now because its lessons have never been more relevant.

It is a funny thing that when politicians elsewhere cite a Swedish example in favour of this or that public service reform they never seem to mention the context. Examples such as Sweden's experiment with allowing private management of some hospitals are ripped from the context of a high level of public investment and social dialogue. And Sweden's welfare and public service model never seems to be cited as contributing to, rather than simply benefiting from, the country's dramatic economic success over the latter half of the 20th century.

You can see the difficulty for economics commentators absorbed by the idea that public investment is a drain on a national economy. Explaining Sweden's economic success just might involve facing the possibility that the taxation levels and social provision that are supposed to be the country's weakness are in fact an important source of strength. The country has produced a healthy and well educated population that keeps proving adaptable to new conditions. Moreover, far from Sweden's long-standing commitment to social partnership leading to conservatism and rigidity, institutions that enable working people to exercise some influence over their futures have proved well suited to flexibility and innovation.

In particular, Sweden's public services and social partnership arrangements have served the country well in enabling it to adapt relatively successfully to increasing international economic integration and pressure on public finance. There is a continuing debate about the durability of the Swedish welfare model in that changing international environment, and many a municipality has reached for privatisation, contracting-out, service reductions and job cuts for the answers. However, the Swedish public service union Kommunal has shown there is another way, and, increasingly, not only Swedish municipal and county government but also policy makers further afield are taking notice.

The Kommunal model

Kommunal calls its approach to improving quality and efficiency Kom An!, Swedish for Come On!. It deserves the exclamation mark, having demonstrated the possibility of simultaneously reducing costs, increasing quality, protecting employment and improving job satisfaction. If you think that combination sounds too good to be true, you are not alone. The Swedish public service employers tended to think so too -- until the union showed what could be done.

That is not to say it can always be done. There are certainly circumstances in which quality cannot be improved without raising costs, and those circumstances might well arise increasingly once the Kom An! approach has achieved initial savings. Moreover, the achievements of the Kommunal approach rest on the strong foundations laid by half a century of investment and social dialogue, and that must be taken into account when considering the model's international potential for replicability.

Given the relatively high level of resources that Sweden has devoted to building strong public services over the last half century, it is not surprising that its unions have been part of a national consensus in favour of improving the productivity with which they are used rather than increasing taxation further. The success of Kommunal's approach has been in showing how that can be done by mobilising and developing the knowledge of employees through

participatory processes. The union has set up a special development and management unit called Komanco which has established its reputation sufficiently to be selling its services to municipalities at commercial rates. Komanco's brochure maintains that 'tax increases are no longer possible' and that 'municipalities and county councils cannot count to any great extent on being able to solve problems with the help of increased resources'. Instead, it adds, 'on the basis of existing (and occasionally even smaller) resources, they must ensure that they do the right things in the right way'.

Komanco's development was led by Lars-Åke Almqvist, who had previously for several years been a trade union official of the conventional type. Recalling the early days of his union's change of approach, Almqvist said:

'Faced with demands from employers for cuts in public services or privatisation, Kommunal realised that just trying to refuse changes is not very constructive, especially as some of the accusations of inefficiency in the public services have definitely been true. In fact, we had for many years stressed that the traditional hierarchical organisation of work in local government administration must inevitably be inefficient if it does not involve the knowledge and experience of the employees. So we started to develop a model to build more efficient, non-hierarchical organisation by involving the employees, with the aim of saving money without making people redundant.'

The opportunity to try out that approach came first in a town called Malung after the municipality there began to draw up plans to reduce staffing and contract out some areas of service to save money. Before going ahead with their plan, the social democratic local politicians in Malung agreed to give the union the chance to show what could be achieved in partnership with the workforce, and to allow them enough time to produce results. Almqvist recalls:

'When we got the chance to test our ideas in practice, in Malung back in 1991, the municipality's goal was to decrease costs by at least 10% within three years. We managed to save 10.5% in the first year.'

Dramatic progress -- possibly even too dramatic for the initiative's own good, in fact. Some fortuitous factors, in particular an exceptionally mild winter, boosted the municipality's financial results in Malung that year. So that year's financial numbers could have raised expectations to unrealistically high levels. On the other hand, it was the concrete results in Malung rather than the abstract arguments of the union that became the model's selling point from then on.

Consequently, Komanco's clients have by no means been limited to politically sympathetic employers. Plenty of Conservative-controlled municipalities have called in Komanco not because they like the ideas so much, but because they work. Within six years of the Malung experiment, Komanco was employing 12 full-time consultants, mostly Kommunal members whose training for their new jobs began with leading Kom An! projects in their own workplace.

So what's the secret? Well, if there's a secret, it's an open one, certainly in some of the most successful of the world's private sector companies.

Komanco's method is fundamentally one of developing trust in the experience and knowledge of the workers at the front line, whom the union believes to be the key experts in any organisation. Some of the most successful private

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companies in the world economy have known that for years, even if their countries' politicians have continued to apply less modern management techniques to their public services.

The first condition of Komanco's involvement in any workplace is that both management and workers (through their unions) say they want them there. That is not so obvious a condition as it might seem -- conventional management consultancies typically arrive with only the management's seal of approval. But this is more than just a matter of principle -- important though the principle is -- because the Komanco approach simply would not work on any other basis. The workplace cannot be successfully transformed without the freely given consent of its stakeholders.

How the model works in practice

A key foundation stone of each Kom An! project is a guarantee that both the process and its outcomes will be jointly owned by management and workforce, and that any changes resulting from it will be negotiated. Soon after a decision has been taken jointly by management and unions to set up a workplace project, groups of a dozen or so employees are established among the workforce, each of which elects a 'tutor' from its membership. A project leader is selected by agreement between management, unions and Komanco.

A Komanco-employed consultant takes responsibility for each new project, but while he or she gets things moving at the start, and has an important facilitating role all the way through, it is the project leaders and 'tutors' who have the key leadership positions. The tutors lead the process of drawing out from their groups as many ideas as possible to improve services and reduce costs. This process is developed through a series of short brainstorming sessions over several months, during which time the tutors have eight days of special training from Komanco, in four lots of two days. The project leaders also undergo that training, as well as an additional day dedicated to their specific role.

In the municipality of Ostersund, for example, 147 tutors were elected from among 1,800 employees for the Kom An! project in health and social services. The project, which began in 1995, had been foreshadowed two years earlier when the local Kommunal branch proposed to the municipality a programme of workplace change under the heading 'Our work, our future'. This coincided with renegotiation of the municipality's pay system, which was shifting away from a centralised grading structure towards individual job evaluation. There had also been an organisational restructuring, involving a purchaser-provider split, which implied a future option of privatising provision.

In 1995, Ostersund's political leaders decided that savings of five per cent had to be found over the following year if the provider side was to remain competitive. This produced a new cost-oriented focus and it was agreed that the Kom An! project should get underway. Over the following six months, the workplace groups were formed and had a series of meetings, led by their increasingly competent tutors. The process produced an astonishing total of more than 800 ideas for large and small changes.

The project leader was Ingrid Gustafsson, who, as well as being a nurses' union (SHSTF) representative, held a management position in a department providing services to people with disabilities. Among the major lessons Gustafsson has learned from her role in the project is that 'from the beginning there needs to be a very strong commitment from the steering group and from management to respond to ideas coming from the workforce. The most important thing is not the fact that we save a bit of money but the change process itself -- it has created a new working environment.'

The process cannot be rushed. The Komanco brochure stresses that 'creativity needs elbow room' and that 'work for change takes time'. Åsa Österman, an auxiliary nurse and tutor in the Ostersund project, found out how true that was. 'My first problem,' she says, 'was to make my colleagues strongly committed to the project. They used to say that what we needed to make improvements was more staff, but one of the first things we had to do was to study how we used our existing working time. Between 12 people we found 30 extra hours of working time by using time more efficiently.'

This included using coffee breaks as a chance to share information and ideas about service delivery issues, says Österman, an idea anathema to those of us who believe coffee breaks should be used for idle chatter about anything but work. But that change in Ostersund's canteen culture said something important about the enthusiasm generated by the Kom An! project. 'We have now nearly forgotten that this was a process started by our project -- it is now so natural for employees to take responsibility,' Österman commented a couple of years after it had begun. 'It has led to a big change in job content for employees, and a big change in attitude. People no longer reject the need for change. As an employee, you now take responsibility for your own ideas.'

Sometimes it is a matter of being given authority to back your own judgement concerning something as mundane as which is the best cleaning cloth to use. Sofia Swallow, an auxiliary nurse in an Ostersund old people's nursing home, says that for a long time she and other cleaning staff had been advocating the use of a particular type of cloth, a type requiring no cleaning agent to be used as well. They had tried the product in their own homes and were convinced it did the job more effectively while saving on other purchases. It was also supposed to be less damaging to the environment.

When all they could do was pass the suggestion up the hierarchy, nothing happened, with the obvious result that there was much less incentive to take an interest in improving things in ways proposed by management. These are precisely the conditions which lead to demoralisation and a cynical attitude to management among a workforce. However, when they were able to feed their ideas into the Kom An! project and were given the authority to try them out, they were able to prove their point, take greater control of their jobs, improve the quality of their work, raise their status in the organisation and save their municipality money.

If, in Ostersund, the workers are happy, then so are the managers, or at least those whom I met. Lena Fredriksson, a manager in the same department, was unequivocal: 'There is no way I would have been able to solve the problems

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myself that this process has solved. We are increasing productivity and what has been clearly crucial has been the participation of the employees. It makes my job as a supervisor much easier. It's no longer me and them.'

Improving elder care services

In another municipality, Oskashalm, a Kom An! project in elder care services also began in 1995 and has since been extended to the whole social welfare department. As in Ostersund, despite the consent of the workers through their union representatives, an early issue was to turn that agreement into enthusiasm by overcoming scepticism. As manager Elisabeth Larsson puts it: 'At the start I discovered a big gap between employees and politicians, and a distrust of politicians by the workforce. They suspected it was just to save money.'

Ewa Karlsson, the project leader who is also in charge of Oskashalm's elder care services, shares that assessment. 'At first there was resistance among employees and also pressure from the economic situation,' she said. Despite agreeing that the Kom An! project was the best alternative on offer, and agreeing to it on that basis, many employees feared that they could not trust assurances that their ideas would not be used against them. There had already been a lot of recent change, including such major restructuring as nursing homes being transferred from counties to municipalities, and staff were simply tired of upheaval.

The way round the scepticism was for the municipality to agree to fund the forthcoming year's projected budget deficit -- to write it off, in effect -- so that the Kom An! project could concentrate on producing sustainable longer-term improvements in quality and financial efficiency. In making that commitment, the municipality was demonstrating great confidence in the capacity of the project to produce longer term sustainable savings. 'It meant we could start with a clean slate,' says Karlsson, and as the process developed, trust was built and resistance to more change gave way to enthusiasm about shaping it.

Employees were able to set their own quality standards and evaluate them, to analyse how money was being spent and to make recommendations about how it could be spent more effectively. This is enabling them to safeguard their own jobs, as well as improving their organisation, because the whole project -- like all Kom An! projects -- was predicated on an agreement between the unions and the municipality that there would be no compulsory redundancies. 'The most important thing about the agreement is the way it was created,' says Elisabeth Larsson. 'Politicians knew how much they needed to save but had no idea how to make those savings. Management has worked with the Kom An! tutors and agreement about how to make the savings is coming through that process.'

Two years after the beginning of the project, which had been extended throughout the department by then, there were 86 tutors among the 900 employees, all overseen by a steering group comprising two Kommunal representatives, one from another union, SKTF, one from the nurses' union, two politicians -- one the chair of the welfare committee, the other an opposition representative -- and the executive manager of the department. 'Everyone has

realised this is a change process for everyone,' says Karlsson. 'It was very hard for the tutors at first, but has become easier as more of their colleagues have come to believe in the process. You do need to be the right kind of person to be a tutor -- their selection is a very important factor in the success of the project.'

The fact that the tutors are elected by their colleagues means they start with the support of most of them, but that does not ease the process for managers, who can also feel greatly threatened by Kom An! 'Some adapt better than others and some need special support,' says Karlsson. One manager told me: 'I have had doubts about it but if you go in and veto what the employees are suggesting you undermine the whole project. If you really want employees to take responsibility you have to allow mistakes to be made. You have to give it a try and see what happens. That is a new role for managers.'

That manager had particular reservations about a proposal to allow staff to earn long weekends off by working longer hours at other times. He was worried about the impact on care standards, and -- even after the scheme was implemented -- remained vigilant about the possibility that it could harm them. At the same time, he believed that the climate generated by the project made it more likely that the staff themselves would be prepared to face up to it if his fears were borne out. As Monika Persson, an Oskashalm nursing home auxiliary nurse, put it: 'We feel we have a different view of our job now -- more responsibility, more confidence. If you have more influence, you take more responsibility for quality. It has come as a surprise to us to learn how many savings we could make in this way -- we had been suspicious about demands for savings because we had assumed it would only be about cutting staff, as before. Some workers had had incentives to keep costs hidden.'

Persson believes that the fact it is a union-led project is decisive in giving workers confidence to take part. She also feels that, to be both fair and sustainable, it is important that the project should produce tangible benefits for employees as well as for their clients and for the municipal balance sheet. 'One big change has been the establishment of physical training room for employees,' she told me. 'Every employee has been given the right to have one hour per week to go training there and to have an individual fitness programme. We support the elderly here with everything -- dressing, washing, showering, feeding, everything -- and so there is a lot of heavy lifting, often in restricted spaces. So there had been a lot of back and shoulder injuries.' The idea is that the physical fitness regime will reduce occupational injuries, and its impact on employee health and sick leave statistics -- and, therefore, on overall employment costs -- is being monitored and measured.

Another innovation enhancing employees' working conditions in Oskashalm has been the institution of an extra staff room, to enable them to get more peace and quiet during their breaks. That has had a beneficial impact on clients as well as workers. 'Residents' relations tend to phone a lot, and they tend to be quite anxious, naturally,' nurse Monika Persson says. 'This produced a very stressful atmosphere in which we felt we were never off duty. It led to people tending to ignore the phone. Now people answer it because at other times there is a room they can go to where the phone doesn't ring.'

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The contrast between the the Oskashalm decision to provide workers with a room to escape from the workplace and the Ostersund innovation of discussing work in coffee breaks emphasises that, if the approach to Kom An! projects is similar throughout Sweden, it enables a variety of outcomes by drawing ideas for change from the workforce rather than imposing a standard model on them. That provides a foundation of trust that enables staff to measure their own performance with confidence that the results will not be used against them.

In another Kom An! project, hospital workers designed a computer programme to predict the levels of staffing and other resources that would be needed in particular wards. The programme enabled them to measure levels of dependence of patients against a number of indices, such as their ability to feed themselves, their toilet needs, their mobility, availability of social contact, ability to manage personal hygiene needs, and so on. Giving each patient marks from 1 to 3 in each category, the staff then tot them up to assess nursing needs in the ward as a whole. Allocation of personnel throughout the hospital is then planned flexibly on a day-to-day basis according to the results, rather than staff being allocated to a particular ward and staying there all the time, regardless of changing circumstances. In addition, the staff developed a system to examine their own activities, identifying ways to make more time for direct patient care by reducing the amount they spent on, for example, administration.

It may sound like Taylorist time and motion studies, with all the associated hazards, but as one Komanco consultant insists: 'I used to work as a nurse myself, and all the time I would try to explain to managers and politicians better ways of managing things. But they wouldn't listen because it was just words -- when you quantify it, it helps the dialogue.'

In any case, an absolutely crucial difference between the Taylorist and Kom An! approaches to measuring and improving the time taken for particular work functions is in their impact on power in the workplace. Time-and-motion studies were designed in early 20th century industry to mechanise workers and subordinate their skills and ingenuity to managerial orders, whereas Kom An! is using its analysis of work processes in early 21st century public services to enable workers themselves to exercise more judgement over their work methods. In the Kom An! system, employees are protected against becoming victims of their own diligence by the fact that only the workers themselves, and not managers, have access to the results of their evaluations of the optimum ways to carry out particular tasks. The programme cannot be used by management to examine individual performance.

It is not only the benefits to themselves but also the way in which they have learned about the financing of their service that has changed employee attitudes. This is why Lars-Åke Almqvist -- since promoted from being Komanco's director to Vice-President of his union -- is unapologetic about the initial focus in Kom An! projects on budgets. Indeed, he insists that it is indispensable. 'Every employee needs to know how his or her costs relate to the costs of the whole organisation,' he insists. 'It is only on this basis that you can have a dialogue between the chief executive and the auxiliary nurse. Then

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you can define the limits within which you must operate and go on to identify how to be successful within these boundaries.'

Measuring costs, improving results

Almqvist speaks of workers, managers and politicians all changing their 'mental models' through Kom An! projects. He says that experience has shown this needs to start with 'results orientation', which involves, among other things, 'knowing the price of every operation as opposed to being budget-governed'. More than that, Almqvist believes that focus on what is happening to the money needs to come first because otherwise people cannot understand how their organisation really functions.

Only having done so, Almqvist maintains, can they proceed in a knowledgeable and effective manner to his second stage of 'mental model' building -- 'quality orientation'. And only then are they ready for the third stage, 'process orientation', in which, guided by parameters of agreed financial limits and quality objectives, employees focus on how to change their organisational systems.

However, this sequence of development stages is seen not as one with fixed starting and finishing points but as a spiral, aided by a continuous 'wheel of learning'. That is the buzz term Komanco uses to describe the knowledge development undertaken by its projects' tutor groups through a process of identifying problems, brainstorming about solutions, planning action and taking it. The outcome is an intelligent organisation able to continually improve its service quality, job satisfaction and value for money.

Training the tutors to guide their groups through the process is one of the distinguishing characteristics of Kom An! as compared to conventional business process re-engineering, Almqvist says. He believes that approaches not led by workers' own organisations tend to make the mistake of failing to initially enable all the people in an organisation to locate themselves personally into the overall picture.

'The members become researchers in their own jobs,' Almqvist adds. 'The workplace groups break down their organisation's budget into its smallest components, to enable everyone to understand it and see where the money goes. They measure the costs of specific tasks, so that each person knows the costs associated with their own job and develops ways of reducing them. They discuss how to improve quality, where responsibility lies and should lie.'

'The process has enabled employees to see they can make big savings by working together in a different way. They are developing team work at the same time as developing themselves as individuals. Their training needs are identified and personal initiative encouraged. The more people get to control their own jobs, the more interesting it becomes and the greater their job satisfaction. It leads to better management and pay systems, which produces real job security in the long run because it is the only way to increase productivity.'

It sounds perfect, but, given the nature of the process and the results it enables, middle managers could be forgiven for viewing the outcome with a more

jaundiced eye. Don't flatter structures and more employee self-management mean fewer managers with less authority? Almqvist concedes that the short answer is yes: 'We do need to remove unnecessary management layers, to be able to make fast and accurate decisions without unnecessary bureaucracy.'

'Public sector organisations with the traditional pyramid hierarchical structure can no longer be defended because they cannot solve our economic problems or provide the right working conditions or give the best quality of service. We need new systems not because the old ones were always wrong. They were right for their time, but the new era requires new concepts.'

Almqvist holds out the prospect of middle managers developing into new and more exciting roles within modernised systems. Kom An! projects enable managers to evolve their roles into more facilitative than directive, consultants to rather than controllers of the front-line. He adds:

'Kom An! is not only a method but also a philosophy. It exists for sound trade union reasons. We want to create better working conditions for our members in all respects. So we must explain our whole philosophy to carry everyone with us. It is based on our ideas about mankind, the way we look upon our members as human beings who quite reasonably want more satisfying jobs as well as secure employment.'

'There is a crisis in the political system in our country. There is no political ideology with answers to the problems of the welfare system. In Upsalla (the city near Stockholm where Almqvist lives), social democratic leaders increased taxes but we had nothing to show for it because the city could not control its own costs. No-one knows where the money goes and how it is used. People say that high quality is expensive and low quality is cheap, but that is very seldom the case. Poor quality costs a lot because of the failure to get it right first time.'

Perhaps this explains why Almqvist maintains it is sometimes easier for Komanco to work with Conservative politicians than with social democratic ones -- 'although to admit that is like swearing in church'. But Komanco has never wavered from its commitment of a guarantee of employment security for all involved in its projects. This is not only a fundamental principle but also a condition of enabling employees to have confidence in the process and an incentive to release their valuable knowledge about how to use labour more effectively.

'When you go out to Kom An! projects you see people with pride in what they have achieved both individually and in teams,' says Almqvist. 'People are learning together and building solidarity permanently. If we work with those ideas in the right way, I'm convinced we are contributing to solidarity in society and in the workplace.'

'In Western societies we are used to seeing things in black and white -- either one thing or the other. We have to find solutions capable of doing two things at same time. Traditionally we have felt instinctively that change cannot be good for employees and employers at same time. That it cannot be good for individuals and society collectively at the same time. We have learned that if

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you do it the right way, it can be. Our ethos has been concerned in the past more with public structure than with service quality, but we will defend the idea of public service only through good results.'

Whether or not those good results will be their own sufficient reward for Swedish public service workers in the future is another matter. As one tutor suggested: 'We certainly have more job satisfaction now, but more responsibility should also lead to higher salaries. It is very important that it is recognised in our pay. Employees want a just reward and incentive scheme. At the moment, savings are not equitably distributed because the changes coming out of the process can be more difficult for some than for others.'

How Kommunal and its sister unions, and the public service organisations employing their members, respond to and manage those changing aspirations may turn out to be the next big challenge of change for the Swedish welfare model, and one which will require as much ingenuity and skill as Kom An! has already demonstrated.

In addition, despite its success in transforming public service organisations, there are still many within the unions who worry about how the Kom An! approach is impacting on the culture of the union itself. They worry that the more unions are drawn into helping employers make savings and change working practices, the less they will be able to stand up for their members' interests when they conflict with those of their bosses. Such concerns are magnified when it is union officials who are taking project leader roles, as they often do, and as Hans Cederlund has done at Stockholm Water.

As well as being Kommunal chairperson in Stockholm Water, Cederlund is the union convenor for all the utility's maintenance workers. He admits there have been conflicts of interest since he added the role of Kom An! project leader to his responsibilities. 'Colleagues have had to accept it means I will have less time to deal with other union issues,' he acknowledges, adding: 'The major conflict so far has been when there have been wage negotiations.'

It is not that his commitment to securing a fair wage settlement has been undermined, he says, but that he has had less time to focus on it. However, Cederlund emphasises: 'It is not that exceptional for union officials to have problems of trust with their members. All trade union leaders have close relationships with management in Sweden. Bear in mind that we have a legal right for the union to be represented on the board. So members are always questioning which side you are on.'

But Cederlund has no doubt that by leading the Kom An! project he has served both his members and their community well by preventing privatisation of Stockholm Water, improving its quality of service and financial efficiency, and enhancing the job satisfaction of his members while protecting their employment security. The results sustain his verdict.

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