

Title: Co-Creating Shared Leadership in the Swedish Public Sector: Transforming Hierarchy into Collaborative, Adaptable and Purpose-Driven Systems

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Abstract

The world faces interconnected complex societal challenges including aging demographics, climate change, rapid changes, increased individualism, and growing mental health problems. To address these multifaceted problems, recent leadership research explores how organizations can become more adaptable, purpose-driven, and adopt wider systems perspectives (Bauwen et al. 2022). Research suggests complex challenges necessitates a transition from traditional hierarchical governance to collective leadership models (Senge et al., 2015), where responsibility and decision-making are distributed to harness diverse perspectives and expertise. This shift requires organizations to become purpose-driven, structured around shared missions and values (Laloux, 2014).

Our research employs a co-creative approach to help organizations navigate complex societal issues through self- and shared leadership. Through Participatory Action Research, we engaged eight teams from five Swedish public sector organizations as active knowledge co-creators. The research design centered on iterative co-creative workshops where participants (employees and managers) reflected on their organizational situations, designed and tested new collaborative practices, and collectively explored what worked within their specific contexts.

Drawing upon eight manager interviews and eight focus groups with employees (n=37) conducted after the workshops, we discuss the materials, methods, and artistic approaches that enabled co-creative knowledge generation throughout our workshop interventions. We employed diverse artistic methods (including contemporary dance, poetry, and photo-voice) to incentivize knowledge sharing and creation. These embodied and visual approaches opened new pathways for participants to explore and express their experiences of leadership and collaboration. The results suggest that these approaches triggered deep reflection about shared leadership, fostered self-awareness and meaningful colleague connections, encouraged participants to step outside comfort zones, and built trust necessary to support collective change. By sharing both the successes and struggles of this co-creative journey, we contribute to understanding how participatory approaches can support organizational transformation toward shared leadership while honoring participants as co-creators of knowledge.

Reference list

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Senge, P., Hamilton, H., & Kania, J. (2015). The dawn of system leadership. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 13(1), 27-33.