TRANSFORMING HOW WE LEAD TOGETHER: MOVING FROM HIERARCHIES TOWARDS CO-CREATION

For Resilient
and Sustainable
Organisations
and Society

Handbook: Transforming how we lead together – Moving from hierarchies towards co-creation

For resilient and sustainable organisations and society

Nina Božič Yams, Laura Gottlieb and Álvaro Aranda Muñoz

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About the authors

Nina Božič Yams is a senior researcher and leader of the Societal transformation group at IVL – Swedish Environmental Research Institute. She has more than 20 years experience of working with organisational development, innovation and systemic transformation across business, public and research sectors. In her research she combines participatory action research with art-based methods, often bringing together different stakeholders around shared complex challenges, facilitating co-creation and co-learning processes between them. She has led a range of nationally and EU funded research projects and assignments, exploring self-leadership, distributed leadership, hybrid work, new ways of organising in complexity, sustainable future work, future literacy, and innovation management. She holds a PhD in Innovation Management from Mälardalen University, and an MA in Marketing and Communications from the University of Ljubljana. Her work bridges the worlds of organisational development and artistic practice, and has been published widely across design, business, and technology research journals. Before IVL she worked for many years as a senior researcher at RISE and previously across different roles, among others as the director of Center for Entrepreneurship and Executive Development Slovenia, the head of communications at a publishing house and management consultant at Deloitte.

Laura Gottlieb is a researcher and facilitator in participatory design, shared leadership, and self-leadership within public sector innovation. Her work focuses on the design of methods and tools that strengthen relational sensitivity and support meaningful learning conversations, bringing together citizens, workers, and organisations to shape more participatory and adaptive ways of collaborating. She is currently a researcher at RISE Research Institutes of Sweden, where she works on projects exploring the future of work and strengthening participation in both civic and workplace contexts, using design and art-based methods. She holds a PhD in Innovation and Design from Mälardalen University, where she also taught at Bachelor's and Master's levels, and a Master's in Information Experience Design from the Royal College of Art in London. She is a qualified facilitator trained in Integral Facilitation, and her research has been published in leading journals, including CoDesign.

Álvaro Aranda Muñoz is a designer, researcher, and facilitator with over a decade of experience working in research in different public sector and industrial contexts. He creates materials and facilitation methods that bring together participants from different backgrounds and experiences to help people reach shared understandings, explore futures, and identify opportunities for change. His work explores participatory design, shared leadership, and emerging technologies, with a focus on how collaborative processes can support organisations and communities in shaping their own paths forward. He has a PhD that focused on the conditions that support successful collaborative design with and through technology. He is currently a researcher at IVL Swedish Environmental Research Institute and affiliated with Mälardalen University (MDU), where he coaches students in design research. He has previously worked at RISE Research Institutes of Sweden and ABB Corporate Research, contributing to human-centred approaches in organisational environments. His research has been published in leading design and futures journals and conference proceedings.

Introduction

Where does this handbook come from?

The ideas, practices, interviews and stories found in this handbook grew out of two research projects conducted in collaboration with the Swedish public sector between 2022 and 2026: “Leading From Afar: Hybrid Leadership Practices for Well-being” (funded by AFA Försäkring) and “Embodying Self-Leadership and Distributed Leadership in the Swedish Public Sector” (funded by Forte). In both projects, we collaborated closely with municipalities, government agencies, and public sector organisations, including Lidingö, Umeå, Eskilstuna and Uppsala municipalities, the Swedish Police, the Swedish Transport Administration, the Swedish National Grid, Formas and RISE Research Institutes of Sweden, among others.

Both research projects set out to understand the same problem. When discussing their strategies, Swedish public institutions frequently name self-leadership and trust-based leadership as priorities. However, the gap between their policies and daily work remains considerable. Many organisations struggle to implement these forms of leadership in practice, and there are many different interpretations of what these terms actually mean. As one long-time public sector employee described in a workshop, “This is us. We stand for self-leadership and trust-based leadership. But I have never experienced any of that in practice. What do we mean by self-leadership?”

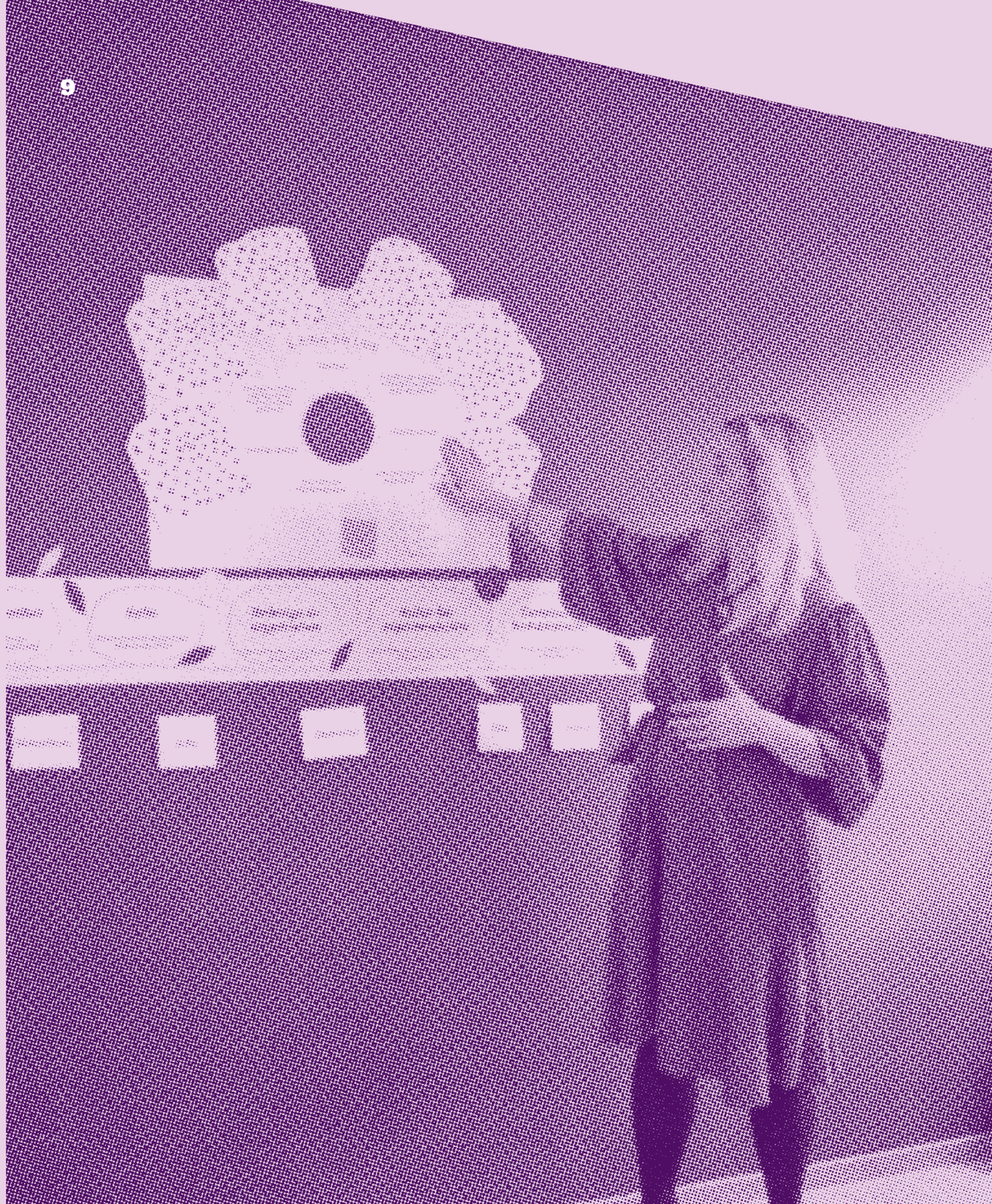
The COVID-19 pandemic made a significant impact on the way people work today. The shift from the standard 8am-4pm in-office work day to various forms of remote, hybrid and on-site working styles has increased workplace complexity. Having more flexibility and autonomy helps people exercise more influence over where, when and how they work; however, it also adds new pressures. Working remotely and in distributed teams puts more pressure on individual self-leadership, and sometimes increases the feeling of isolation. Boundaries between private and work life, including working hours schedules, become more blurred. Managers are trying to foster trust and collaboration in teams that rarely meet in person and whose members have widely diverse needs and working styles. On top of that, the public sector is faced with increasingly complex societal challenges

that are hard to solve within existing organisational structures and processes – which are based on top-down hierarchies – and budgets and goals tied to separate departments that often work within their own silos. The complex challenges confronting us as a society due to an aging population, increased individualism and social degradation, polarisation and geopolitical fragmentation, AI integration, and climate change, among other trends, cannot be solved within a specific department. They call for increased collaboration and distributed leadership across ecosystems. These challenges require us to work in a more systemic way, adopting a long-term perspective on transformation to help us build a sustainable society. The public sector, therefore, needs to work in a more proactive and preventive way, in co-creation with citizens, rather than offering transactional services in a reactive, short-term manner.

riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/socialtjanstlag-2025400_sfs-2025-400/

New laws, like the Social Services Act (Socialtjänstlag, 2025)* demand that the public sector works in more proactive and collaborative ways, strengthening co-creation between different actors in the system and working through a more holistic lens. However, many organisations struggle with implementation because current hierarchical structures hinder transformation towards increased participation, co-creation and leading together across boundaries.

This handbook, therefore, strives to highlight possibilities for systemic transformation, suggesting how the public sector can move from hierarchies towards increased trust, participation and collaboration by exploring how to lead more together. The purpose of this transformation is to create more human, meaningful, resilient and sustainable workplaces, local communities, and society. However, making the shift to a more distributed form of leadership demands significant changes on various levels. Organisations must not only learn to work in parallel with transformation on both an individual and cultural level, but they also need to redesign processes and structures that can enable transformation towards leading together.



What did the learning process look like?

The two research projects that provided the basis for this handbook were designed in line with participatory action research principles. Co-creation with participants from partner organisations was at the core of these projects and took different shapes. Each project included a series of creative workshops conducted during a period of approximately one and a half years. In workshops, participants were invited to explore different aspects of systemic transformation, ranging from hierarchies to more collective forms of leadership, through a combination of theoretical study and practical exercises. Participants were further invited to reflect on how they could apply learnings and methods from workshops in their own teams and organisations.

Workshops were designed to engage participants holistically, not only activating their cognitive capacities, but also utilising design and artistic practices to activate their body, intuition, imagination and emotion, while exploring leadership on a deeper level – both individually and collectively. A professional choreographer adapted contemporary dance methods to help participants physically explore and embody concepts like trust, shared responsibility, and letting go of control. A photographer invited participants to practise the Photovoice method, taking photos to reflect on their current work situation and needs for change and development. A poet helped teams to land in themselves and reflect on their learnings through writing poems. Innovation and design facilitators guided participants in working with visual and tangible materials. The workshops took place in different spaces, including local museums and art galleries. Spaces that invoked a different quality of attention and openness in the learning process, compared to the typical conference room and corporate environment. These experiences helped participants leave the comfort zones of their job routines behind and become more vulnerable and brave enough to move together, share personal stories and poems, look at familiar situations with new perspectives, and connect their personal experiences with the larger transformation they were part of.

Between workshops, participants were invited to test and integrate their learnings into the daily practices of their teams and organisations. One-on-one and small group meetings were arranged between workshops to provide additional implementation support. Participants were also invited to reflect on their learning between workshops, taking reflective walks where they captured their learnings through taking photos and writing poems.

The whole process was organised as a series of iterative prototyping and learning cycles. Each cycle commenced with a workshop, continued with testing and integrating learnings from the workshop into the daily work practice, and ended with reflection. Before, during and after the workshop series took place, data were collected in various ways, including the Photovoice method, field observations, quantitative surveys, individual interviews and focus group interviews.

Altogether, our experiences from these research projects enrich this handbook with real stories from real teams, practices we tested in the field, and honest reflections about what made the journey difficult and insightful. Over the course of these projects, we visited municipalities, sat with teams in their meeting rooms and kitchens, and interviewed people across a wide range of roles in public sector environments, always including both team members and formal managers. We met change agents who were quietly transforming their organisations with little formal support, and decision makers who were trying to figure out how to lead differently within systems that were not designed for it. We worked with an advisory board of expert consultants and senior researchers who have spent decades helping organisations move towards more collaborative ways of working. We participated in research conferences, where conversations with other practitioners and researchers helped us challenge and refine our ideas and practices. All of these experiences – the interviews, site visits, informal corridor and kitchen conversations, conference discussions, and focus groups – have shaped what ended up on these pages. This handbook aims to provide an overview of what we witnessed, questioned, and came to understand together with participants while supporting the transformation from hierarchies to more collaborative ways of leading together.

If you are reading this, you are probably someone who cares about making things better, whether that's within your team, your organisation, or society at large. We hope that somewhere in these pages, you find support and a sense of warmth and recognition, and that what you find here sparks enough curiosity to help you take the next step in your own journey. You are not alone.

Participants mapping the terrain of transformation: what needs to change, and where to begin.

Who is this handbook for?

If you feel that the way leadership and work are structured in your organisation isn't working – and you're curious about what else might be possible – this handbook is for you. When we wrote these pages, we had three kinds of readers in mind. The first is a transformation agent; someone who is already driving, or wants to drive, transformation in their organisation, whether or not they carry a formal title that gives them that mandate. The second is a decision maker, politician, manager, or someone who works in another role that controls and designs the conditions in which people work and holds the power to enable change in an organisation or prevent it from happening. The third reader we have in mind is a curious employee; someone who feels that something could be different, who wants to understand what making a change towards leading together can look like in practice.

Depending on who you are and where you are in your own journey, this handbook can help you in different ways. If you are new to leading together, it can help you to understand why moving your organisation from a hierarchical style of leadership to one that is co-creative and shared is important – not only for yourself but especially for the people inside your organisation and the communities and citizens your organisation aims to serve. And if you are already working within the domain, we hope this handbook can offer you new practices to explore, stories from other organisations that might resonate with your own experiences, and ideas that can help you to make sense of where you can go next.

Throughout this handbook, you will find practices that have been developed and tested in our workshops, which you can adapt and try out in your own context. You will find stories of teams and individuals who have already been on this journey. You will encounter reflection questions designed to help you open up conversations with your colleagues. You will find artistic practices for working individually and in teams. (If the word artistic makes you hesitate, we ask that you stay with us a little bit longer. When the work is fundamentally about how people relate to each other, how they listen, trust, share decision-making, and show up for each other, art-based methods are very helpful.) You will also find guidance and references on how to think about and navigate your own transformation process. Of course, we acknowledge that every context is different and that no single recipe will work for everyone.

How should you use this handbook?

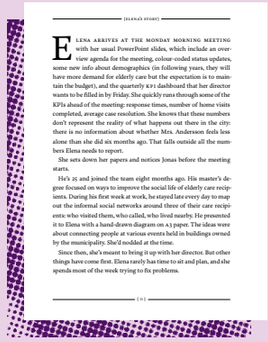
This handbook is designed to be a companion for a journey. Not a journey with a fixed destination or a straight path, but one that emerges differently for each person and each organisation that decides to join the path towards leading together. You can read it from start to finish, or skip to specific chapters as new terrain opens up before you. To help you find your way, here is a brief overview of the recurring sections you'll encounter, which are woven throughout this handbook.

Introduction to concepts. In different chapters, we introduce and explain various concepts related to leading together. These explanations are based on both theory and practice. Visual diagrams are provided to support the descriptions.

Practices. Conceptual introductions are always followed or complemented by practical exercises to help you apply these concepts in your own work. These are concrete, tried-and-tested methods and exercises that will hopefully inspire your own practice. They range from short reflective practices you can do individually to structured processes you can facilitate with a group. Each practice is described in enough detail to help you get started. Where relevant, we also point you to additional resources so you can explore further along that particular path if you wish.

Voices from the field. Here, you'll find excerpts from conversations with expert practitioners and consultants actively working in the field, who offer their experienced perspectives. They have been our advisors during the process of writing this handbook and have co-led some of the workshops held for one of our research projects. We hope their words provoke thought, offer insights into how you can work with collective forms of leadership, and remind you that many others are on this journey alongside you.

Voice from the artistic field. This section features excerpts from conversations with Dejan Srhoj, who is a dancer and choreographer. For over 20 years, he has used artistic methods in organisational and other contexts to explore how they can support innovation and transformation.. He offers another perspective, through his artistic lens, on systemic transformation towards more participatory structures and shared leadership.



[ELENA'S STORY]

Elena arrives at the Monday morning meeting with her usual PowerPoint slides, which include an overview agenda for the meeting, colour-coded status updates, some new info about demographics (in following years, they will have more demand for elderly care but the expectation is to maintain the budget), and the quarterly KPI dashboard that her director wants to be filled in by Friday. She quickly runs through some of the KPIs ahead of the meeting: response times, number of home visits completed, average case resolution. She knows that these numbers don't represent the reality of what happens out there in the city: there is no information about whether Mrs. Andersson feels less alone than she did six months ago. That falls outside all the numbers Elena needs to report.

She sets down her papers and notices Jonas before the meeting starts.

He's 25 and joined the team eight months ago. His master's degree focused on ways to improve the social life of elderly care recipients. During his first week at work, he stayed late every day to map out the informal social networks around three of their care recipients: who visited them, who called, who lived nearby. He presented it to Elena with a hand-drawn diagram on A3 paper. The ideas were about connecting people at various events held in buildings owned by the municipality. She'd nodded at the time.

Since then, she's meant to bring it up with her director. But other things have come first. Elena rarely has time to sit and plan, and she spends most of the week trying to fix problems.

[1]

Movement scores. Here, you'll find exercises and prompts, created by Dejan Srhoj, that you can explore on your own or together with others in your work environment. They have been tried and tested by participants of various workshops, within different contexts, and allow for embodied experiences of specific topics.

Elena's story. This section tells the story of Elena, a mid-level manager in a public sector organisation who is trying to lead differently and struggles to find her way in a system that presents many barriers. Elena is a fictional character, but her story is not entirely invented. It is heavily inspired by our own experiences working with organisations in transformation, as well as the many conversations and interviews we've had with people navigating this journey. Her story is full of doubt, small breakthroughs and setbacks, because in our experience, this is what the journey can look like. We have included this story because we view transformation not only as an intellectual process but also as an emotional and relational one. Elena's path is meant to help you feel what leading together can mean from the inside.

Questions for reflection. At the end of each chapter, we include a list of questions to help you reflect on the ideas just explored. These questions serve as great starting points for a dialogue with colleagues, within a study circle or a learning group. There are no right answers. We view the questions as open invitations to slow down, make the material personal and explore what it means to you in your specific context.

Further exploration. Lastly, some sections of this handbook provide a selection of resources to inspire your learning journey beyond its pages. We have chosen not to limit the suggested resources to academic papers. You will find well-known books that have shaped thinking in the field, along with podcast episodes and TED Talks that bring these ideas to life. Whether you are looking for a quick dose of inspiration or motivation, our hope is that there is something here for every kind of traveller.

Voices from the field

Throughout this handbook you will often see a section called Voices from the field. These are edited excerpts from interviews we held with three senior practitioners who have spent years accompanying organisations through transformation towards leading together, which we explore in the book. We invited them because they were our expert advisors during our research projects, and because they have seen things we have not, worked in contexts different from our own, and developed perspectives that might sometimes challenge our own views and practices.

Each of them offers a different background and perspective. We have tried to preserve them, because leading together is not a static field with agreed answers. It is a living and evolving practice. You will find their contributions placed throughout the chapters, at the points where their experience speaks directly to the theme being explored. We recommend reading them as conversation partners: people thinking aloud about hard problems, sharing what they have learned.

Learn more:
agora.as/

Mette Aagaard (Denmark) is a frontrunner in expanding our understanding of leadership and organisations for the future, as well as an expert on the practical design and implementation of less hierarchy and more shared leadership. As a former executive, she has more than 30 years of experience transforming organisations and leadership. Based on her practical experience integrating shared and distributed leadership to reduce hierarchy in a Danish municipality, she published the first – and now best selling – book in Danish on the subject. Today, she is an executive advisor and consultant for workplaces that wish to rethink their organisations, as well as a lecturer on shared leadership, among other topics, at the Copenhagen Business School Executive program.

Learn more:
tuffledarskapstraning.se

Karin Tenelius (Sweden) co-founded Tuff Leadership Training in 2003 with a mission to transform the way we lead and organise at work. Drawing from hands-on experiments in small companies–later captured in the book Moose Heads on the Table–she developed practical, empowering methods to help leaders cultivate responsibility, engagement, and initiative within their teams. Over the years, Karin has trained hundreds of managers and supported numerous organisations in creating more collaborative and self-managing cultures.

Learn more:
thehum.org/

Nati Lombardo (Argentina/Spain) is a facilitator, coach, and advisor with nearly two decades of experience in self-organising teams, supporting diverse groups worldwide in the development of more participatory and adaptive ways of collaborating. She is co-founder of The Hum, a consultancy specialising in collaborative culture and organisational development, and a member of the Enspiral network, a pioneering global community experimenting with distributed leadership and self-management at scale. Her work focuses on process design and dialogue, helping groups strengthen relational capacity and shift towards more shared forms of leadership. Born in Argentina and now based in Europe, she brings a cross-cultural perspective grounded in practice and informed by long-term engagement with decentralised and purpose-driven organisations and networks.

Voice from the artistic field

In this handbook, you will also find a voice that does not come from organisational and leadership research and practice, but from the artistic field.

Dejan Srhoj, a contemporary dance choreographer, contributed to the co-design and co-facilitation of many workshops that were part of the research projects described in this book. He worked with participants from public sector organisations – people who spend most of their professional lives attending meetings, writing reports, and carrying out structured processes – and invited them to instead move, create and learn together by being present with each other in ways they were not used to.

Contemporary performing arts have long been experimenting with the questions this book explores: *How do people share authority? How does something meaningful emerge from a group? What happens when you replace a single director with a score that everyone inhabits together?* Dejan carries that tradition into organisational contexts. He offers a practice, a way of attending to space, time, body, presence and relationships that conventional leadership approaches rarely consider.

We include his voice because we understand that the transformation this handbook talks about cannot unfold solely on a cognitive level. Comprehending new concepts about leadership is not the same as embodying them. And there are things that happen when a group of people moves together, creates something together, or simply inhabits silence together, that are impossible to experience through language. Dejan has facilitated such processes for many years. Both in the context of dance and in various organisations. He has also seen what gets in the way: self-consciousness, the hierarchy that follows people into the room even when nobody intended it, and the relief when it loosens.

His perspective may not always fit perfectly alongside the other voices in this handbook. And that is the point. We invite you to read it as a new outlook on a different way of knowing. We ask you to listen to what transformation feels like from the inside.

Learn more: nda.si/
and: nomaddanceacademy.org/

Dejan Srhoj (Slovenia) is a contemporary dance artist and choreographer who integrates his extensive background in performance and improvisation into the field of systemic transformation. His artistic career spans a wide range of formats, from professional ballet to experimental contemporary dance practices, with a specific focus on the development and application of choreographic scores. Through a long-standing collaboration with Nina Božič, he has developed methodologies that translate choreographic knowledge into organisational and social contexts. He is a co-founder of the regional dance platform Nomad Dance Academy and of the international dance festival CoFestival in Ljubljana, Slovenia. He holds an MA in New Performative Practices from the Stockholm University of the Arts (SKH).

A voice from fiction

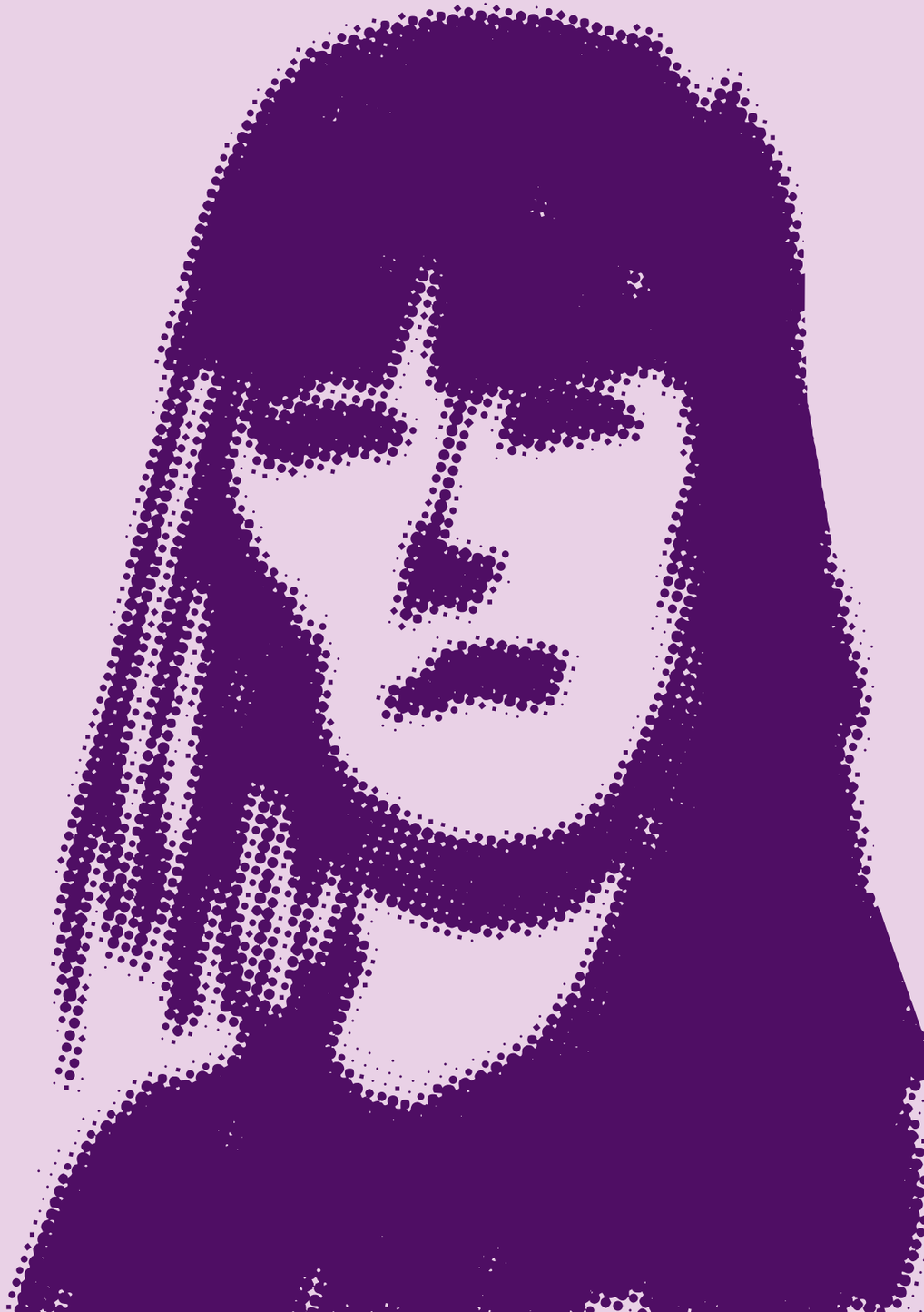
In addition to the researchers, practitioners, and the performing artist who speak on these pages, you will meet one more figure in this handbook: Elena. She appears at the start of each chapter, in a short fictional narrative that follows her journey as a manager inside a public sector organisation.

Elena is not real. She does not work in any specific municipality, and her story did not happen. But it was not invented either. Her doubts, her decisions, her moments of recognition and her setbacks are drawn from our years of working alongside people navigating this kind of transformation, as well as the many conversations and interviews that have informed this handbook. She is, in a sense, a collage of what we have heard and witnessed from many real-life journeys.

We chose fiction because some truths and emotions are best communicated through storytelling rather than analysis, and the kind of transformation we explore in this handbook can be a complex and sometimes scary process to embark on. We consider storytelling to be a powerful practice in the transformation processes, enabling us to communicate about complex challenges in more relatable, empathic and meaningful ways.

Elena (Sweden) is a fictional character. She is a manager at a Swedish municipal department responsible for elderly care services. With seven years of experience in public sector leadership, she has built a great reputation. She is perceived as a reliable, structured and people-oriented manager who delivers on her promises while also fighting to protect her team's well-being under the constant pressures of restructuring and budget cut-offs.

She is also aware, at the start of this story, that something is not working. The system and organisational structures are not designed for the work that actually matters to her, her team and her citizens.



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Why do we need to change the way we lead and organise our work?

{ELENA'S STORY}

ELENA ARRIVES AT THE MONDAY MORNING MEETING with her usual PowerPoint slides, which include an overview agenda for the meeting, colour-coded status updates, some new info about demographics (in following years, they will have more demand for elderly care but the expectation is to maintain the budget), and the quarterly KPI dashboard that her director wants to be filled in by Friday. She quickly runs through some of the KPIs ahead of the meeting: response times, number of home visits completed, average case resolution. She knows that these numbers don't represent the reality of what happens out there in the city: there is no information about whether Mrs. Andersson feels less alone than she did six months ago. That falls outside all the numbers Elena needs to report.

She sets down her papers and notices Jonas before the meeting starts.

He's 25 and joined the team eight months ago. His master's degree focused on ways to improve the social life of elderly care recipients. During his first week at work, he stayed late every day to map out the informal social networks around three of their care recipients: who visited them, who called, who lived nearby. He presented it to Elena with a hand-drawn diagram on A3 paper. The ideas were about connecting people at various events held in buildings owned by the municipality. She'd nodded at the time.

Since then, she's meant to bring it up with her director. But other things have come first. Elena rarely has time to sit and plan, and she spends most of the week trying to fix problems.

Now Jonas is sitting at the far end of the table, turning his phone over and over in his hand. Last week, he'd proposed something smaller: a monthly, volunteer-run coffee meeting between care recipients in the same neighborhood. He'd sent it to Elena in a two-page email with a budget breakdown. Since the budget had already been approved and fixed a few weeks ago, Elena had forwarded the suggestion upwards–but she knew that now was not a good time, especially with the new restructurings, especially if some people might be laid off.

She had talked with Jonas briefly when she saw him in one of the corridors. "The idea is great, really," she'd said. "It's only that these things take time. Keep the ideas coming."

She watches him now as the meeting begins. He opens his notebook and writes the date at the top. That's all he writes for the first 20 minutes.

The meeting moves through the agenda. KPIs are reviewed. Response times are up 3%: good. The number of completed home visits is slightly down: needs attention. Elena presents the numbers with the fluency of someone who has done this for seven years. She answers questions. She nods at the right moments. She updates the presentation based on the feedback she receives. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she is thinking that last week there was a book event and she met Mrs. Andersson, who told her that the best part of her week was when the young man from the municipality took the extra time to be with her, discuss some books and asked her to join the book club of the municipality (whispering, "where she could discuss books with single men from the neighbourhood").

That young man had been Jonas. There is no column on the KPI dashboard about helping Mrs. Andersson get out of her house to attend a book club.

Now, towards the end of the meeting, someone references Jonas's coffee morning proposal. It is mentioned as an example of why clearer submission guidelines are needed for new initiatives. They stress the importance of using the right template and storing submissions in a specific Microsoft Teams folder. Jonas looks up for a moment. Elena watches his face move through something (*a brief flash of emotion that might be indignation, or hope that someone is finally discussing his idea?*), but then it settles back into its neutral position. Jonas writes something in his notebook and nods.

After the meeting, Elena finds herself standing next to Jonas at the coffee machine. She is no longer sure of what to say. She feels there is something wrong with the system. She knows the system is broken. She feels it in her body. In her stomach. But she doesn't have the time, nor the energy. She needs to update the PowerPoint with the new information and send it soon–otherwise she will be late for the next meeting.

What can I do about it? She wonders. *I need to do something. I really do.*

*

1.1 Cracks in our society and working environments

Over the last few years, we have visited and collaborated with many municipalities and public sector organisations in Sweden. As we observed their workplaces, we began to notice some common patterns. The public sector buildings looked good and were generally well kept. They had clean facades, doors that opened on schedule, and people in the reception who greeted us with a smile and a genuine desire to make our society better. Yet, each time we spent a few hours inside, something else started to emerge.

We noticed long corridors with closed office doors that felt like labyrinths. Special cards were required to move through these buildings and citizens were kept outside or could only access areas specially designated for citizen-service areas. People didn't greet each other in the elevators or on the stairs. Kitchens with tables and chairs were often empty, as many people prefer to work from home since the pandemic. On the walls, we saw colourful posters with slogans like "Together we are building a better society" or "Collaboration is our strength". And next to them, we saw maps showing how different teams and departments were scattered across different floors and buildings – people were physically distant from each other, with no chance of crossing paths during the week. When we entered the meeting rooms, we found them, as we'd heard many times, "well-equipped" with long rectangular tables, projectors, new sound systems for online meetings, and big screens. Everything needed to present information to each other is there. But, as we and the participants in our projects keep asking, where are the spaces for co-creation and co-learning? How can we organise a workshop where everyone can share stories while sitting in a circle, or where we can have a big empty space for moving or painting together? Flexible spaces that allow different forms of participation and co-creation between colleagues and together with citizens are still rare. And the question is: even if the work places were redesigned, is there enough psychological safety between people and a culture that allows space for shared co-creation and experimentation? Or are we so stuck in existing processes and structures that it has become difficult to free ourselves from them, even though we know this is what's needed?

When we spoke with the participants in our projects and asked them to identify current challenges and needs for change, they all agreed they want to deepen relationships with each other, create a stronger sense of a shared purpose, and open up more opportunities for shared learning and reflection at work. They said that they want to bring more fun, play and experimentation into their workplaces and increase engagement among both colleagues and citizens. Many expressed feeling lonely, disconnected, and lacking a sense of belonging – even though they appreciated the flexibility that remote work gave them. They said they craved more connection and a sense of togetherness, not only at work but also in their local communities.

Outcome of a workshop exercise, where participants explored what they needed and longed for together.

We deliberately use this image of physical workplaces, even though the main challenge is, of course, not how offices are designed. But their architecture reflects an underlying worldview based on a mechanistic understanding of organisations and workplaces. The structures, processes, and leadership models built in these organisations over the past century were designed for a different world. A world where problems had clear department boundaries within which the same expertise was concentrated, where planning in spreadsheets could help to anticipate the future to a great extent, and where citizens could be serviced in a transactional manner. However, that world looks profoundly different today. And the people working inside these organisations feel it. They know that solving the challenges they are facing demands placing more trust in those who work closest to the citizens. They know that, to solve the problems they are encountering, they will need more collaboration and shared leadership across their organisations and with other external actors, including citizens. They recognise a lot of unused potential – not only among their colleagues but also within their broader ecosystems.

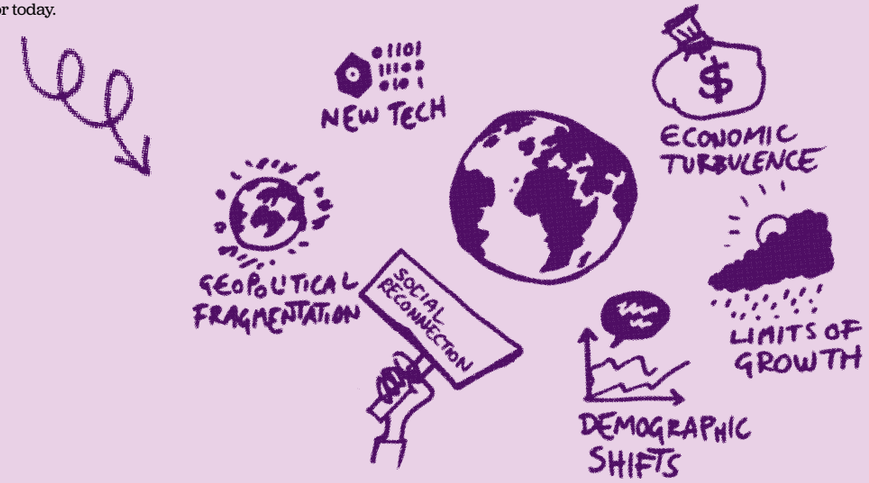
When we look at the buildings we've described, we see the cracks. Even when the buildings have been recently repainted. We do not see these cracks as signs that everything is about to collapse. But we do see structures and pillars under enormous stress, structures that were not designed to hold what is currently being asked of them. In our experience, the people working inside public organisations already sense this. What we found is that people are waiting for an honest conversation about what to do about it. Recognising and being aware of the cracks is the beginning of that conversation.

That is precisely what this chapter invites us into.

External cracks: a system struggling to keep up

Unfortunately, the public sector is struggling to keep up with the major challenges society is currently facing. Some examples of urgent issues include climate change, the rapid development of artificial intelligence and its integration into work environments and everyday life, demographic shifts marked by a growing ageing population and declining birthrates, and geopolitical and social fragmentation. What all these challenges have in common is that they are complex, they af-

Complex challenges facing the public sector today.



fect each other and they evolve continuously over time. Such qualities make it hard to solve them in isolation and call for a more systemic way of looking at the world and dealing with wicked problems.

The urgency of the climate situation is already visible: extreme weather events, rising sea levels, retreating glaciers, and people being displaced from their homes. The World Meteorological Organisation* reported in 2025 that greenhouse gas concentrations reached record levels and continue to rise.

*The United Nations regularly publishes State of the Climate updates in collaboration with the World Meteorological Organisation, including reports focused on specific regions of the world.

un.org/en/climatechange/reports

wmo.int/

Artificial intelligence is already integrated in governments, healthcare, and financial systems, often in ways that make human oversight difficult. Regulatory frameworks and the public sector are lagging behind a technology that is already reshaping everyday life and affecting how we work. A recent paper from Stanford* found that generative AI is displacing entry-level workers in tasks vulnerable to automation, while more senior roles seem to be more protected for the moment. The fact that these adjustments are showing up as job losses rather than wage changes raises a pressing question about how the next generation will enter the workforce and develop professional expertise. Beyond the labour market, the Center for Humane Technology* has documented how AI is amplifying existing social harms: algorithmic filter bubbles are deepening polarisation and distrust in the world, AI-generated content is making it harder to agree on shared facts, and the concentration of AI capabilities in a small number of companies is changing power and creating demand for new regulations.

*Brynjolfsson, E., Chandar, B. and Chen, R. (2025). *Canaries in the Coal Mine? Six Facts about the Recent Employment Effects of Artificial Intelligence*

Demographic shifts are calling for radical changes too – especially in Sweden, where the population is rapidly aging. According to recent statistics*, by 2070 more than a fifth of the population will be 70 or older, with annual deaths projected to outnumber births. A smaller working-age population will need to support an increasingly elderly one. The Central Bank of Sweden has noted that maintaining healthcare under these circumstances will require a reallocation of the workforce into elderly care. Such reallocation might trigger new consequences, such as intensified competition for jobs, and will place increased pressure on finances.

Alongside these challenges, Sweden and many other Western societies are also dealing with a rise in individualism, loneliness and burnout levels. Mental health problems have increased, particularly among young people. The slow disintegration of local communities and the rise of youth crime point to something failing at the foundations of how we live together. Democratic participation is declining, and cycles of unfulfilled promises are deepening mistrust. Ironically, this is happening in the public sector, where institutions exist to support citizens and promote well-being in society at large.

This handbook does not aim to map every crack in the system. What we want to point out is that the challenges society faces today, in all their complexity and urgency, cannot be addressed by hierarchical organisations that are divided into isolated parts, and are rigid and slow in responding to changes in external environments. These challenges call for new ways of working, collaborating, and organising. They call for the activation of the full potential of every individual, be it a public official or citizen, trusting in their abilities and seeing their potential beyond their formal role and title. Most of all, these challenges call for the deepening of relationships and collaboration between different actors across ecosystems. For a more systemic way at looking at these challenges – recognising how they are interwoven and that a long-term transformation is needed to address them. They call for a new paradigm shift that demands a change in values, belief systems, and language. They call for more collective forms of leadership and making decisions together across departmental and organisational borders.

Workshop participants mapping the system from the inside.

The first chapter of the "Human Learning Systems: Public Service for the Real World" presents a great overview of the main challenges and alternatives for public service: centreforpublicimpact.org/our-work/human-learning-systems/

Internal cracks: what is happening inside our organisations?

The cracks are not only external. Inside public organisations, something has also broken down under the paradigm of the New Public Management*. Work is increasingly measured using quantitative indicators – for example, number of cases processed, response times, and percentage of targets met – and with the urgent objective to address short-term results. These metrics are relevant, but when they become the centre of attention for the organisation and different levels of management, a diminished understanding of reality replaces the real complexity and nuances that the public officials face in their daily meetings with different citizens. The consequence is that the metrics can be manipulated, and managers can end up as administrators with a focus on controlling and improving metrics that don't represent

the full picture of reality. Employees who try to fulfill the expectations of this system become caught up in reporting the right metrics while losing connection with their primary purpose of serving citizens and their needs. The unfortunate result is that the mission and purpose of the public sector – which is to support the well-being of citizens and society at large – vanishes into the background, workers lose their motivation and engagement drops.

These results also highlight additional consequences for public sector employees. Many build a quiet frustration over the years: the sense that they cannot focus on what really matters, and that they instead waste their time on administrative tasks that do not create value for citizens. They also feel that their potential is reduced to a narrow and formal role, while their experience from other areas of life, their ideas, and their genuine interests can't find a place in predefined and outdated job descriptions. When people are not viewed as whole human beings, when the only kind of performance considered relevant is that which can be measured by reductive performance indicators, work becomes a chore to get through. It grows abstract, repetitive, and disconnected from the joy that drew most people to public service in the beginning: the desire to be useful and to contribute to a better society in a meaningful way. The sense of doing something that matters is lost.

In some ways, digitalisation and remote working have worsened this situation. It's easier for people to become prisoners of their own project bubbles and silos, lose sight of the bigger picture and become disconnected from their team, as well as from other parts of the organisation and the citizens they are meant to serve. Some of the consequences directly affect their well-being and result in loneliness, higher burnout levels, and increased mental health problems. These are signals that something needs to change.

One striking insight from our collaborations is how consistently we observed and heard the same things: frustration, a sense of untapped potential, and health issues. It is not a problem specific to one municipality or team. It is systemic. That is why we asked our advisory board members and our artistic collaborator to share their perspectives on what might lie beneath these challenges and what we can do about it. What emerged from their reflections was how the current system is

built on a limited understanding of what human beings are, what they are capable of, and what they need in order to do their best. Changing that system requires a different way of seeing people: seeing them as whole human beings.

What did participants say they needed most? Connection – with each other, with their purpose, and with the citizens they serve.

Voices from the field

The leaders and consultants we spoke to during our research were consistent on one point: the case for change no longer needs to be argued. The people inside public organisations already feel it.

Mette Aagaard has spent years working with public organisations on distributed leadership. When we asked her whether the case for change still needs to be made, her answer was almost impatient. "When I meet leaders from the public sector, they feel the pain. They don't need me to explain why it's needed." What she sees, again and again, is the same impossible equation: the demands placed on public organisations, the resources available, and what citizens expect simply do not add up. And when organisations feel that pressure, they reach for the only lever they know. "Historically we have just been turning the optimisation dial like crazy. In the lack of imagination, we can't really see any other button to push. And it doesn't solve the problem."

The greater difficulty, she argues, is about imagination. It is genuinely hard for people to picture a different way of organising, one that moves beyond the binary of either "manager decides" or full consensus, or that replaces control procedures and cascading targets with something more human. As an example of how far this has gone, she mentions that each Danish public school must meet an estimated 3,000-4,000 targets set for them by both local and national governments – and sometimes even parents! "It's not humanly possible!"

Karin Tenelius builds on this with a simple insight: the real source of organisational efficiency is not process or structure. It is engagement. "The big 'why' is really effectiveness, which comes from unleashing engagement and accountability in many people. Accountability comes from engagement. That's the big

game." The evidence, she says, is visible in organisations that have made the shift. Sick leave goes down. Staff turnover falls. Financial performance improves, sometimes even when salaries are raised at the same time – this happened with some of the companies she acquired, and where self-organising principles were introduced.

The same logic holds in the public sector, where the bottom line is measured differently. However, it shows up in different places. Flatter structures mean fewer unnecessary management layers. Response times to citizens improve. And something harder to measure but equally significant shifts: the organisation starts to be seen as genuinely oriented towards the people it serves. "People can see the organisation is there for the citizens, not for itself. They have a bigger picture!" The benefits, she argues, are the same as anywhere else. Only the metrics are different.

Voice from the artistic field

The cracks in society are, in a deeper sense, problems of imagination. We have built systems that reflect a particular understanding of what human beings are, what they are capable of, and what they are for. Changing those systems requires a different way of seeing. That is where art enters.

When asked about it, Dejan Srhoj sits for a while to reflect from his artistic perspective, considering how such cracks relate to leading together. One of the most consequential shifts in performing arts in the 20th century happened in the New York dance scene of the 1960s, with the introduction of what practitioners called scores. A score, as Dejan describes it, is a set of proposals, rules, indications or prompts that allow a choreography to unfold. When the score arrived, it replaced the

authority of the choreographer. “Suddenly, you do not refer to a person anymore who knows, or who is the one that decides success or not. You refer to a score.” And in that shift, many new possibilities opened up that had not been possible before: events, relations, outputs that nobody could have predicted. All of it emerged as the score was practised. Failure became allowable. Not knowing became allowable. Being surprised became allowable.

The effect on dance and choreographic forms was enormous. Groups of people could practise a score together that might last one minute or two years. The research process became democratic. And perhaps most importantly, each participant was invited to contextualise what was happening from inside their own experience of the practice, rather than from the outside position of someone being directed. “To me, it feels that through that you allow each participant to contextualise as the person is doing the practice.”

Dejan also reflects on the risks of translating this kind of artistic practice into organisational contexts. The danger is commodification: someone takes the form of the score and puts it to work in the service of the same productivity logic it was designed to resist. But the score, he argues, tends to resist this precisely because it operates through intention. How you are within the practice shapes everything that follows: the practice itself, what emerges from it, what it means. “With the intention, then everything changes.” What it requires, in an organisational setting, is courage from leadership to allow practices whose outcomes cannot be specified in advance – a quality that is genuinely difficult to manufacture.

This difficulty highlights one of the most telling differences in how art and most workplaces understand human beings. In the performing arts, practitioners spend most of their time

rehearsing – practising, exploring, failing, trying again – in order to perform occasionally when there is an audience. In most workplaces, that ratio is reversed. Every hour is expected to produce specific outputs. Every meeting is supposed to arrive somewhere. The space for exploration, for the kind of tuning in that precedes understanding, has been compressed to almost nothing. However, as Dejan observes, such tuning in is not a luxury. It is what we need to spend most of our time and attention on, whether we acknowledge it or not. “We know from everyday life that the majority of time is either tuning into something, tuning out of something, trying to understand, trying to fit in, finding ways to relate. We need a lot of time to understand where we are in space, where we are in time and how we relate to people who are there.”

For Dejan, this is at its roots a question of trust, a question that sits at the heart of the shift towards leading together. “Do we trust that our employees are there in order to create value for the organisation but also for themselves?” When the answer is uncertain, organisations reach for control, and control demands that everyone at every level is performing for the person above them, demonstrating that what they are doing makes sense. But that performance consumes the very time and attention that work requires. Refusing to acknowledge this perspective, according to Dejan, means we have created a system that expects something from people that they cannot actually deliver.

He pauses a minute to laugh about the ironies: as a performer, Dejan is expected to perform far less than most people in organisations. When he performs, everyone knows it is happening. The rest of the time, he is practising. “It’s very funny

that I, as a performer, need to perform less than you do in your organisation, but I'm called a performer."

The system that demands constant performance not only exhausts people. It traps them in a loop that is difficult to see from the inside. You report to a manager, the manager reports to another manager, all the way up to a director, who is accountable to a politician, who is accountable to a prime minister, who is accountable to voters. And voters, which is to say all of us, demand clear answers: what was the money spent on, how was it spent? We do not want too much experimentation. We just want things to work. "So in a way, it's us who are unhappy with the system, but it's also us voting for politicians who will deliver in a way what we don't want." We want things to work instantaneously, and we also want the freedom to explore, experiment and improvise. The system cannot give us both, and we keep asking it to.

That is why, Dejan says, he keeps returning to the organisational level, to the everyday work environment, to the small scale where change can start. It is hard to expect entire countries to shift the paradigm. But teams and organisations can. And if enough of them do, it might create a movement on higher levels. Dejan has experienced this tension firsthand: as part of a European Union project, he has been expected to fill in forms accounting for his working hours. He resists it. "I think I will just have to fake it somehow. How can I account for hours of thinking, preparing, talking, observing, dancing, and doing nothing, which all form a process that enables me to create? I need to keep the dignity and the trust that I'm doing something that has value in my own way. Otherwise I can start to doubt myself: am I doing it right, am I doing it enough, should it be more, should it be less?" The form does not measure what he is doing. It measures his compliance with a system that needs to believe it is measuring something.

This is one of the most dangerous effects of the current paradigm. And it connects directly to the internal cracks described earlier in this chapter. Organisations are not interested in the whole person. They are interested in one specific aspect: the rational mind, the flexible and quick response, the deliverable. Everything else, the body, the emotions, the relational self, the parts of a person that need time to tune in and find meaning, is left outside the door. "We are expected to engage at the workplace only partially." And that accumulates. In the short and medium term, that partial engagement creates stress, burnout, and mental health problems. Over time, it prevents people from developing the capacities they do not even know they have, because those capacities only emerge through relationships, through being met as a whole person rather than as a function. "We do not exist on our own, but we exist as relational beings to other humans, living beings and objects. And if those relations are continually partial, then we stay partial."

We believe that Dejan's views open up a necessary dialogue on the transformation this book is about: if the current ways of constant control and performance are not only exhausting but structurally incapable of producing what we need, then what would it mean to build organisations around a different understanding of how humans work, create and lead together?

WE DO NOT EXIST ON
OUR OWN, BUT WE
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HUMANS, LIVING
BEINGS AND OBJECTS

1.2 We are in the middle of a systemic transformation

Workshop participants engaging in movement as a way to explore trust and leading together.

A systemic transformation is a paradigm shift, a profound change that reshapes our understanding of how the systems in our society function. In the context of organisations, this shift addresses multiple aspects simultaneously. It includes the process on how decisions are made, how work can be organised and how leadership is implemented in the reality of everyday work.

Currently, we are moving away from a paradigm called modernity. The term modernity is in itself quite contested. There is no single definition because it varies enormously depending on who is defining it and from which part of the world and time. Some consider modernity to be humanity's best achievement because it embodies the progress of reason, science and the comfortable freedoms and services we are used to in our daily lives. However, others view it as a system that has produced great outcomes while also leading to the production of terrible ones, where violence, terror and resource exploitation of the planet are usually brought to the table. This is well reflected in one of the books we usually recommend called Hospicing Modernity. In the book, Vanessa Machado de Oliveira invites us to sit with this complexity and

stay for a while to reflect both on what it has to offer us and its consequences. We find this a useful starting point. What matters for us is the practical side: that the particular way of organising work, leadership, and institutions that modernity produced is now struggling to meet the demands of the complexities of the current world we live in. Recognising this is the first step towards imagining something different.

In organisations, this progress of modernity translated into a way of structuring work that made sense at the time. Work was divided into specialised roles and departments, each with defined goals, expected outcomes and clear responsibilities. Hierarchies were designed to control and ensure these goals and outcomes, having a flow of communication to inform employees of decisions. The primary perspective was the performance. And for that, enormous emphasis was placed on measuring and tracking every aspect of the organisation, with the intention of maximising efficiency. The act of planning, consequently, was seen as a tool of control: by setting the right targets, you could probably anticipate and prepare for what was coming next.

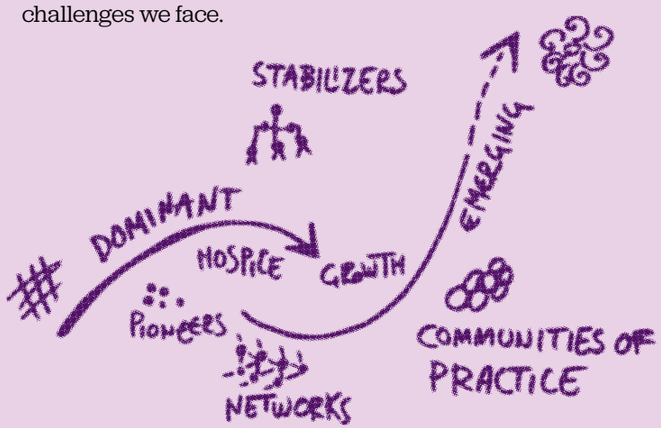
This model works well in specific circumstances, for example, when problems are complicated but maybe predictable, when the same processes need to be repeated often, and when the everyday work is, in a way, a routine where no big surprises are expected. One example to imagine this model is to think of a factory. In a factory, the goal is to produce as much as possible, as efficiently as possible, with as little variation as possible. Every role has a defined job that is to be executed through a series of specific tasks. Every process has a recipe. The manager's job is to maintain an overview of the machinery and the team, making sure that they are maximising production. Deviation from the plan is seen as a problem to be fixed. Employees who follow instructions are considered good workers. This model rewards control and predictability above almost everything else. And of course, for the sake of the example, we are oversimplifying this model.

For a long time, this was not a bad way to run things. But the world has changed. The problems that public organisations are now asked to address – the ones we described in the previous section – are not oversimplified factory problems. They involve people, relationships with other departments and organisations, competing values, and constantly evolving situations that are hard to predict. Today's challenges do not fit nor can be solved in isolated departments. These

challenges are usually referred to as “wicked problems”: interconnected, dynamic challenges in which every intervention produces unexpected consequences, and in which the actors involved hold different and often contradictory worldviews.

This shift does not mean that everything from the way we did things under the modernity paradigm should disappear. Organisations still need structure, processes and some forms of accountability. They also need new skills and capacities that enable them to keep up with the new complexities. This means they need to be able to adapt, learn, and respond to the unexpected.

Being in the middle of this systemic transformation feels uncomfortable. It’s because we are trapped between two very different worlds: the old model is no longer able to provide us with answers, but the new one is not yet fully formed and we are in the process of figuring it out. The natural instinct (understandably and unfortunately) is to be tempted into asking for more of the same – reaching for the tools we already know and pushing a little bit further in our quest for more efficiency (clearer plans, tighter structures, more control). But these ways of working are precisely the least suited for addressing the current challenges we face.



The Berkana Institutes *Two curve model*, illustrating the experience of living in two paradigms at the same time.

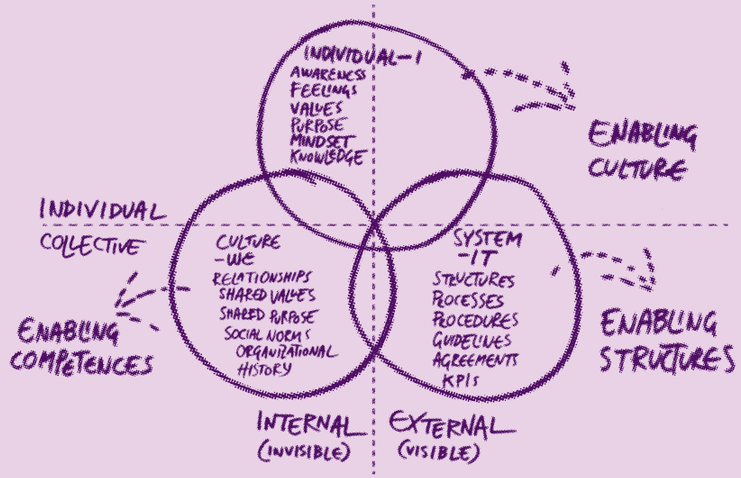
The current problems are complex and relational, but the methods that we apply were designed for situations that were complicated but predictable. This gap between the complexity of the challenges and the limitations of the modernity model is where many organisations are stuck today. Moving forward requires awareness and honesty about the depth of change needed. It also calls for the ability to work on multiple levels at once and think with a systemic perspective.

To deepen your understanding of this transition, we recommend reading two books that offer complementary entry points. Vanessa Machado de Oliveira’s Hospicing Modernity invites a reflective engagement with what we are leaving behind, viewing modernity as an old paradigm, and Frederic Laloux’s Reinventing Organizations examines organisations that have already begun operating from a different set of assumptions, documenting ways of leading together.

Living with complexity: the I, WE and IT model

Working in complex contexts requires maintaining awareness of multiple dimensions simultaneously. Changing processes is not enough if people do not change internally. It is not enough for individuals to change if the team culture does not change as well. And it is not enough to change the culture if the formal structures are designed to support the opposite direction.

The I, WE, and IT model, inspired by Ken Wilber’s integral theory framework and adapted to an organisational context by Daniel Ofman, offers a way to maintain this system perspective. Each of the three dimensions in the framework points to a different layer of transformation needed. Some are more external and visible, such as the office design or the key performance indicators. Others, such as values and norms that are part of a culture, or an individual’s inner feelings are more internal and invisible. All three dimensions are interwoven and influence each other, so we need to address their interconnections. For example, if efficiency is highly valued in an organisational culture (WE dimension), this will affect how individual employees behave (I dimension) and will be reflected in organisational processes and performance indicators (IT dimension).



The I-WE-IT model adjusted from the models of Wilber and Ofman.

The I, WE and IT model

I is the individual dimension. It includes the beliefs, values, emotions, skills and inner disposition of each person. How do I relate to uncertainty? Am I able to listen before I speak? Can I admit when I am wrong to myself and to others? This is the most personal layer and it asks us to examine our assumptions and question them. Leadership development, coaching, reflective practice and experiences that genuinely challenge a person's existing worldview work at this level. Without any change in this layer, all other changes stay on a superficial level.

WE is the relational and cultural dimension. It refers to trust between people, the way a team makes decisions, shared values, the quality of conversations and the organisational culture that can either enable or hinder change. Culture emerges continuously from the dynamics of how people treat each other, what gets rewarded within the group, what goes unsaid (because people might be afraid to confront situations or people), and what happens when something goes wrong.

IT is the structural and systemic dimension. It includes formal processes, organisational models, evaluation indicators, regulations, technology and resources. This is the most visible layer, and consequently, the one organisations are often most tempted to change first. This is because it feels concrete and actionable. One important aspect to highlight is that structures are never neutral. They include assumptions about how work should be done, who should have authority and power, what can be counted as success and should be rewarded, what should be measured and reported (and what not). The consequence of not changing structures is that they tend to pull behaviour back towards familiar dynamics. New ways of working require structural conditions that make them possible to maintain.

A workshop session exploring the three dimensions of systemic change.

Transformation only happens when we are aware and work at acknowledging these three dimensions. This does not mean everything needs to change at once, but it asks us to keep the three in our mind, being aware that each layer affects the other two, and noticing when progress in one dimension hinders or enables progress in the other two. If you would like to go deeper into this framework, Fred Kofman's Conscious Business develops these ideas and applies them to the context of organisations.

What this model also makes visible is that the I and WE dimensions (our inner life and how we relate to others) cannot be reached just through rational thinking and applying structural changes to the organisation. You can rewrite a job description, introduce a new meeting format or hang new posters on the walls; but supporting how a person relates to uncertainty, or how a team navigates trust after it has been broken, requires something different: approaches that can engage people not only as rational beings but as whole human beings – with their bodies, emotions, intuition, will and the capacity to make meaning together.

One way to engage people in a more holistic way during transformation processes is through art-based methods.

Why artistic methods support transformation

Systemic transformation cannot be driven through rational planning alone. It involves deep change processes on the level of mental models and underlying beliefs and values, as well as in structures and processes that are, ultimately, reflected in people's behaviours. In transformation processes it is therefore crucial to engage people beyond the cognitive level – through their emotions, intuition, relationships and shared meanings – to achieve transformation on deeper levels. To be able to leave behind beliefs and systems that we have been educated in and grew up in, imagination needs to be activated so we don't get stuck in the known and comfortable. Artistic methods and practices can play an enabling role in these processes of opening up, going deeper, questioning existing ways of being and imagining new ones.

Theatre, collective storytelling, movement, visual arts, poetry and music are tools that allow us to access dimensions of experience that conventional meetings and strategy documents cannot reach. They can help a team see its own dynamics differently, articulate what it cannot yet say, or imagine futures that do not yet exist.

Artistic methods provide a platform for people to meet on equal ground, because when a group suddenly moves or sings together, one's formal job title or expert background becomes irrelevant. Even if people enter the room with different agendas and worldviews, artistic methods allow them to meet through what they share – being human. When people share their personal poems or perform improvisational theater together, they find themselves in a bit of a challenging situation where they share the discomfort of doing something new together. Something that invites them to be vulnerable with each other and take risks together. Trust and connection are built in ways that are hard to achieve using traditional work set-ups.

Artistic methods are also useful when working with co-creation processes that are emergent, complex and uncertain – like any transformation. Rather than forcing something according to a predetermined plan, they follow the group's energy and the places where interest in development resides. Real change rarely happens according to a plan. It happens when the right conditions are created for it to emerge.

Artistic practices engage individuals and collectives as a whole, activating their bodies, senses, emotions, intuition, imagination and thinking. They accomplish this by inviting people to stay with the complexity and, at the same time, stay in touch with themselves, with each other, and with their environment. By opening access to other sources of knowing and being together, artistic practices allow space for experimentation. Space where we can explore and practise new ways of being together before we can fully understand them, make sense of them through thinking or describe them to others through language.

This is not a new insight. It is, in our understanding, a very old one that has simply been developing in a parallel room, waiting to be invited.

Workshop participants building trust and connection through movement.

Voice from the artistic field

For at least a hundred years, avant-garde and contemporary art have been working with the same problems that organisations are now becoming more interested in exploring. How do people share authority? How does something genuine emerge from a group? What happens to time, space, and perception when you stop organising them from the top down? Dejan Srhoj, who comes from the world of contemporary performing arts, has spent years thinking about what that accumulated artistic knowledge might offer organisations trying to carry out a transformation towards collective forms of leadership.

"Contemporary art has been experimenting heavily with how people are together," he says. "How do we understand or play with time, how do we play with space, what are the ways of being together, mixing everyday life and art, understanding intimacy as a political act?" This includes what I feel, how I relate to others, how I use everyday situations, how I show up in a room with other people. These intimate aspects constitute the substance of how we organise ourselves.

Much of this knowledge, he observes, developed in isolated pockets: avant-garde art forms in the 1920s, a particular approach to choreography in the 1960s, "conceptual dance" in the 1990s – different experiments that took place in specific spaces and timeframes and never quite escaped them. But the knowledge is there, rich and largely unexplored, available to be reapproached not only within the art field but from anywhere where people are trying to change how they work together. What gives him hope is that by translating this knowledge into organisational contexts, the knowledge might reach the scale it was aiming for: "Some of the wishes and ideas that artists had might actually be practised by many more people, especially by people or organisations that have perhaps more power in the process of social change."

1.3 A new vocabulary is needed

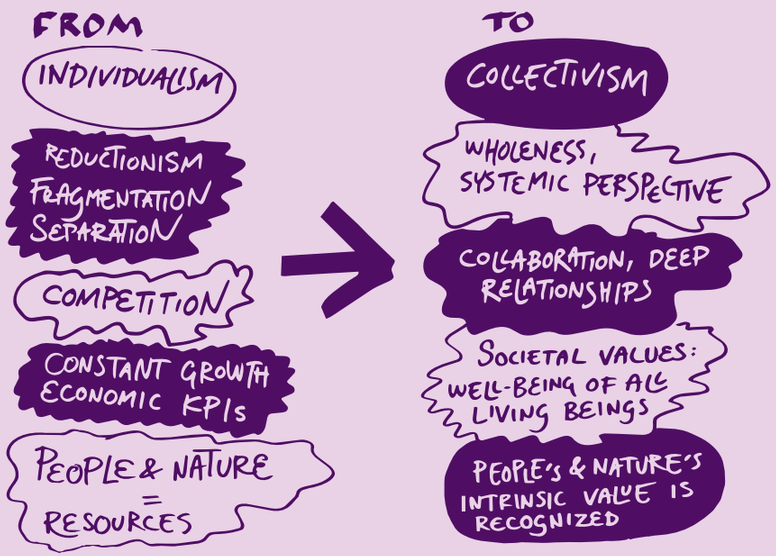
Different terms connected to leading together.

What Dejan points to is something this field is still working out in practice: when the old ways of organising authority no longer fit, new language is needed to describe what is trying to emerge. And when we start talking about new forms of leadership and organising principles that move away from traditional hierarchies and towards increased participation, co-creation, distributed forms of decision-making and leading, we can find a great variety of terms that can lead to confusion. Terms like *self-management* and *self-managing organisations*, or *self-leadership, trust-based leadership, shared leadership, distributed leadership, collective leadership, systemic leadership, adaptive leadership* and *emergent leadership* – to name a few. In certain academic contexts, the term *collective forms of leadership* is used as an umbrella concept. This proliferation of terms reflects the fact that we are in a field that is still under development, where different theoretical traditions and organisational development practices have developed their own terms in an effort to highlight specific aspects of a higher-level transformation in leadership practice that shares the same ground.

In this book, we use the term *leading together*, both in the title and as a guiding thread, to highlight a movement away from a traditional understanding of leadership that is attached to individuals, often formal managers, who hold the power within a hierarchy. Instead, we understand leadership as a collective and emergent practice that is shared and developed within teams, between different parts of an organisation and even distributed among various actors in the ecosystem that need to collaborate and make decisions to address complex challenges together. Leadership is, therefore, something that we need to learn

to practice together and share. Besides leading together, we also use the terms *shared leadership*, *collective (forms of) leadership* and *distributed leadership* interchangeably throughout the book. These are the most established terms in research, as well as the terms that the practitioners we worked with mostly related to. Self-leadership is closely connected to collective forms of leadership. This is because having autonomous, responsible and self-driven individuals who possess strong self-leadership skills is often a precondition for the individuals being ready to move towards leading together and sharing leadership with others in their team, organisation or ecosystem. We explain self leadership and its relationship to leading together in more detail in Chapter 2.

Based on our experience working with practitioners, we have found it is often not very useful to get stuck on nuances between the different terms describing collective forms of leadership, which academics might do. The practitioners we worked with highlighted the importance of choosing the terms that resonate the most in your context and that the people in your organisation can relate to. Several participants in our projects shared that they intentionally chose not to talk about self-leadership and shared or distributed leadership with their colleagues but instead focused on naming what needed to change in the culture, behaviours and ways of working to achieve the desired



From the old paradigm to the new paradigm: A side-by-side comparison of the basic principles driving how each paradigm works.

purpose and work in more sustainable and effective ways together. That included practices that revolved around self-leadership and shared leadership without necessarily naming them. Whatever words an organisation chooses, what matters most is that they point towards the underlying transformation: moving away from a model where leadership is held by a few people in formal power, towards one where everyone practices it together.

What is important to notice is that leading together is connected to a deeper systemic transformation or shift between two different paradigms that operate on different principles and also use a different language. On one hand, we have the more functional mechanistic logic of modernity and scientific management from the early 20th century, which still dominates our organisations today. This paradigm views the organisation as a machine that can be divided into different functions based on different competencies and work tasks. For example, into finance, HR, development, marketing, production, etcetera. People can be distributed into different units and departments based on their competence and budgets, with goals that are tightly linked to these specific parts or silos within the organisation. The problem with this top-down, functionally organised structure is that it fails to account for the complex and interwoven reality we live in today. A reality in which people with different competencies need to collaborate across borders to solve complex problems. A reality in which processes are hard to plan in advance or control using reductive measurements that don't represent the full reality of things. Today, we need to lead based on a complexity paradigm. A logic where we see that many things are interrelated and influence each other at all times. Where we adopt a more systemic perspective, and short-term goals are balanced with long-term ones. A more organic logic with language describing organisations as living systems in a constant state of change is more appropriate.

The modernity paradigm emphasises separation, individualism, fragmentation, competition, transactional logic, productivity and continuous growth. It operates with a focus on economic performance indicators and treats people and nature like resources. On the other hand, the complexity paradigm emphasises a holistic and systemic perspective, where collaboration and deep relationships, the creation of shared meanings and the well-being for all living beings and the

Participants using the Photovoice method to reflect on their work situation.

planet are at the centre. When this is translated into organisations and workplaces, the language also shifts. Leadership moves away from being concentrated at the top, universal, formal and steering to being more distributed, context-specific, informal and enabling. Ultimately, this also translates into two sets of logic about how citizens are viewed and treated by public officials. In mechanistic logic, they are viewed as customers, to whom public officials must efficiently deliver standardised services through one-way transactional logic. When looking at citizens through a complexity lens, we see them as active participants and co-creators who find context-specific solutions together with public officials.

And this paradigm shift, it turns out, has consequences that are beneficial, concrete and measurable.

1.4 The benefits of leading together

The shift towards leading together produces outcomes that organisations can see and feel, and in many cases also measure. Organisations that have moved in this direction report greater adaptability, resilience under crises, and deeper and more trusting relationships within teams, between departments and with citizens.

From the perspective of people at work, the impact is visible. In the organisations we collaborated with, we observed lower rates of sick leave, increased engagement, improved well-being and a stronger sense of meaning at work. For example, at Lidingö's elderly care department, sick leave declined and staff retention improved to the point where fewer external consultants were needed, reducing costs while raising the quality of the work. Colleagues from other parts of the city's administration began asking if they could be placed on the team or collaborate with them, because the environment gave them energy. In one of Umeå's departments, survey results revealed that scores in some dimensions actually became harsher – not because things had gotten worse, but because people had developed enough agency and critical awareness to call out what wasn't working. This shift from acceptance to active engagement is a form of organisational health. When people feel that their contribution matters, that they have autonomy and that they are part of something larger, they engage on a deeper level. The human element, which so many public organisations have lost, returns, making itself felt during the work day.

From an economic perspective, leading together is also more sustainable. A public administration that acts preventively and co-creates solutions with citizens, which, in turn, activates volunteering, can generate a much greater impact using the same resources. In Lidingö, a network of self-governing local communities is now largely self-run, with the municipality playing a connecting and supporting role instead of being responsible for delivering them. They helped create communities that meet regularly, look out for each other, and draw upon the energy of local actors including restaurants, schools, churches and cultural institutions. From this perspective, the public sector stops acting in transactional ways (services in exchange for taxes), and becomes a process of shared value and meaning creation where citizens are actively involved.

These examples of benefits represent organisations that are more capable, more humane and more effective at the same time. The evidence points in a consistent direction, and so do the stories of the people doing this work on the ground. Because while data can describe a direction, it is rarely what moves an organisation to change. What moves people are specific moments in specific places where something shifted, and someone was paying close enough attention to notice. This is why we have also compiled, at the end of this book, four case journeys with examples on how different organisations in our projects explored leading together while reflecting on their insights, enablers, hinders and benefits.

As this chapter comes to an end, we would like to highlight a few resources that may spark some inspiration. The work of Buurtzorg, the Dutch home care organisation, is a great example of leading together. They redistributed decision-making to self-managing nursing teams. This case has been extensively documented and shows what's possible when bureaucracy is reduced and professional autonomy is increased. Jos de Blok, Buurtzorg's founder, has spoken about this journey during a TEDx talk in Geneva and a presentation at the ICT&Health World Conference in 2025. If you are specifically interested in public sector contexts, we can recommend checking out the Human Learning Systems initiative's great collection of well-documented case studies exploring how public organisations are moving toward more adaptive, relational and person-centred ways of working.

To learn more, visit:

Kreitzer MJ, Monsen KA, Nandram S, de Blok J. Buurtzorg nederland: a global model of social innovation, change, and whole-systems healing. Glob Adv Health Med. 2015 Jan;4(1):40-4. doi: 10.7453/gahmj.2014.030. PMID: 25694851; PMCID: PMC4311562.

Healthcare: humanity above bureaucracy. TEDxGeneva. Jos de Blok. youtube.com/watch?v=SSoWtXvqsgg

Jos de Blok. ICT&health World Conference 2025. youtube.com/watch?v=koLV35oxGRs

The Human Learning Systems website has a collection of well-documented case studies in reports: humanlearning.systems/hls-insights-findings-from-our-research-2024/

Voices from the field

Change often shows up in small moments: a meeting that finally felt worth attending, a colleague whose voice you had never properly heard, a task you never thought you would be trusted with. The experts we spoke to collect these moments carefully, because they know that in the middle of a difficult transformation, small stories of impact matter just as much as large ones.

Mette Aagaard is candid about the nature of her work: she is usually called in when things get hard, which means her archive of stories leans more towards struggle than triumph. But even within that, she notices something accumulating. One story that stays with her is of an organisation that managed to shift its strategic direction without the usual disruption of restructuring reporting lines, a small but significant sign of what becomes possible when decision-making is genuinely distributed. More often, though, what she carries are quieter moments. The time a team member shared that it had become easier to focus once interpersonal dynamics stopped consuming so much energy: "I can actually focus on the job I need to get done." A nurse who had spent her entire career being told she needed to listen better, without ever quite managing it, until a change in how her team structured its dialogues forced a different kind of attention. "I feel like I have new colleagues now," the nurse told her. "These three colleagues who I've never really heard from because they're quieter people, they're extremely clever and they come up with ideas I couldn't have come up with." And a team member who, simply because the new structure allowed people to nominate themselves for tasks, found herself working outside her usual professional domain for the first time. "It's more like little stories of impact rather than one big story," Mette says. "But they add up."

Nati Lombardo came to this work through a worker-owned software cooperative before turning her attention to NGOs. A background that sharpened her eye for a particular kind of organisational contradiction. The organisations she began working with held genuinely progressive values about how they wanted to show up in the world. Yet internally, they were still running on structures that didn't reflect any of that. Drawing upon Laloux's framework, she describes it as organisations holding green values but living in an orange environment. "They started to notice that internally they were still upholding very old structures that were not serving them. And they were like: how do we change?"

What shifts once those organisations begin to align how they operate with what they stand for is, according to Nati, primarily a sense of empowerment: the realisation that it is possible to live your values inside the organisation, not only in what it does externally. That said, she is careful not to overstate the progress. Funding constraints in the NGO world limit how much flexibility organisations can realistically afford, and many teams are still somewhere in the middle of their journey. A common sticking point is the move beyond the initial opening up, the moment of full consensus and flat equality, towards something more workable and sustainable. "How can we be more efficient while still holding those values?" That, she says, is where the real and ongoing work lies.

1.5 Questions for Reflection

Before moving on to the next chapter, we invite you to spend a few minutes with these questions. You can reflect individually or collectively, using the questions as a starting point for a conversation with your colleagues.

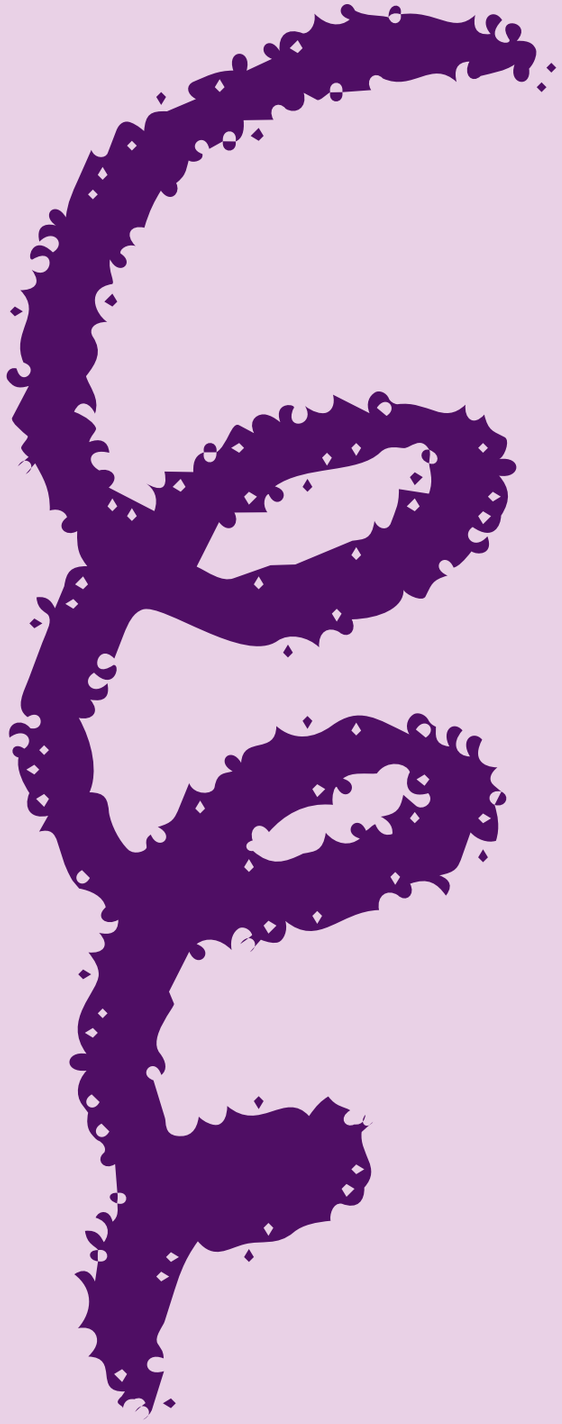
1. What cracks do you recognise in your own organisation? Which of the problems described, both external and internal, feel familiar to you?
2. Where do you feel the tension between the two paradigms? Have you experienced moments in your work where the current system clashes with what you know would need to be done differently?
3. How is leadership practised and understood in your organisation? Does it rely heavily on a few people in power or is it more distributed?
4. What words do you use in your organisation to talk about leadership, purpose, culture and organisation? Is there a shared language for these things, and does it represent the language you think is needed?
5. What generates the most resistance in you from what you have read in this chapter? Resistance often points to something important. Where does it come from? What would you be willing to let go of in order to move forward?
6. Looking at the I, WE and IT model. In which of the three dimensions do you think your organisation needs to invest most in? Why? How do you view the relationships between the changes needed in the three dimensions?

1.6 Conclusions

In this chapter, we have seen that the challenges facing public organisations today are a signal that something more fundamental needs to change. The cracks are real, they are structural, and they are felt by the people working inside these organisations. The world has changed faster than the systems and models integrated in organisations, and the gap between what is being asked of public organisations and what their current structures allow them to do can't be solved through working hard and putting in more effort. It requires changing how people relate to each other, how authority is shared, how decisions are made, and ultimately how leadership is understood.

Alongside the diagnosis, we have seen evidence that the transformation is already happening – in nursing teams and municipal departments, in NGOs and performing arts studios. Something new is emerging wherever people have decided to try a different way of being together at work. It might not have a clear shared language yet. But the knowledge exists. The examples are there. What tends to be missing is the inner capacity of people to lead themselves before they can lead together with others.

That is where the next chapter begins. Leading together is a personal question. Before exploring how teams and organisations can share leadership, we need to investigate what it takes for each person to show up as someone capable of being self-aware and willing to take responsibility for their tasks and for their own growth. In Chapter 2, we will explore what self-leadership means in practise, and why it serves as the starting point for everything that follows.



Nurturing self-leadership for Leading Together

{ELENA'S STORY}

A LEADERSHIP COURSE IS HELD IN A CONFERENCE ROOM on the fourth floor of the municipal building (the one with the good coffee machine and a view of the canal). In attendance are 12 managers from different departments. The facilitator, Karin, has kind eyes and a habit of asking a question and then waiting much longer than feels comfortable for the answer.

Elena signed up for this course willingly. She signs up for most things willingly. If it looks good, it is good, and besides, she is genuinely curious about the Personal Compass exercise Karin had described in the invitation email. *A tool for mapping your values, strengths, what drains you, what energises you. A foundation for self-leadership*. Elena had read that and thought: *useful for the team*. She has already been thinking about who on her team might benefit from it the most. *Jonas, probably. Sara*.

Now, Karin is asking everyone to turn to their own Personal Compass.

The room quiets. Pens are uncapped. Elena looks down at the paper in front of her.

The compass has six sections. Elena starts with the easy ones. *Strengths*. Moving her pen quickly, she writes: structured thinking, reliability, navigating complexity, translating strategy into action. *That's true*. She knows it's true because she's been told it's true many times, in many performance reviews. She moves on to *Values*, writing: fairness, responsibility, quality. Elena pauses before adding: *People*. Looking at it, she wonders if *People* is perhaps too vague. But she doesn't know how to make it any more specific so she leaves it and moves on.

She arrives at the box in the centre of the compass which is slightly larger than the others. It reads: *What energises you at work?*

Elena puts her pen to the paper. She writes: *Solving problems*.

Then she stops.

She looks at it for a moment. *It's true. Isn't it?* She is energised by solving problems. By that feeling when a difficult situation untangles. When the right decision becomes clear. When someone comes to her overwhelmed and leaves with a plan. That feeling is real.

But then something else surfaces. It is quieter and less comfortable: *Is that what energises me, or is that just what I'm good at?*

Elena tries to think of the last time she felt genuinely energised at work. Not satisfied. Not relieved. Not competent. But *energised*. The way the word implies something being added rather than depleted.

She thinks of Mrs. Andersson at the book club. The way her face had looked. She thinks of Jonas's A3 diagram, spread out on the table during his first week. The hand-drawn lines connecting people. She had felt something then. Not the satisfaction of a problem solved. Something more like… *possibility?*

Elena doesn't write anything else in the box.

After lunch, Karin introduces the second exercise. "Imagine your ideal work week," she says. "Not realistic. Not what your calendar looks like. But how you would design it if you could design it from scratch. What kinds of work, rhythms, conversations and spaces would there be?"

Elena starts writing. *Monday: team meeting and weekly planning. Tuesday-Thursday: problem-solving, stakeholder meetings, reviewing outputs, supporting the team with blockers. Friday: wrap-up, reporting, preparation for the following week.*

She reads it back.

It looks exactly like her current week.

After a pause, she adds: *More time for strategic thinking.*

Karin walks slowly around the room. She stops near Elena, glances at the paper without reading it, then asks the group a question. It's addressed to no one in particular, but that lands, somehow, specifically in Elena's thoughts:

"I'm curious–when you read what you've written, does it feel like something you're dreaming toward? Or something you're already living?"

A few people laugh. Elena laughs too.

On the train ride home, Elena looks out the window at the city moving past. The canal. The old hospital building that's been converted into flats. A group of teenagers on bikes.

She thinks about the compass sitting in her bag. The centre box, half-empty.

She thinks about something her mother used to say when Elena was a teenager and couldn't make a decision: "*What do you actually want, Elena? Not what makes sense. What do you want?*" Elena had always found the question slightly frustrating.

She pulls out the compass. Reads her list of Strengths. Reads her Values. Reads *Solving problems* in the centre box, alone.

She picks up her pen. Underneath, she writes one more line. Small, slightly hesitantly, as if reserving the option to deny that she wrote it:

To see people become more than they thought they could be.

She looks at it for a moment.

Then she puts the canvas away and opens her email inbox: she has 43 unread messages since this morning.

2.1 What is self-leadership and why it is important for leading together

Self-leadership is a concept built upon psychological theories that emerged in the mid-1980s. Originally, it focused on how individuals can improve their performance by influencing and managing themselves through self-direction and self-motivation. The idea was that individuals can improve their effectiveness by employing different strategies, like self-observation, building self-awareness, setting improvement goals and rewarding themselves once they achieve them. The main researchers who introduced the concept of self-leadership, and the way it is often understood in mainstream research, are Charles C. Manz, and Christopher P. Neck.*

In contrast to the original self-leadership research, which pinpoints productivity and effectiveness as the objectives of self-leadership, our understanding of self-leadership places more value on learning about oneself, self-acceptance and self-care, thereby better equipping individuals to support themselves in life and work, as well as to collaborate more effectively with others. When team members are aware of and regularly reflect on both how they are affected by others and how they, in turn, affect others, they can talk about it with their colleagues, and, in this way, learn from each other, develop together and support a culture of building trust, mutual learning, and care. These are all important preconditions for practising collective forms of leadership in teams and organisations.

On the other hand, self-leadership is an important enabler of the transition from traditional hierarchical organisational models to more participatory models because it can support individuals on their own transformation journeys. During the transformation process, both managers and employees need to rethink their own roles and develop new competencies – with employees taking more initiative, responsibility and stepping up in their leadership practice, and managers letting go of control and the traditional steering function, instead sharing leadership with others on the team and assuming a more facilitating and coaching role. Such changes should be accompanied by a self-development process that is part of practising self-leadership.

* *Self-Leadership: The Definitive Guide to Personal Excellence* by Christopher P. Neck, Jeffery D. Houghton and Charles C. Manz: edge.sagepub.com/neckslf3e

The need for self-leadership skills increased rapidly with the widespread introduction of remote work and distributed teams during the COVID-19 pandemic. As employees strengthened their autonomy, the need for more self-leadership and collective forms of leadership expanded. Managers could no longer maintain control over employees in the same way as before, when everyone sat at the office together. Consequently, employees had to take more individual responsibility for their ways of working. This included deciding where and when to work, what to prioritise in work, when to take breaks, and how to set healthy boundaries between work and private time, among other things.

Voices from the field

Nati Lombardo has spent years supporting other organisations as they transition towards self-management, but she is candid about the fact that the learning has run in both directions. When asked what lessons she has personally derived from the journey, the first thing she names is the sheer amount of inner work involved, something she had not anticipated at the start. "I didn't really consider that at the beginning. How much I would have to look at my own behaviours and patterns." The personal dimension of this kind of transformation – the need to examine your own habitual ways of operating and the assumptions you carry without knowing it – turns out to be as demanding as anything on the organisational side.

Defining self-leadership

In our research, we have focused on three core aspects that help us define self-leadership: *self-awareness*, *self-direction* and *self-regulation*. *Self-awareness* serves as the basis for self-leadership practice and involves fostering awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses, behavioural patterns and how those affect oneself and others in the work context – especially in challenging situations. This aspect is also connected to developing awareness of one's own personal values, needs and purpose. In the context of moving from hierarchies towards leading together, self-awareness helps individuals reflect on what roles they often assume in their team or how they currently contribute to existing team dynamics and patterns.

The three core aspects of self-leadership

The second element of self-leadership, *self-direction*, is connected to one's ability to connect personal values and purpose to team and organisational values and purpose. It's also about being able to define and prioritise work tasks in a way that supports the work's purpose, values, goals, and the individual's needs. In the context of moving from hierarchies towards leading together, self-direction also helps individuals set the desired direction in which they would like to develop as individuals. A development process that involves reshaping their role on the team in order to practise a more shared form of leadership. Reshaping one's role can, for example, look like developing new skills, such as facilitation, coaching, and feedback, or taking more

responsibility and being proactive in terms of actively participating in team processes – whether for example, co-facilitating team meetings, actively contributing to shared decision-making processes, or leading development initiatives, etc.

The third aspect of self-leadership, *self-regulation*, enables an individual to regulate their own behaviour towards desired goals by using external work environments, tools, processes and strategies to support oneself at work. Strategies can include, for example, effective time management, designing work routines for balance, and using workspaces in a way that supports different work tasks.

When striving to move from hierarchies to leading together, self-regulation also means that individuals intentionally reflect on how they are embodying desired behaviours and developing as individuals in order to actively contribute to shared leadership practices and goals they set for themselves in this area.

Voices from the field

Self-leadership is sometimes spoken about as though it were simply a matter of individual discipline. But the practitioners we spoke to view it as something fundamentally more relational: how we know ourselves shapes how we show up with others. That connection between the inner and the collective is where much of the real work of transformation happens.

Karin Tenelius points to something she has observed repeatedly in her work with self-organising teams: the process of working differently together does not just change how decisions get made. It changes people. “I think it’s an even stronger thing than awareness,” she says. “It’s self-insight. And it’s fascinating how much self-insight self-organising processes generate in people.” She recalls working with a call centre many years ago, with a team of down-to-earth, practical people who would not necessarily have described themselves as particularly reflective. Over the course of two, three or four years, something unexpected emerged: people made significant life decisions, pursued university degrees they had never previously considered, and stepped into professional roles that had seemed out of reach. One former employee went on to become a senior manager in a municipality, something that, as Karin puts it, “was not on the cards for her.” Self-insight, she argues, is the foundation from which self-regulation and self-leadership actually grow, and it is the self-organising process itself that tends to generate it. In our research processes, that self-insight sometimes resulted in participants realising they were not in the right workplace and changing jobs. In other cases, participants realised that, throughout their lives, they had abandoned doing things that were an important source of joy, and ended up returning to them over the course of the project.

Mette Aagaard recognises the same dynamic but approaches it from a slightly different angle. The transformation she describes requires awareness at a very practical level: becoming conscious of the habitual patterns we have built up over years of

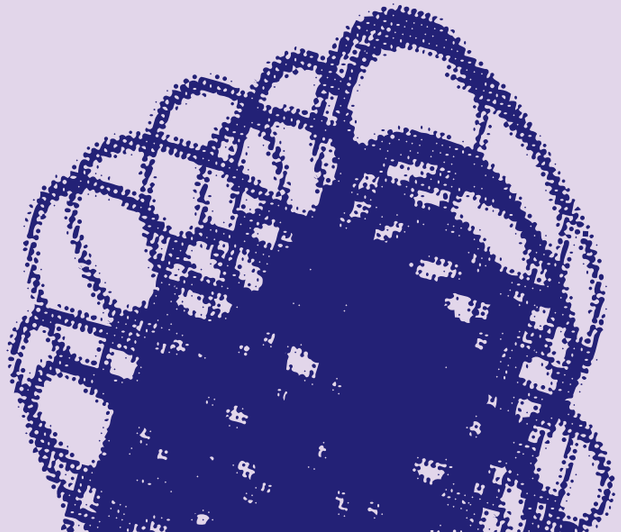
working within hierarchical structures. An employee who has always delegated upward, always expected the manager to take responsibility, and has found it quite comfortable to complain when problems are not solved from above, needs to become aware of that pattern before anything can shift. “It demands more from both managers and employees to be aware of their natural patterns, and then to proactively direct themselves to change that pattern. And then to self-regulate when they notice they’ve slipped back into the old ways.”

That said, Mette is candid about her own ambivalence when it comes to the question of where to start. Her primary focus is on getting teams to work, and for her, the relationship between individual self-leadership and team dynamics is more like a chicken and egg than a clear sequence. Rather than beginning with the individual and telling them they need to manage themselves better, she prefers to change the team dynamic first and trust that self-insight will follow. “I would support people’s self-insight through deploying a different dynamic in the team, rather than starting with the individual.” What she has seen get in the way most often is not a lack of willingness but a lack of awareness: individuals who push their preferences too hard without noticing the effect on others, who are too confident that their way is simply the right way, and who interpret difference as a failure of intelligence rather than a different perspective. “I completely agree that self-leadership is important. It’s just that I prefer to support individuals’ ability to interact with others while working with that in a team setting. My focus is not so much on self-management of the individual in isolation.”

This is something we have also learned in our own research. Many organisations in Sweden approached us after the COVID-19 pandemic, asking us to support their efforts to strengthen self-leadership among their employees. However, focusing too much, or solely, on strengthening individuals’ ability to manage themselves often increases pressure and expectations around individual performance. This, in turn, increases stress levels and the risk of burnout. Most importantly, it weakens the collective focus on shared purpose, mutual care, support and collective learning, which is the cornerstone of building sustainable, meaningful, effective and innovative organisations.

2.2 In what ways can self-leadership stand in the way of leading together?

In our research, we have seen that increased hybrid and remote forms of work – which allow more work flexibility and give individuals the autonomy to decide where and when they work – sometimes generate negative effects for teams and collective forms of leadership, even though they strengthen individuals in their self-leadership. While increased autonomy often empowers workers to feel more influential and have a greater sense of ownership in their work, or to proactively initiate activities in the workplace, it sometimes runs the risk of people closing themselves off in their own bubbles at home, focusing predominantly on their work tasks while losing a sense of the bigger picture, shared purpose and belonging. In this process, possibilities for collective learning and support between colleagues who are not the closest collaborators in daily work tasks are lost. Especially when there is a strong performance-driven culture that places a lot of pressure on individual performance, increased self-leadership might get in the way of collective learning, support and shared forms of leadership. Experienced and highly self-reliant workers, in particular, can end up in situations where they don't prioritise meeting colleagues if it doesn't fit their own priorities. They will, therefore, miss opportunities for deepening colleague relationships, collective learning and being there to support their colleagues when they need them.



Self-leadership and leading together in balance.

Designing and holding rituals that create time and space for deepening connection, trust and relationships between colleagues – as well as for collective learning, feedback, and mutual support – needs to be combined with high levels of autonomy and self-leadership in order to support shared leadership. These rituals can take place online, but from our research, it is clear that the teams that balance flexible work and collaborating online with physical meetings and collective rituals are most effective and better at sharing leadership. This doesn't happen automatically in a culture dominated by a performance-driven mentality that often prioritises short-term delivery goals over the long-term investment that is required to develop a strong culture of collaboration and shared leadership. Extra care is therefore needed to encourage autonomy, self-leadership and flexible work conditions while, at the same time, ensuring there is enough space for collective rituals that strengthen a culture of trust and collaboration – a culture where leading oneself and leading together can mutually reinforce each other.

Voices from the field

Moving towards self-organising ways of working places a real and sometimes underestimated demand on people, particularly those who are at an earlier stage of their careers or who have never worked in environments where taking initiative was genuinely encouraged or safe. Nati Lombardo has observed this tension closely in her work with NGOs and cooperative organisations.

"People who might be quite young when they enter the workforce don't yet have that built in," she says. "It takes time and a certain maturity to develop self-leadership." The problem is often compounded by the managers around them, who are more accustomed to delegating tasks and directing people than to supporting them in growing into their own leadership space. The result can be a kind of paradox: organisations that open up space for self-leadership without building the conditions for people to actually grow into it. "We are expecting people to be able to do it, but if they can't, we don't know how to help them get there."

Her answer highlights a shift in how managers understand their role. Rather than focusing on task delegation, coaching is the more useful orientation, where the manager understands what a particular person needs in order to step into their own leadership and creates the conditions for that to happen. But crucially, she argues, that responsibility should not solely rest with the manager. Distributing the role of supporting others across the whole team is itself a form of empowerment. "It's like distributed empowerment," she says. "I think that's quite important."

She also pushes back on an assumption she often hears from managers: that people simply prefer to be told what to do. In her experience, that preference is rarely as fixed as it appears. "Is it that they don't want it, or is it that they never had the experience or a context where they could do that, and therefore they don't know how?" The distinction matters enormously – one calls for acceptance and the other calls for intentional design. And the way forward, she suggests, is less about individual coaching in isolation and more about creating spaces where teams can openly and explicitly talk about what they are trying to build together, what support is needed, where they still fall short, and what skills they need to develop collectively. "It takes time," she says. "Not just the manager with new people, but for everyone."

Voice from the artistic field

When an organisation decides to initiate a process of transformation using artistic methods, something begins to unfold that is difficult to understand from the outside. Dejan Srhoj describes it as a space of research: one that requires a certain courage from leadership to enter, because the outcomes cannot be predetermined. As the creative process of transformation develops, he says, you encounter challenges and problems, but also joys and desires. What he and his colleagues do as facilitators, within that space, is invite people to question their own role, not only within the organisation, but as individuals in relation to others.

The vehicle for such questioning is often movement. Through dance and physical exercises, he invites people to try things they would not normally do: to lead when they are habitual followers, to follow when they are usually leaders. The experience opens up questions: Do I feel that everything will collapse if I do not lead? If I take action, will I destroy what is already happening, as if there were a plan my initiative might ruin? These are psychological questions that the exercises make visible, giving people a direct physical experience with their own patterns in a context where there is no right way to be. "If our task is to research, if our task is experimentation, if our task is innovation, then through those workshops we invite people to take action, to take responsibility for their own proposals, in a context that does not judge what they have proposed, which allows for unexpected outputs and which allows for failure as well." For Dejan, this is what self-leadership looks like from the inside: not a set of skills to be acquired, but an awareness and a self-emancipation within the body, within oneself, and then in relation to the group and the organisation.

What makes the body and movement essential to this process, rather than simply one method among many, is a question Dejan has thought about. The answer begins with time.

Through physical exercise, the experience of leading or following, of feeling safe or not safe, of knowing or not knowing, is immediate. There is no discussion about it first. The experience itself gives you the information directly, and reflection arrives afterward to place it in the context. “I believe that movement and dance have their own logic, their own language, their own ways of understanding, which are many times faster than through language and thinking with our brain. It’s as if we unlock something.”

That unlocking, he argues, is not metaphorical. As human beings, we have understood ourselves and related to each other through doing, playing, working and moving together for millions of years. The capacity to navigate a room full of other people, to sense who is leading, who is following, who has a particular energy that makes you want to move with them, has been practised across our history as humans. Sitting in meetings, using computers, resolving issues through language alone: that is very recent. “Maybe evolution will get us there, maybe in 50,000 years we will be able to resolve things only by sitting, but right now we are not there at all.” What embodied practice does is it gives us access to a deeper layer of knowing. A knowing we have built across generations and can no longer consciously remember, but that our bodies still hold.

He offers a simple example that illustrates this. An exercise he often returns to is one where a group simply walks together. When one person stops, everyone stops. When one person starts to walk, everyone starts to walk. Nothing more than that. And yet, within half an hour, that exercise yields knowledge that would be extremely difficult and time-consuming to arrive at through conversation alone: who the people in the room are, how they behave, who creates a genuine bodily pull to follow certain people and who follows only because the exercise requires it, who leads because they carry a particular energy and who leads because they have decided they should. That speed – and that directness of access – is what embodied practices bring to the work of leading together.

2.3 Practices for self-leadership

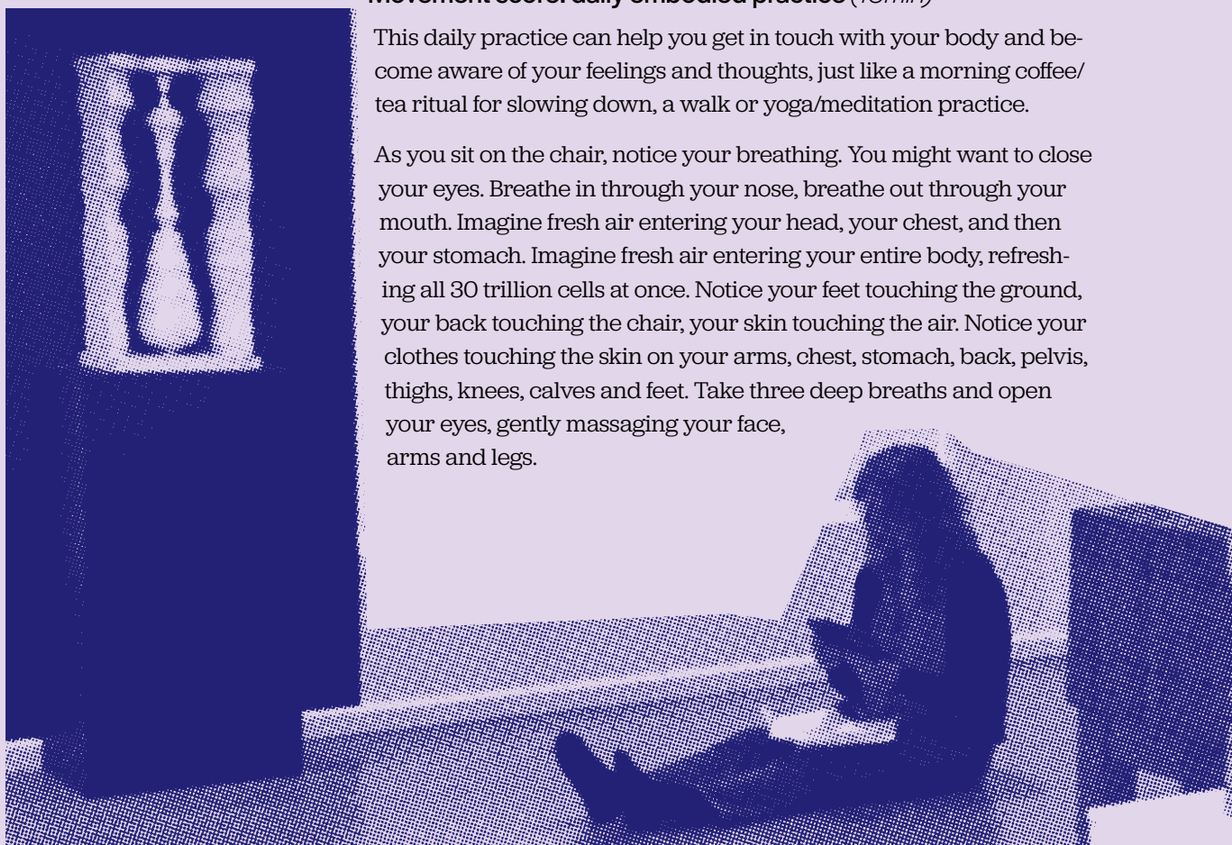
Nurturing self-awareness and connection with oneself

We live in a fast-paced and highly digitalised society with a constant overload of incoming information and blurred boundaries between the private sphere and work. Work is constantly within hand’s reach through mobile phones and portable computers that we carry with us. When a significant proportion of people’s time is spent in front of screens, they start risking losing connection with their bodies, needs, and struggle to set healthy boundaries for sustainable work. This results in higher levels of stress and burnout at work. Developing daily practices to connect with oneself and one’s body, feelings and thoughts, is an important precondition for remaining calm, focused and present at work. Furthermore, such practices enable one to slow down and practise self-awareness.

Movement score: daily embodied practice *(10min)*

This daily practice can help you get in touch with your body and become aware of your feelings and thoughts, just like a morning coffee/tea ritual for slowing down, a walk or yoga/meditation practice.

As you sit on the chair, notice your breathing. You might want to close your eyes. Breathe in through your nose, breathe out through your mouth. Imagine fresh air entering your head, your chest, and then your stomach. Imagine fresh air entering your entire body, refreshing all 30 trillion cells at once. Notice your feet touching the ground, your back touching the chair, your skin touching the air. Notice your clothes touching the skin on your arms, chest, stomach, back, pelvis, thighs, knees, calves and feet. Take three deep breaths and open your eyes, gently massaging your face, arms and legs.



Cultivating self-awareness not only helps ensure a basic level of self-care, but it is also vital for self-leadership, as it enables individuals to better navigate conflict and challenging situations where tensions with colleagues might arise. Instead of responding defensively in conflict situations, self-awareness enables individuals to become aware of different parts of themselves that might be triggered in challenging situations, and learn how to meet those parts with acknowledgment, understanding and care. Through this practice, protective and hurt parts within oneself can slowly melt away or unfold. One can learn more about this practice from the internal family systems model developed by Richard Schwartz.*

One particular method that can help us become more aware of our internal dynamics and the behaviours of others that might trigger us, as well as how our own behaviour might be challenging for others, is derived fromThe Core Quadrant, a model developed by Daniel Ofman. This method can help us reflect upon what aspects of ourselves we would like to strengthen or develop in order to better support our team in practising shared leadership.

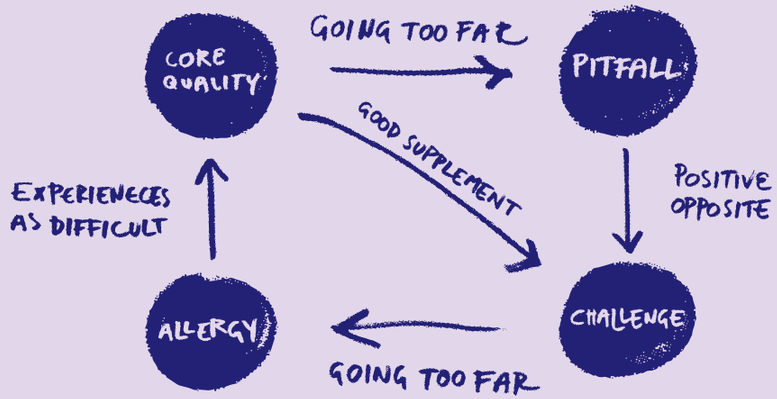
Core quadrant

The Core Quadrant helps us explore our *core qualities* or personality strengths and their dynamic relationship with our challenges, pitfalls and allergies. This method helps us increase our self-awareness, an important aspect of self-leadership. Mapping out our natural positive qualities, like being punctual and tidy, and understanding how they can become *pitfalls* if we go too far with them or how they are connected to things we might be allergic to in others who are different from us (for example, someone who tends to be late or untidy), increases our own self-knowledge and helps us better function in teams. Every quality, when its limit is exceeded, can become a pitfall with a negative effect on the environment and an inner obstacle for the person possessing it. For example, too much flexibility can turn into fickleness or being too decisive can be seen as pushy. On the other hand, every excessive quality or pitfall has a positive opposite, which is a *challenge* and a good supplement to the core quality. The challenge provides us with opportunities to grow and act in a more balanced way. For example, the positive opposite of being pushy is being patient or reserved. Someone who is naturally very driven can sometimes be perceived as too pushy and might struggle with being

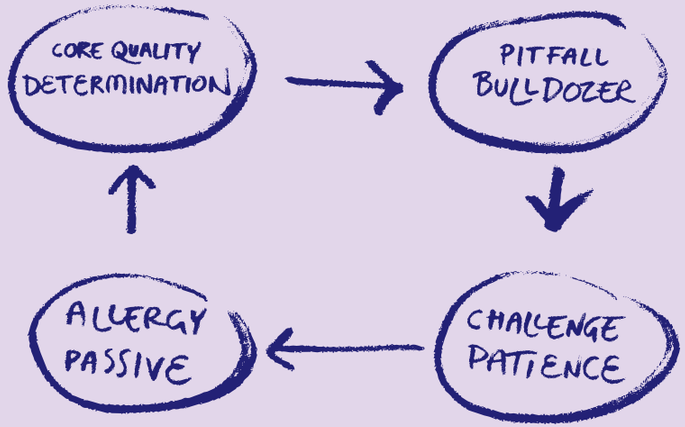
**Internal Family Systems theory* by Richard Schwartz: ifs-institute.com/about-us/richard-c-schwartz-phd

patient. Learning how to be more patient is therefore their challenge and, at the same time, a learning opportunity. Part of developing one's self-leadership is, therefore, understanding how to balance a quality like drive with patience when collaborating with others.

Core quadrant by Daniel Ofman



The last and fourth element of the Core Quadrant connected to each of our core qualities is the *allergy*, which is the direct opposite of a core quality. For example, if one's quality is a strong drive and their challenge is being patient, one may have an allergy to people who are passive. Similarly, a person whose core quality is being tidy might feel allergic to people who are very untidy and disorganised. Allergies can be a source of irritation and conflict. Mapping out our core qualities, and related pitfalls, challenges and allergies can help us better understand ourselves in dynamics with others. Working with the Core Quadrant is therefore recommended for both strengthening individuals' self-leadership and improving team dynamics, as well as for supporting shared leadership in teams. When teams can openly discuss their dynamics and how their members' core qualities may be a source of conflict, they can better navigate challenges together. If a team realises that a certain quality is dominant among most team members – for example, being performance-driven and short-term oriented – the team might decide to recruit more members who may be more prone to slowing down, taking time to reflect and question how things are done in the future. This can help the team better balance their focus on short-term deliveries and finding quick solutions to problems with more time for reflection, challenging the status quo and exploring long-term strategic goals.



Example of a Core Quadrant analysis on an individual level.

Movement score: a Core Quadrant exercise *(120 min)*

a. In the centre of the room, apply two pieces of adhesive tape on the floor in the shape of a cross so that you end up with four squares. In each of the squares, place a piece of paper that you have respectively labeled Core qualities, Pitfalls, Challenges, and Allergies. Invite participants to spend 10-15 minutes writing their Core Quadrant qualities on sticky notes and placing them in the corresponding quadrants. Once that is done, ask the group to review the collective sticky notes in each quadrant together and discuss what their Qualities, Pitfalls, Challenges and Allergies would be as a team.

b. Invite everyone to embody these qualities through any kind of movement or gesture, but no talking. Have participants move from one square to another in their own timing, asking them to observe how it makes them feel and how they move in each of the quadrants. Do this for around 10 minutes.

c. Now, invite participants to explore different qualities by only moving from one chosen part of their body. Ask them to observe what changes when they move like that. Participants can remain in each quadrant as long as they wish or need to. There is no choreography that needs to appear. Do this for around 10 minutes.

d. Divide participants into groups of three and ask them to discuss how the exercise felt, reflecting upon what they observed, what they enjoyed, or what annoyed them. All reflections are welcome.

e. Now gathering all participants together in a circle, ask them to share their reflections. After that, find a way to incorporate movement experience and reflection in further discussions about the group's quadrants.

Example of Core quadrant analysis on a team level

To find out more, visit: corequality.nl

VIVUS VADA
EGNA PRICE.

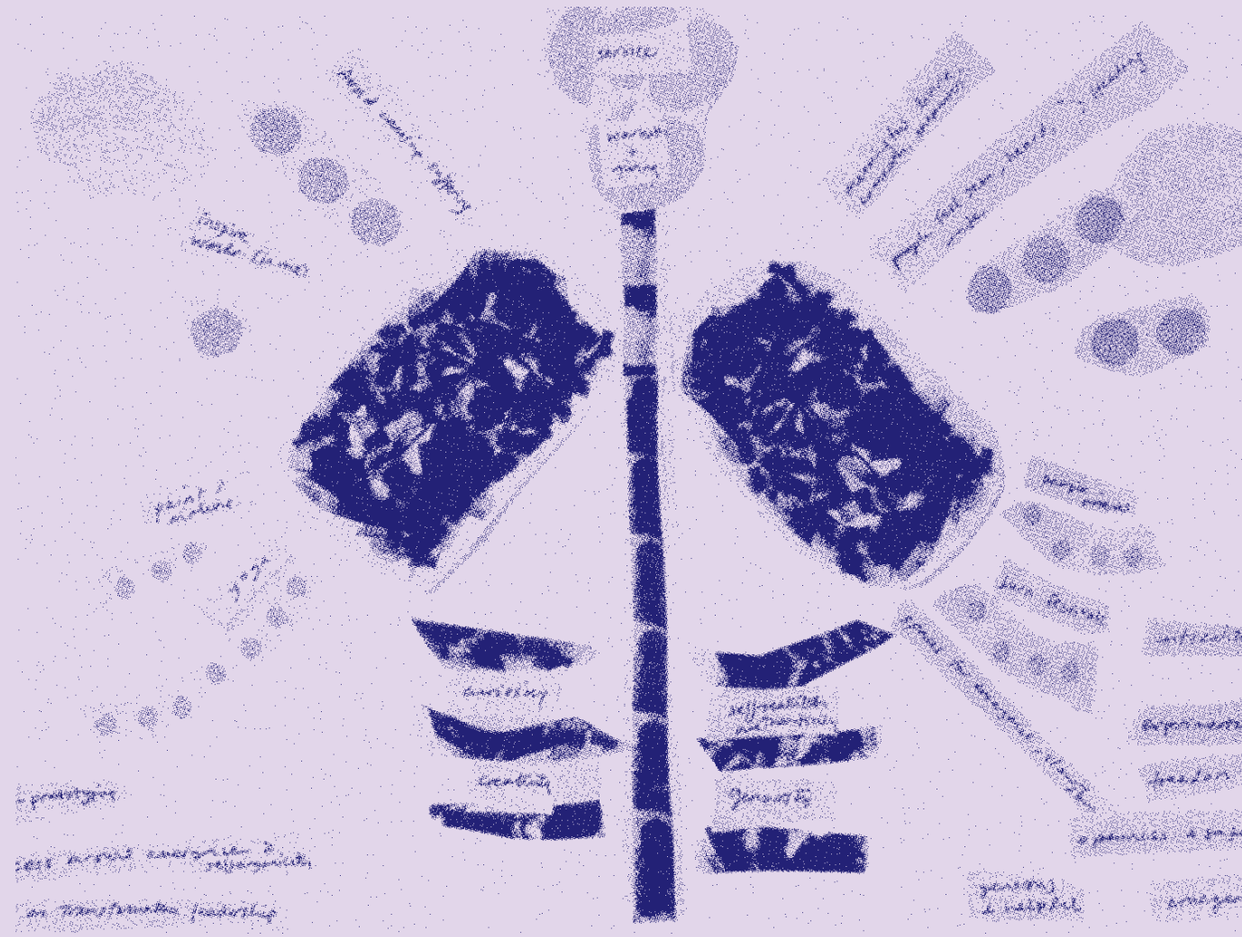
Strengthening self-direction

Apart from knowing oneself and being self-aware, *self-direction* is another important aspect when practising self-leadership. Self-direction is connected to the ability to guide oneself in a desirable direction that supports one's purpose and values in life. It therefore contributes to experiencing more meaning and engagement at work which, in turn, can contribute to a positive team climate and support the team in orienting itself towards more purpose-driven work. One practice that can support us in practising self-direction is called *Personal Canvas*.

Personal Canvas

The Personal Canvas is a practice that invites you to reflect upon and visualise your core values and passions. It encourages you to formulate the purpose of your work and the impact you would like your work to have on others and the world around you. It also asks you to consider which ways of working in your team and with other colleagues would support you – enabling you to work according to your values and purpose, use your passions in work, and achieve your desired impact. The first step helps increase your self-awareness around your own drives and motivations at work, which can support

you in your self-leadership, helping you orient your work towards what feels most meaningful. If you would like to deepen your reflection, you may employ more creative methods that support you in the process. For example, you can make a collage to visualise your values, passions, purpose and desired impact, or even write a poem about it.



Examples of visualizing Personal Canvas through a collage

Since defining your purpose may be a challenging process, you can gather some inspiration from others who have developed specific processes and tools around this work–for example, those created by Simon Sinek or Fred Kofman, or the Japanese way of finding your way to a joyful life through Ikigai, can all be interesting sources of inspiration.

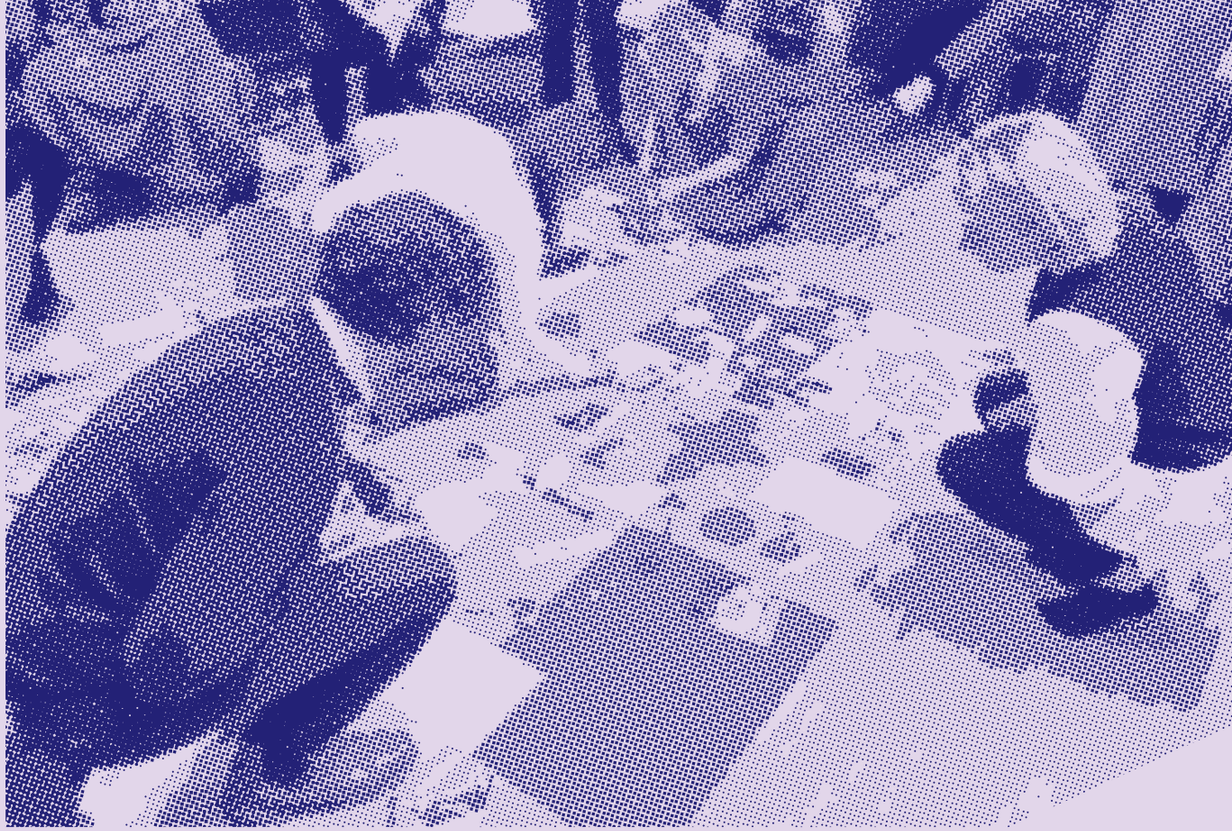
A visualisation of Ikigai, the Japanese way of finding your way to a joyful life.

To find out more, visit:
Simon Sinek's work on finding your WHY: simonsinek.com/

Japanese way of defining your purpose or Ikigai: japan.go.jp/kizuna/2022/03/ikigai_japanese_secret_to_a_joyful_life.html

Fred Kofman: defining the purpose of your job or "Your job is not your job": youtube.com/watch?v=6Ol7REyatq4

Since this book focuses on strengthening the way we lead together, we encourage you to also use the personal canvas to support your team. When team members share their personal values, passions, purpose and desired impact, a powerful process of understanding each other on a deeper level takes place. If the team can then develop shared values, purpose and desired impact – creating a bridge between personal values and purposes and the broader vision, purpose and values of the entire organisation – this practice becomes even more powerful. This way of working supports organisations in their movement towards becoming a more purpose-driven organisation. One that often increases motivation, engagement and a sense of meaning at work. And last but not least, what is crucial for each team is to develop ways of working that embody and integrate their shared values, purpose and desired impact in regular work routines. This, therefore, becomes not a one-time activity to be completed in a workshop, but a continuous practice in daily work.



Developing shared values, purpose and ways of working in the project team through collective collage

Working with self-regulation

A third element of self-leadership that complements and works hand in hand with self-awareness and self-direction is so-called self-regulation. Self-regulation is related to an individual's ability to regulate their behaviour in a way that supports their development and ways of working in a desired direction. Meaning that one notices when they work against their own values, goals and well-being, and have the capacity to repair their course of action. Self-leadership, therefore, means one is able to establish good work routines on an individual level, contributing to one's well-being at work – finding balance between delivering results and having time for learning, development and recovery. Since we are not isolated as individuals at work, it is important that team members don't focus solely on setting good work processes for themselves. They should also utilise their self-leadership skills to support one another in finding sustainable work routines and balance on the team level.

One practice that invites you to think proactively about how you want to use your time in the most meaningful ways when working, and establish more supportive work routines for yourself, is called *My Dream Work Week*.

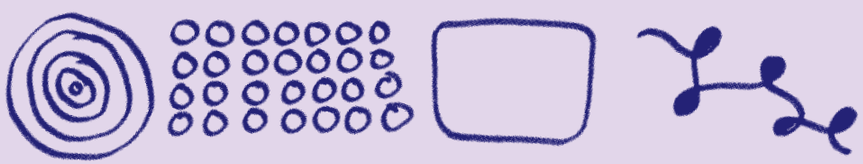
My dream work week

Support questions for thinking about your dream work week

While Personal Canvas is a tool that helps us raise self-awareness and direct ourselves towards value and purpose-driven work, My Dream Work Week is more of a practical tool. It not only helps us to plan and design our time and work processes in a way that prioritises work according to our values and purpose, but it also helps us find the right flow and balance in our work. Before designing your dream work week, we recommend you start by reflecting on how you currently spend your time during a typical work week: *How do current ways of working support you (or not) in achieving your purpose and desired impact? Do you work according to your values and apply your passions at work? Do you feel well and balanced at work today?* Do your current ways of working support you in learning new things and contributing to the larger organisational purpose in a meaningful way? In this reflection, it can be helpful to identify the challenges you experience while working in the way you work today. For example, perhaps you spend too much time in meetings that don't seem to create real value, immediately react to every email or message when it arrives, or feel stressed and don't take the time to pause, recover and reflect, etc.

Next, think about how you would visualise a week in terms of how you would like to relate to time if it weren't represented by a typical work planning calendar divided into days and hours. Maybe your week would look like a spiral, or circles of different sizes representing different chunks of time when you do different things?

Different ways of thinking about, experiencing and visualizing time during a work week.

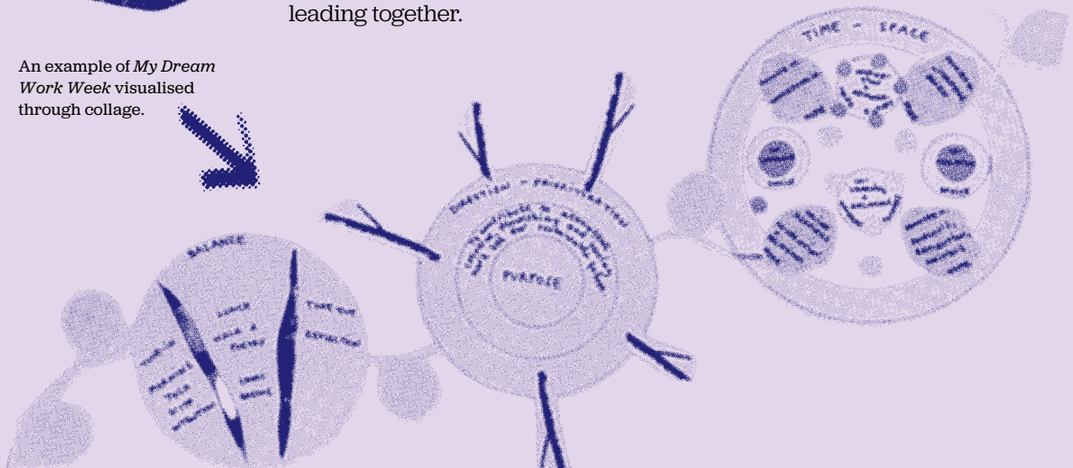


How would you divide your time in order to focus on what matters most in your work? Maybe you would like to reserve longer periods of time for focused work, a few days a week? Maybe working from home when you have more focused work to complete helps you to get more peace and quiet? Maybe you would like to spend certain days in person with colleagues to build relationships, strengthen collaboration, advance project deliveries, learn from others, and do more creative work? Maybe you would like to spend certain days in spaces that can bring new inspiration? Like a co-working space, library, art museum or your customer's office. Or maybe you miss having time for breaks, when you can take a walk, chat with colleagues, or do some stretching? Be creative in how you visualise your dream work week and use it as a visual reminder that you can revisit in the future, to see what you've managed to integrate into your work processes and where you still have opportunities to grow. Doing this exercise with your team can be very useful as it is more powerful when team members support each other in finding the right flow for working and leading together.

To find out more tips in how you can plan and organise your work, explore: Cal Newport's books: "Deep work", "Digital minimalism" and "Slow productivity": calnewport.com/writing/

Gisela Bäcklander's book on self-leadership: "Ostörd": giselabacklander.se/

An example of *My Dream Work Week* visualised through collage.



Participant in our process sharing a personal reflection through a photo.

Weekly reflection practice

One aspect of work that participants in our research projects often overlook is dedicated time for slowing down, just being, and opening up to reflection and new ideas. Reflection instigates self-regulation. If we don't stop and look at what's happening from a distance, we will be less likely to notice what we need to change and how we want to do that.

Therefore, we invite you to develop your own weekly reflection practice, setting aside some time to reflect on your work week. In our projects, we have been developing a practice called Body-photo-poetry voicing that you can try out to give yourself some time to connect with yourself and reflect on what's happening in your work, opening up space for new insights and ideas. You can do this at the end of each week or find your own timing for it.

Start the practice by sitting in a quiet space with your eyes closed. Just focus on your breathing, taking a few deeper breaths to relax any tensions in your body. You may continue with a brief body scan, slowly sensing all your body parts, gradually moving from sensing your feet touching the ground to the top of your head. Still keeping your eyes closed, think back in time and go through your work week,

observing what memories, feelings and images pop up for you. You can continue this practice by taking a slow walk outside (in nature if possible), continuing to reflect on your work week, but now focusing on identifying the most meaningful moments at work. When an idea comes to you, you can stop walking and pause, looking around and finding something in your environment that you associate with this meaningful moment. For example, you might associate a deep conversation with a colleague with two flowers leaning onto each other in the grass in front of you. Take a picture of what you notice. Then, continue your walk. On your way, stop a few times more, whenever reflections on meaningful experiences at work pop up, and take a photo of something you associate with each memory. After the walk, look at the photos you took and write down a reflection about your experiences and thoughts from the walk. Or choose one photo from the walk and capture the experience of that specific meaningful work moment it represents in a short poem. Reflection walks can also be focused on other things, such as the most challenging moment at work you've experienced lately, or a moment when you really felt your work made an impact. We encourage you to practise reflection together with your team. When you share personal thoughts, feelings and stories, sharing photos and poems with your colleagues, you will deepen trust and connection within your team and, through shared reflection, open up new possibilities for learning and development.

Participants in our process sharing personal reflections through photos.

For more inspiration:
If you would like to give yourself more creative prompts and practise the art of noticing in your walks, you can read the book *The Art of Noticing* by Rob Walker: robwalker.substack.com/

If you would like to spend your reflective time unlocking your own creativity, you can read the book *The Artist's Way*, by Julia Cameron, and simply start each day with her "Morning pages" exercise, emptying your thoughts onto a piece of paper: juliacameronlive.com

2.4 Questions for reflection

1. What are your core values and purpose at work?
2. What kind of impact would you like to achieve through your work?
3. What do you feel are your core qualities and challenges at work?
4. How do your own behaviour patterns affect the dynamic of your team?
5. In what ways do you feel your personal core qualities and challenges contribute or hinder you from practising shared leadership in your team?
6. What aspects of yourself would you like to develop in your work?
7. To what extent do you feel your work today supports your values, purpose and desired impact?
8. What can you change in your work to make it align more closely with your values, purpose and desired impact?
9. What can you change in your ways of working to experience desired balance and well-being at work?
10. How can you contribute to shared rituals for balance and well-being in your team?
11. What practices do you have or would like to develop to support yourself in practising reflection and learning at work?
12. How can you contribute to shared learning and development in your team?
13. What can you change in your ways of working to better support your colleagues when they need help?
14. How can you explore using different spaces at work to best support the different types of work tasks you do?
15. How can you plan your time differently to prioritise what matters most in your work?

2.5 Conclusions

In this chapter, we have explored different aspects of self-leadership, from self-awareness to self-direction and self-regulation. When it comes to supporting oneself at work, we have argued that self-leadership skills are very helpful – especially in a fast-paced, digitalised society where remote working is increasingly common. However, self-leadership is also a key enabler in helping us nurture the relational values of mutual trust, learning, care and collaboration. Such values are important for teams and organisations that want to strengthen collective forms of leadership. It can contribute to psychological safety in a team, which you can learn more about in the next chapter.

Furthermore, the practice of self-leadership can strengthen the ability of individuals and teams to navigate increased complexity and uncertainty. By cultivating greater awareness of who they are and what is important to them, team members can better orient themselves in complex situations where they need to continuously prioritise between many possibilities. The ability to set healthy boundaries and prioritise what is important is crucial for avoiding high levels of stress and burnout – especially in a society dominated by information overload and increasingly blurred boundaries between one's work and private life. Maintaining a healthy sense of self-awareness and direction while, at the same time, staying open to different perspectives and holding several views simultaneously, is an essential ability for navigating a complex world in which we are often faced with tackling complex challenges and collaborating with people who have diverse backgrounds and world views.

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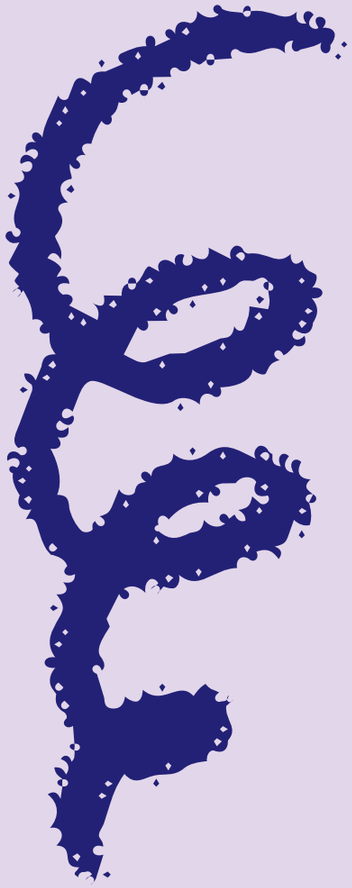

8

Transforming culture and the way we relate to each other

{ELENA'S STORY}

ELENA IS ATTENDING A NEW WORKSHOP RUN BY KARIN about culture and relationships. They have been doing some movement exercises that feel nice. Now, Karin invites participants to sit in a circle and asks Elena to describe her team.

Elena describes Sara's precision, Jamal's instinct for relationships, and Per's reluctance that sometimes conceals his best thinking. Then she mentions Jonas.

She describes him the way she always does: "talented, full of ideas, still finding his feet." She mentions the coffee morning proposal, the A3 diagram, and the book club. She can hear herself use the phrase, "I've been trying to protect him a little from how slow the system moves."

Karin doesn't say anything immediately. This is, Elena has noticed, a habit of Karin's. The pauses are not empty: they have a texture, weight.

"Protect him from what, exactly?" Karin says.

"From…discouragement, I suppose. From hitting bureaucratic walls and losing motivation."

"Has it worked?"

Elena opens her mouth. Closes it.

She thinks about Jonas at the coffee machine. The polite smile. The notebook he barely writes in anymore. The way he used to stay late, but now leaves at exactly five o'clock.

"No," she replies. "Not really."

Karin nods slowly. "What do you think he needed instead of protection?"

Elena looks out the window. It's a grey Tuesday in November. A tram goes past.

What did he need? He needed the system to be less rigid. He needed Elena's director to create space for new initiatives. He needed the budget cycle to work differently, the restructuring not to happen, the submission guidelines not to require a specific Microsoft Teams folder. He needed things that were not in Elena's power to give.

But then she hears herself, and the excuse in it.

She thinks about what she actually said to Jonas. "Great idea. These things take time. Keep the ideas coming." She had never once sat down with him and said: "Here is how this organisation actually works. Here is what makes a proposal land. Here is what I would do differently if I were you." She had never offered her real knowledge.

"I think he needed me to actually tell him the truth," she says to Karin. "About what I see in him. And about what I think he's missing."

"What do you see in him?"

"Someone with genuinely good instincts who doesn't yet know how to make them land. Who's proposing the right things in the wrong register. Who's waiting for the system to recognise him instead of learning how to move inside it."

After the workshop, Elena schedules a conversation with Jonas for the following Thursday. She thinks about it more than she expects to.

She is not worried about Jonas's reaction. She is worried about something harder to name: that the conversation will require her to admit, implicitly, that she has not been fully present as his manager. That the kindness she's been performing has been partly for her-

self (a way of being the good one, the supportive one, the one who didn't add to his frustration) while quietly avoiding the discomfort of the real conversation. She has been managing her own feelings. And calling it mentorship.

One week later, Jonas and Elena sit in a small meeting room on the second floor.

"I want to be honest with you about something," she says. "I think I've been letting you down."

Jonas looks up. Carefully.

"Your ideas are genuinely good. The A3 diagram, the coffee mornings. They're not just nice ideas, Jonas, they're right. They're the kind of thinking this department actually needs." She pauses. "But I've never told you what I actually observe. How you're presenting them. What I think you're missing. I've just absorbed your frustration on your behalf and told you to keep going. That wasn't fair to you."

The room is quiet.

"What do you think I'm missing?" Jonas says. His voice is careful.

She tells him. Not everything at once. But the true things: that he's proposing before he's built any allies, that his emails read as solutions when they should read as questions. She tells him what she would have done differently. She tells him what she sees that he doesn't see about himself yet.

It's awkward in the way that honest things are awkward. There are moments of silence that require sitting with. But Jonas doesn't deflect. He writes things down. At one point, he says, "I thought you just didn't think my ideas were viable."

"I should have said this months ago," Elena says.

"I'm glad you're saying it now," Jonas says.

Elena nods. Then, after a moment:

"There's something else I want to tell you. Not just about the feedback."

She had not planned this part. But the conversation has created a kind of honesty that feels worth staying inside.

"I've been thinking a lot lately about how we work as a team. About the fact that your ideas keep hitting walls not only because of how they're framed, but because there's no real structure here for them to land in. No regular space where we actually think together about what we're trying to do and how. Where someone like you can bring an idea and have it genuinely explored instead of forwarded upward and buried."

Jonas is listening more openly.

"I'm working on changing that. Not dramatically. I don't control the budget cycle or the restructuring. But the things I do control: how we run our meetings, whether we have real conversations about what's working and what isn't, whether there's a ritual in this team for actually hearing each other." She pauses.

Jonas looks at her for a moment. Something in his face is doing the same thing it did in that first week, when he spread the A3 diagram across the table. Not quite hope, but the precondition of it.

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3.1 Why culture shapes how we lead

Moving towards more collective forms of leadership requires more than a structural reorganisation. It demands a fundamental transformation of the organisational culture. While frameworks and processes provide the structure for sharing leadership, it is the cultural foundation that determines whether such models thrive and exist in practice. Culture, in this context, encompasses the often-invisible patterns of interaction, the unspoken norms about how people relate to one another, and the collective practices that either enable or constrain genuine collaboration.

Hierarchical leadership structures have long relied on formal authority, clear reporting lines, and the assumption that decision-making flows from the top down. More collective forms of leadership, by contrast, require a foundation built on relationships where authority emerges from expertise, adapts and changes to the situation at hand, and is based on a shared understanding rather than hierarchy alone. This transformation cannot succeed through structural changes alone; it requires cultivating new ways of being together.

The relationship between culture and collaborative leadership works both ways. Collaborative practices can help reshape culture, but without intentional cultural work, hierarchical patterns resurface even within supposedly equal structures. Organisations may implement shared decision-making processes only to find that the same voices dominate, conflicts remain unaddressed, and power dynamics continue unchanged. Culture provides the ground upon which new leadership practices either succeed or fail. Building a culture for leading together requires sustained effort over a longer period of time, as changing culture demands changing people's norms, hidden assumptions, behaviours and daily rituals of being together. It takes time.

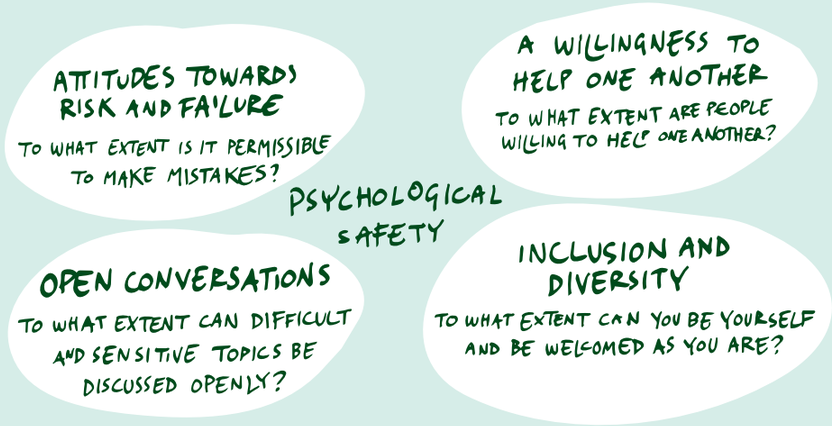
If you want your team to lead more collaboratively, focus on strengthening the cultural areas described in the following section. For each topic, you'll find exercises and readings to guide your practice.

Identifying areas for development to strengthen a culture of shared leadership.

3.2 Creating psychological safety: The foundation for leading together

At the heart of any collective form of leadership culture lies psychological safety – the shared belief that the team is safe taking risks with each other. Amy Edmondson's research demonstrates that psychological safety is not about being nice or comfortable, but about creating conditions where people can speak up, challenge ideas, admit mistakes, and bring more of themselves to collective work. For example, by being able to work with questions and areas they want to develop. Edmondson's research emphasises the role of the leader in psychological safety to reinforce important dimensions and behaviours. In collective forms of leadership, this leadership role may be shared among multiple people.

Core elements of psychological safety.



Psychological safety rests upon several connected elements. Trust forms the foundation – not blind trust, but earned trust built through consistent behaviour and reliability. When team members trust one another, they can engage authentically rather than pretending or being strategic. Inclusion ensures that diverse perspectives are not merely tolerated but actively sought and valued, recognising that collective forms of leadership require drawing on collective intelligence. Supporting each other through challenges and setbacks creates resilience, allowing teams to navigate unavoidable difficulties without falling apart. Finally, a willingness to take risks – to propose unconventional ideas, experiment, fail and learn – enables innovation and adaptation in collective forms of leadership.

Critically, psychological safety also requires having the courage to engage in open conversations to address conflicts and challenges directly rather than avoiding them. In hierarchical cultures, disagreements often get suppressed or redirected upward to authority figures for resolution. In collaborative leadership cultures, the ability to engage productively with conflict becomes essential. This means developing the collective capacity to name tensions, explore differing viewpoints, and work through disagreements without damaging relationships. The alternative – conflict avoidance – leads to surface-level agreement while real issues remain hidden underneath, ultimately undermining both relationships and results.

Voice from the artistic field

In our research projects, we employed artistic practices to help build psychological safety among participants. Choreographer Dejan Srhoj reflects on how a choreographic practice that emphasises investing time to tune in before people start working together – by slowing down and bringing awareness to space, time, relationships, and feelings – strengthens different aspects of psychological safety, including trust, taking risks, inclusion and open conversations:

"Before work happens in a room, something else has to happen first. Where am I physically? What is this space? What is its temperature?How large is it? Do I feel safe here? Do I feel welcome? Who are the people around me, and how do I relate to them? Where did I come from before this meeting, and where am I going afterward? These are not trivial questions to be ignored to start the 'real' work. They are the real work, or at least the necessary ground for it. And they take time."

In dance and choreography, Dejan says this tuning is so fundamental that practitioners do it without thinking. It is the default, the starting point of every rehearsal, something nobody questions. In his work with organisations, however, he discovered that this is far from the default elsewhere. "People simply sit and start talking, as if you can jump over all of this just because you told yourself,: let's just start working. But it doesn't work like that." The body is still in transit, still arriving, still negotiating the room and the people in it, while the meeting has already begun.

What choreography brings, then, is an understanding of dramaturgy: the thinking about how an event is structured in time and space. When do people move, when do they reflect, and when do they rest? How is the space organised? How

much time is devoted to each phase, and in what sequence? "Everything is important: when you have the break, what kind of break it is, when you reflect, how you reflect, when you move and for how long." This is nothing to be stressed about, but rather, something to be attentive to. And the answers might differ from time to time, from place to place. Recognising how people inhabit a shared space and time shapes everything that becomes possible within it.

The effect of understanding and attending to this, Dejan says, is trust. Not trust as an abstract value to be stated or agreed upon, but trust as in something that actually arises in a body, in a room, and between people. And from trust arises something else that organisations rarely make room for: playfulness. "We've established trust, so we can be playful. And within that playfulness, different qualities of people can emerge, some of them that we know and some of them that are not known." Playfulness allows for silliness, for not knowing, for failure. It also creates something that is still rare in organisational life: a more equal starting point. When nobody already knows how to do the task at hand, when everyone is practising something new together, the hierarchy slowly dissipates.

What this setup ultimately makes possible, and what Dejan holds as a deep intention in this work, is the possibility of a whole person being present. Not the rational or the professional role alone, but the whole individual, the body, the emotions, the difficulties and desires. All the parts of a person that workplaces usually ask to be left outside the door. The embodied experience is meant to be brought into dialogue with the cognitive: how does what has just emerged in me translate into my everyday work and life? That translation, Dejan acknowledges, is where the biggest challenge lies. Some of it happens consciously, through reflection. And some of it, perhaps the biggest part, happens through continuous practice and without quite knowing how.

A practice for psychological safety

Evaluate: Review the four dimensions of psychological safety described above – inclusion, supporting each other, taking risks, and open conversations. Together with colleagues, discuss each dimension: how developed is each one in your team?

One approach is to rate your group on each dimension, either as a whole or individually, using a traffic light system (green,yellow,red) to identify areas for development. Discuss why you've given each dimension this rating and what specific behaviours or patterns make it that colour.*

*Validated self-evaluation tools are also available in Edmondson's book The Fearless Organization (2019) that can be used to supplement this discussion.

To learn more, explore these additional resources:

Edmondson, A. C. (2019). *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth.* John Wiley & Sons.

Podcast episode with Amy Edmondson: leadermorphosis.co/episodes/45-amy-edmondson-on-psychological-safety-and-the-future-of-work/

Reflecting together on psychological safety within the team.

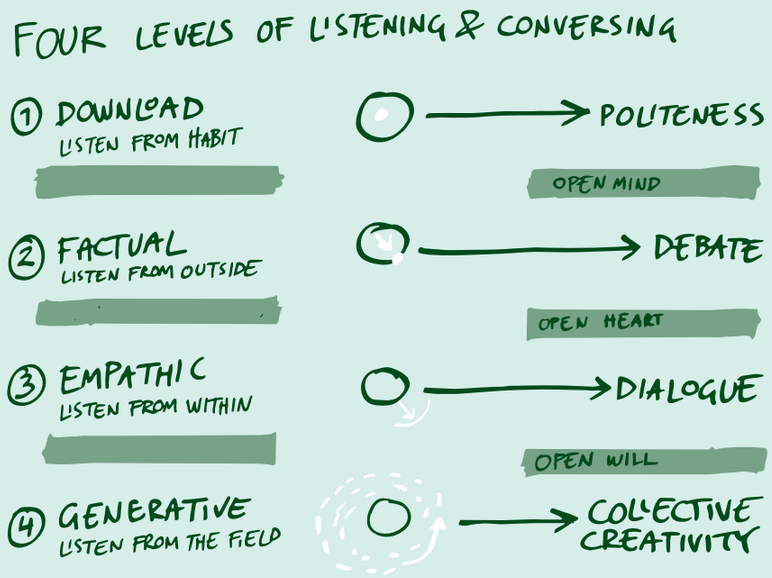
Evaluating psychological safety in a team or organisation.

Experiment: Once you've identified where the team currently is, ask yourselves, which one or two dimensions need the most attention? Discuss what small, concrete actions the team can take to strengthen this area. Who needs to be involved? How will you know you are making progress?

Follow up: This practice works best when repeated periodically to track cultural evolution and maintain focus on its development.

3.3 Listening and dialogue: communication that enables us to lead together

At its core, leading together depends on the quality of conversation and collective thinking that occurs among team members. This requires moving beyond conventional debate, where participants argue for pre-decided positions, towards genuine dialogue where understanding and collective insight can develop. This collective insight creates a richer, more complex understanding and can build shared ownership before decisions are made.



Different levels of listening by Otto Scharmer

Downloading – listening for what confirms what we already know – keeps us stuck in existing patterns. We appear to be listening to the other person while talking to them to seem polite while, in reality, we are more focused on our own agendas and getting our point across. *Factual listening* helps us open our mind and stay open to information that challenges our assumptions. We listen for information and facts in what the other person is saying, but also already look for cracks

in those facts that we can argue against when it is our time to speak. This way of listening, which often results in debate, is typical in an academic setting. *Empathic listening* allows us to see from another's perspective. When utilising this kind of listening, we step out of our own patterns of thinking to listen to the other person with an open heart, putting ourselves in their shoes and understanding their perspective. *Generative listening*, the deepest level, opens us to emerging possibilities that weren't present before the conversation began. We can follow the flow of conversation and sense what needs to be said, co-creating with others in a way that helps us expand our own ways of thinking in a generative way. Collaborative leadership requires building the ability for these deeper forms of listening to take place across the organisation.

Distinct from discussion or debate, dialogue creates space for collective thinking. Rather than individuals presenting finished thoughts for approval or rejection, dialogue allows individuals' ideas to be explored, built upon, and transformed through interaction. Key principles of dialogue include noticing and suspending judgment, making one's thinking and reasoning process transparent, and allowing enough silence and reflection for new insights to surface.

Dialogue practice

In dialogue practice, as described by David Bohm (1996), a group intentionally practises dialogue to learn this new way of being together. Continuous practice is essential – dialogue is a skill that develops over time through repeated experience. For instance, a group might set aside two hours weekly to practise dialogue.

Setting up a dialogue practice:

- Sit in a circle so that participants can see each other (groups of 4–20 people work well)
- Begin with a brief meditation or silence to help everyone settle into a listening space – ask participants to tune into their bodies, breath, and the space itself
- Start the dialogue. In the beginning, we recommend having a facilitator who can help the group slow down and notice the quality of conversation

Guiding principles:

Ideally, dialogue has no predefined question or agenda. This allows the conversation to follow what wants to be explored by the group in the moment – different topics can be shared. However, for a first dialogue session, it can be helpful to focus on the topic of dialogue itself: What is dialogue? How is it different from a discussion or debate?

To learn more, explore these additional resources:
Scharmer, C. O. (2018). *The Essentials of Theory U: Core Principles and Applications*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Bohm, D. (1996). *On Dialogue*. Routledge.

Blogpost from Tuff Leadership Training: tuffledarskapstraning.se/article/tanka-tillsammans

Meta-dialogue:

An important aspect of dialogue is *meta-dialogue*, *that is*, the group commenting on the conversation itself. Notice: How spacious does the conversation feel? If people are interrupting, waiting eagerly for their turn to speak, or raising hands, these can be indicators that participants are focused more on speaking than listening. When you notice these patterns, name them, slow down, and invite people to tune back into listening.

A recommended resource for deepening your understanding of this practice is Bohm's book *On Dialogue* (1996).

Movement score: group morning exercise on dialoguing *(30 min)*

a. As you walk through a space, notice the walls, objects, and other people. Notice your breathing and relax your shoulders and neck and jaw. Release your feet to the ground. Stretch your body parts as you walk. (5 min)

b. Find a partner. Your partner will move through the space and also up and down. Your task is to follow the height of your partner's pelvis with your own. That means that when your partner jumps, you jump, and when they move towards the ground, you follow. You might be close to each other or far away in space. The idea is that you become so connected in movement that an outsider would not be able to discern who is leading and who is following. (5 min)

c. Exchange roles and repeat the exercise. (5 min)

d. Now, both you and your partner are leaders and followers at the same time. So the leadership role will shift instantaneously. Do this for at least 10 minutes. You might want to put on some background music.

e. Give each other feedback on how it felt, what the challenges and joys of dancing together were.

3.4 Building a culture of feedback, coaching and conflict resolution

In traditional hierarchies, feedback and coaching typically flow downwards from managers to employees. Often, feedback and coaching are limited to yearly performance and development reviews, and, at best, such talks occur between managers and employees a few times a year. Collaborative leadership requires a fundamental shift – spreading out these practices so that feedback and coaching flow in all directions, becoming informal, continuous, and built into everyday work. This shift is essential because the responsibility for developing people and holding them accountable can no longer sit with just one manager – it must be shared across the team. As people navigate changing roles and participate in shared decision-making, they need ongoing feedback from their peers to understand how their actions affect others and to develop the group's collective competence and abilities to work together. This peer feedback also helps people navigate the subtle dynamics of power and participation – understanding when to step forward and when to step back, as well as when they're contributing productively and when they might be unintentionally dominating or holding back. Without such distributed feedback and coaching, collaborative approaches tend to break down, as people lack the information they need to adjust their behaviour and work better together.

A feedback culture normalises the giving and receiving of observations, reactions, and reflections as a natural part of collaboration. This requires developing specific skills: knowing how to offer feedback that is direct and clear, timely, and comes from a place of wanting to support the person's growth rather than criticise or blame them. Equally important are skills in receiving feedback – listening to feedback with curiosity rather than defensiveness, and understanding the difference between evaluation and development.

Likewise, addressing conflict directly is critical in collective forms of leadership cultures, where the team must develop the capacity to work through disagreements, tensions, and differing perspectives together. This means learning to name tensions early – when they are still small and manageable – rather than allowing them to accumulate

into larger conflicts that damage relationships and undermine trust. It also means distinguishing between different types of conflict: task-related disagreements that can strengthen decision-making versus interpersonal tensions that require relationship repair. Without having skills and processes for addressing conflict, teams default to avoidance, which leads to passive-aggressive behaviour, behind-the-scenes complaints, and the erosion of psychological safety.

Similarly, in collective forms of leadership cultures, coaching shifts from a specialised role to a shared skill. Team members develop the ability to ask powerful questions, listen deeply, and support one another's growth and problem-solving. Such peer coaching recognises that expertise and wisdom exist throughout the organisation, not just in official leadership positions. For managers in hierarchical organisations, this represents a significant transition. They must shift from solving problems for their employees to supporting people in finding their own solutions through asking questions.

Practices for feedback and coaching

Karin Tenelius, an advisor in one of the research projects this book is based on and whose voice you hear from in "Voices from the field", started the consulting company Tuff Leadership Training. The consultancy helps organisations transition towards self-managing principles and has developed training programmes for coaching, conflict, relationship repair and feedback conversations, offering processes for conversations that strengthen collective forms of leadership, using specific, shared language for teams.

For instance, Tuff Leadership Training uses the word *pebble* to signify small tensions or discomforts. By naming and sharing pebbles early on, team members can address tensions and possible misunderstandings as they arise – deepening authenticity and psychological safety rather than allowing tensions to build up over time.

To learn more, explore these additional resources:

Blogpost on feedback:
tuffledarskapstraning.se/article/vill-ni-infora-feedbackkultur

Blogpost on conflict:
tuffledarskapstraning.se/article/konfliktthantering-pa-arbetsplatsen

For deeper conflicts or relationship repair, different languages and processes are used. Tuff Leadership Training uses the phrase "moose heads on the table" to signify these bigger tensions that everyone senses but no one is addressing. They have defined processes for relationship repair conversations to work through more substantial conflicts.

The key practice here is developing a shared language and practices that allow your team to engage in different types of conversations.

Practising peer-to-peer feedback

Chapter

Chapter Title Here

Voices from the field

Karin Tenelius starts with a simple observation: self-organising requires more collaboration, collaboration requires communication, and communication requires a language for things that are usually left unnamed. “Between people, there are interpersonal relationships happening; that’s air, basically. But the air has qualities: moods, tension or not. In a team, there’s a working climate, and you need a completely different language to be able to name what’s going on between people.” Part of what she and her colleagues do when working with teams is help them develop that language.

The examples she gives are small but telling. The word pebble is used to name a friction between two people: something like a stone in your shoe that is tickling or hurting you, that, in most workplaces, would simply be left untouched. “In ordinary workplaces, that friction just goes on for ages; some people don’t talk to each other if they don’t like each other. But in self-organising teams, we have to cooperate, so we need to resolve it.” A moose head is something bigger: a tension that has become infected, perhaps taboo, that everyone in the room senses but nobody is addressing. These invented words do something important. They make it possible to talk about things that previously had no name and therefore no handle.

The core objective of the rituals Karin recommends is to keep the culture open: to maintain an environment where nothing is too small to address and where the working climate is often tended to. Quality check-ins, she stresses, are not about reporting what you did last weekend or announcing that you feel fine. They are about genuinely attending to how people are doing and how they are. Quarterly meetings include a dedicated moment to ask whether any moose heads have surfaced. Feedback is built in as an ongoing practice rather than reserved for formal reviews, with the team developing shared agreements about how to name

and address behaviour that is getting in the way. “It’s really about keeping communication and the working climate clean.”

On the question of when and how feedback happens, Karin is pragmatic. Some of it is responsive: if someone is behaving in a way that is not helpful, there needs to be an agreement that a colleague can name it at the moment. Some of it is structural: evaluating after a meeting what worked and what did not, as a regular ritual, so that the team can keep refining how it operates together. Decision-making processes are themselves rituals, she argues, ensuring that mandates are kept where they belong and that before anyone makes a decision that affects others, there is a shared process for doing so. Importantly, she cautions against trying to design all of this in advance. “It’s better to carve out rituals and procedures along the way, as things occur that need to be addressed.”

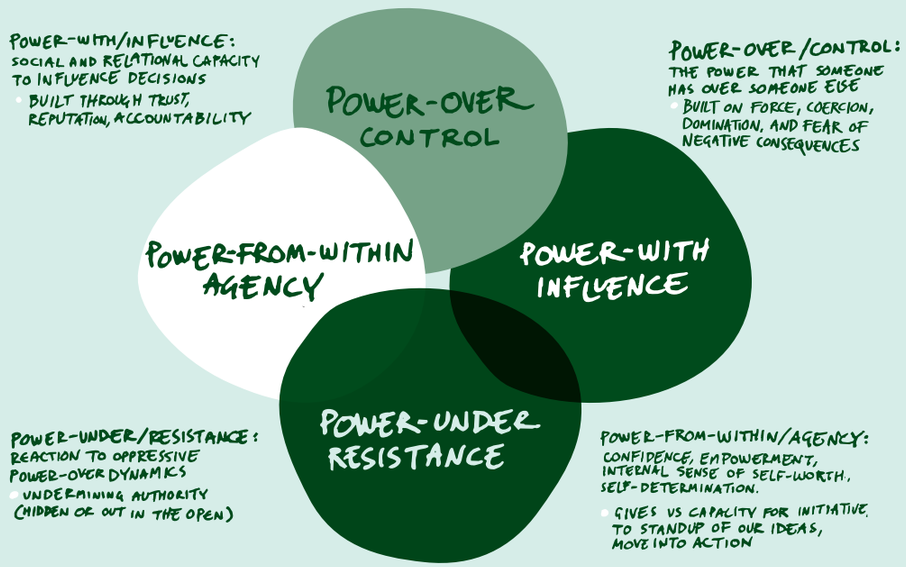
When teams come from more hierarchical cultures where psychological safety is low, she does not begin by demanding openness. She begins by onboarding people into the idea of it: acknowledging the fear that is present, making it nameable, and letting openness grow from there. “Openness feeds openness,” she says. Most people, in her experience, actually want to be more open. What stands in the way is fear, and fear responds to being named. “Ask: what is it that we don’t talk about? And then openness is created.” On power, her approach is similarly direct. Rather than committing to flattening all hierarchies, she encourages teams to name the hierarchies that actually exist, including knowledge and competence hierarchies, and to talk about them honestly. A founder who holds power by virtue of being a founder needs to acknowledge that explicitly and take responsibility for how it shows up. “It’s resolved through communication,” she says.

3.5 Talking about power and practising power differently

A challenging cultural shift for collaborative leadership involves naming and changing power dynamics. Traditional organisations often avoid explicit discussion of power, preferring to maintain the false idea that hierarchies are purely functional or based solely on merit. Yet power – formal and informal, visible and invisible – shapes our interactions.

Collaborative leadership requires developing a collective understanding of power: recognising how it operates, acknowledging who holds it in different contexts, and discussing how it's used. One way to understand and talk about power is to distinguish between four different types: *power-over* (domination and control); *power-under* (resistance); *power-within* (personal agency and self-determination); and *power-with* (collective capacity and working together as equals). While hierarchical organisations depend primarily on power-over, collaborative leadership aims to develop power-within and power-with.

Different forms of power, adapted from the typology of Starhawk, 1987.



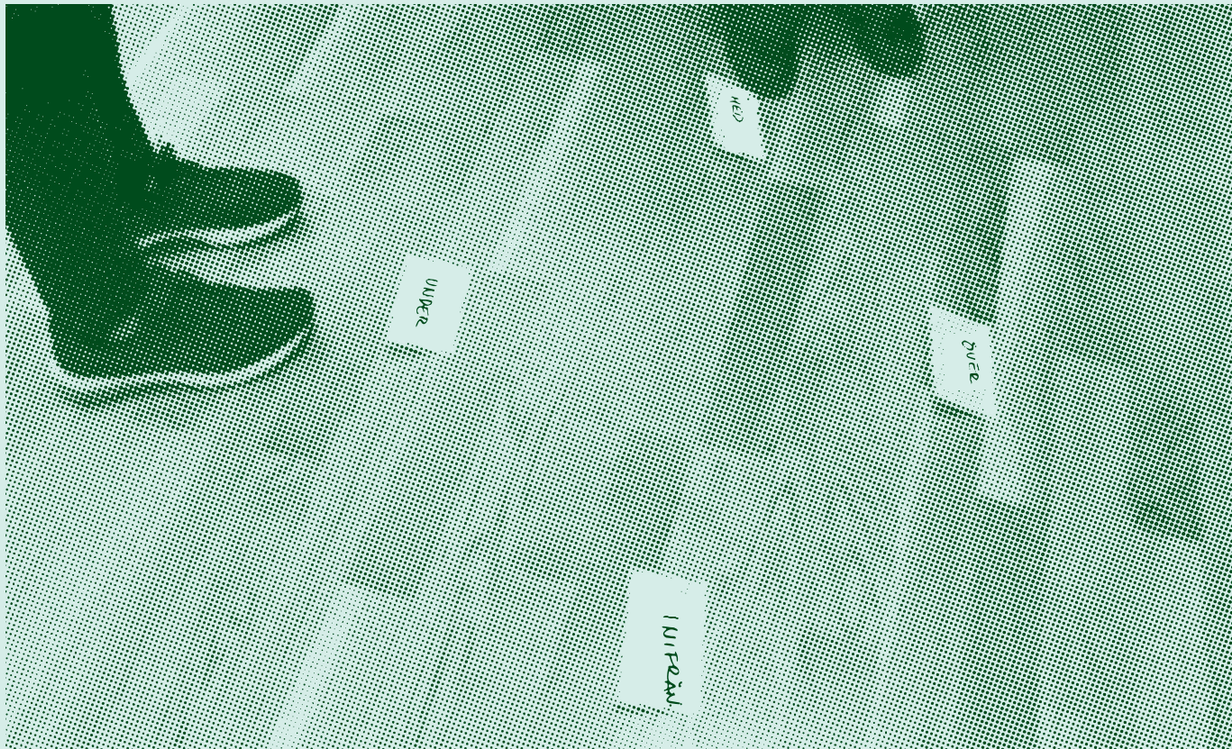
This transformation is not about eliminating all hierarchy or pretending everyone has equal power. Rather, it involves being explicit about where formal authority resides, having clarity about where decisions are made and who holds accountability for them, and ensuring that those most affected by decisions have a meaningful voice in making them. It means recognising when hierarchical decision-making is appropriate and when a more collective form of leadership serves the organisation better.

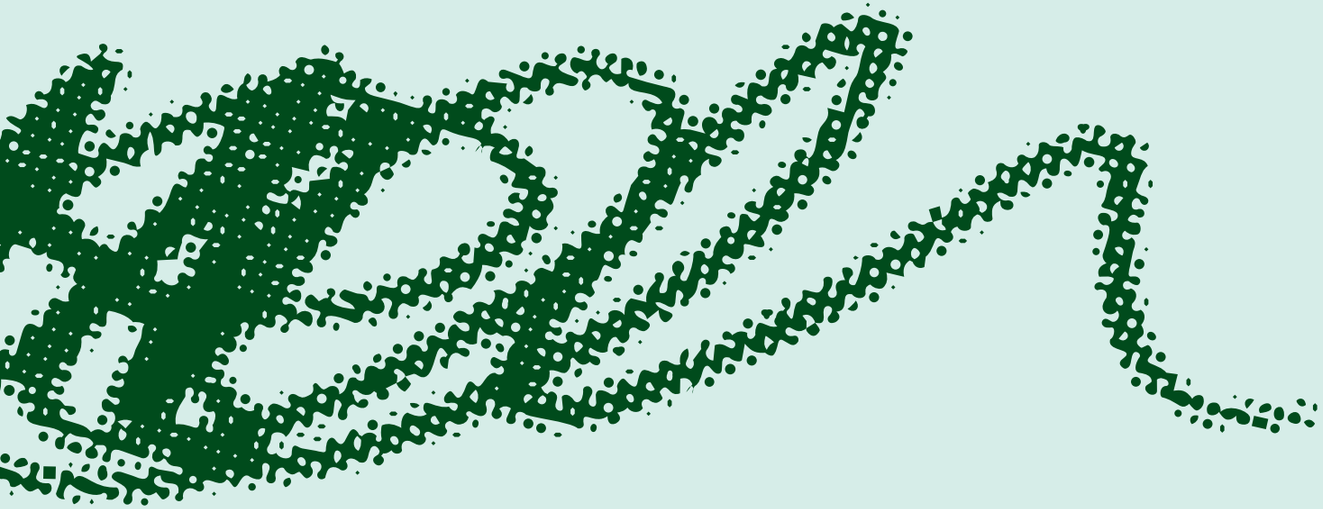
A practice for exploring different forms of power

Review the model on power (Starhawk, 1987). Individually, reflect on examples for each type of power – how does each one manifest in your life and work?

An embodied practice can deepen this reflection: write each power type on a piece of paper or sticky note and place them on the floor. Stand on each paper in turn – how does it feel to stand in each type of power? This embodied layer can add another dimension, helping you recognise how these powers feel in your body and how to recognise them in practice.

How do different forms of power feel?





After individual exploration, pair up with a colleague and share your examples. This provides a more intimate space for sharing than a large group setting and can be a good way to deepen your understanding of each other.

Finally, come together as a whole group to discuss: How could the team support "power with" and "power within"? What specific practices or changes would strengthen these forms of power?

Nati Lombardo, an advisor of one of the research projects this book is based on and whose voice you hear from in "Voices from the field", is a co-founder of the consulting company The HUM, which helps organisations introduce collective forms of leadership. On their website "Let's talk about power", you can find further exercises for exploring power. Visit The Hum's resource at: thehum.org/visitors/resources. All of their exercises are free; you just need to create a free account first to access them.

To learn more, explore these additional resources:

Starhawk (Miriam Simos), 1987. *Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority, and Mystery* (the author of the model/distinction of power)

Rau, Ted J. 2023. *Collective Power: Patterns for a Self-Organized Future. Sociocracy For All.*

Voices from the field

Transforming culture in organisations that have long operated as a hierarchy is rarely a question of implementing the right framework or attending the right training. Nati Lombardo, who has worked with NGOs and cooperatives through such transitions, usually starts with something simpler.

"When it comes down to it, our main advice is: talk about it. Just talk about all the things you think you can talk about. Make things explicit. Make space for people to be able to name what they need, what they want, what they're scared of." The phrase "bringing your whole self to work" may have become a cliché, she acknowledges, but the underlying idea is genuine. Creating space for people to show up more fully is not a nice addition to cultural change. It is the beginning of it. And that space cannot be designed from above and handed down. It has to be built together, starting from real questions: what does each person in this team need? What do we all bring? What happens when my personality meets yours? "From that place," she says, "you can decide together what kind of culture you want to have, and then ask: where is the gap between where we are now and where we want to go, and how do we support each other?"

One of the conversations that tends to be hardest to open, particularly in Scandinavian contexts where the word itself carries uncomfortable associations, is the conversation about power. Nati is direct about what makes it possible. "It's quite important that the people who already hold some of the power, whether social capital or explicit role-based power, are the ones who open up the conversation." An external facilitator can help create conditions for this, but the key move is modelling: showing, through how you show up, that talking about power is not an accusation or a threat but a necessary

part of building something more honest together. Nati recalls a fishbowl exercise in one of her workshops where several participants found it genuinely difficult to acknowledge the power they held, precisely because they associated power with something negative. What changes when more nuance enters that conversation – when power can be talked about in terms of how it is earned, how it can be used well, and how it can be distributed – is that the topic stops being taboo and starts being workable in the team.

That same dynamic, she argues, is at the heart of the most common obstacle she encounters when working with teams on cultural change. You can put the right structures in place, agree on the right values, and run the right workshops, but if the people who hold formal or informal power behave in ways that contradict what is being said, the culture will not shift. "You can talk about a lot of things, but if the person who holds that leadership role shows up in a way that contradicts all of their stated ideals, the culture is really not going to shift, and it will be much more difficult." Role modeling, she says, is not one ingredient among many. It is the condition that determines whether everything else lands or not.

3.6 Challenges with distributed teams

On a final note, developing a culture for leading together can be challenging - especially as remote and distributed work styles become more common. Online work and geographic separation makes the informal relationship-building that supports trust and psychological safety more difficult due to things like having a more task-based focus and a lack of spontaneous interactions. To navigate these challenges, we recommend experimenting with structures that support teams in building a culture of safety, and that help deepen relationships. This demands prioritising bringing people together for relationship-building, creating explicit agreements about how teams will work together, and continually examining whether the culture and relationships are supported with the actual practices.

A practice for developing team agreement

With your team, discuss your shared purpose and values, and identify which behaviours support these. In the previous chapter on self-leadership, we introduced the Personal Canvas practice. Look at that practice and build upon it, progressing from individual reflections to reflections on team level.

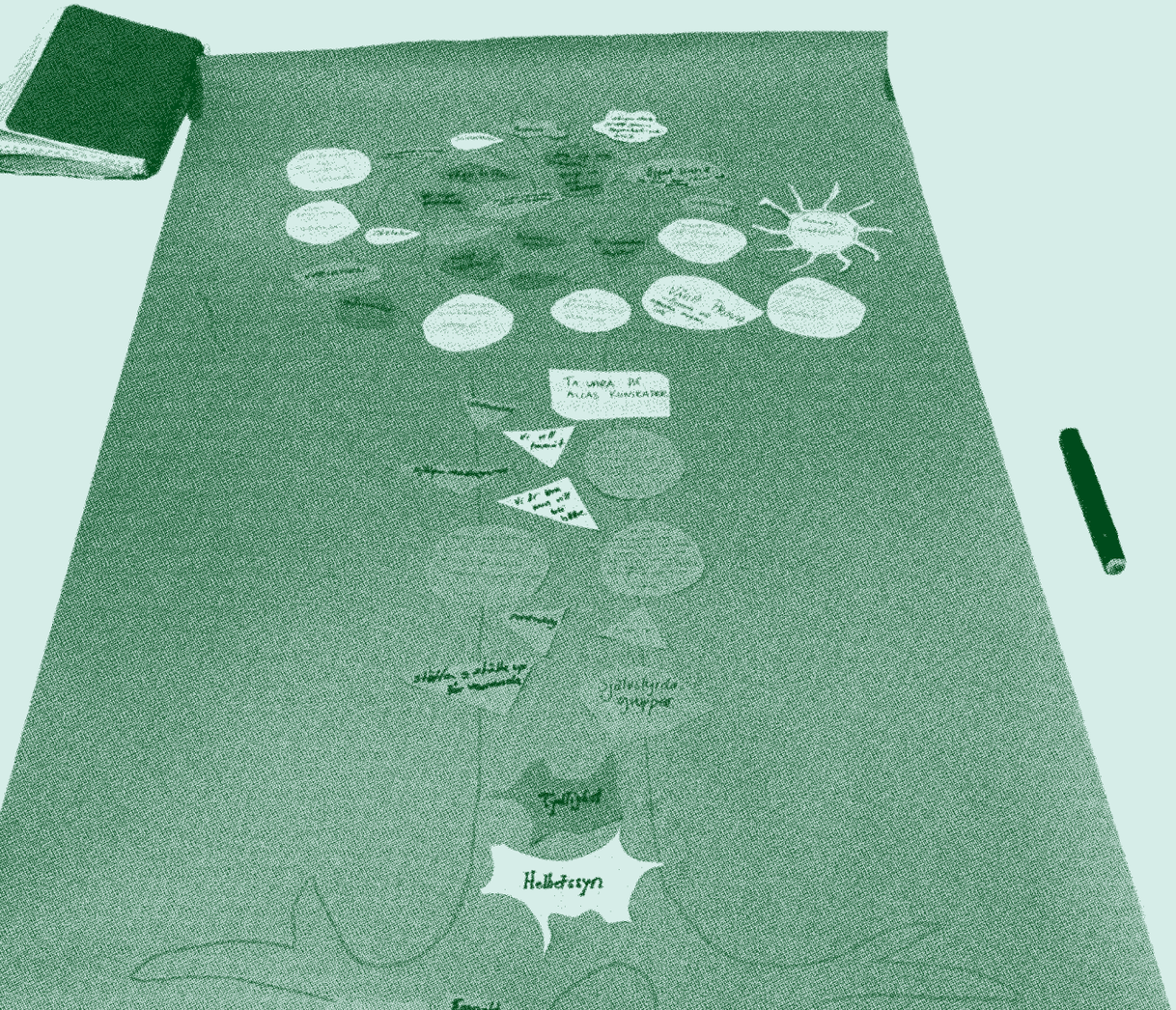
After each team member has created a personal canvas with their own reflections about purpose, values, passions and desired impact, invite everyone to share their thoughts and ask the team to distill core shared values on the team level. How can a team formulate a shared purpose that bridges the individual sense of purpose with a purpose that everyone on the team shares, while also being connected to the overall purpose of organisation? Invite team members to also reflect on what kind of supporting behaviours would be needed on the team to enable them to enact shared purpose in everyday work. Then come together as a whole group to discuss and find a shared understanding of supporting behaviours and how they can be transformed into concrete work principles and activities integrated into the team's daily work.

You can use sticky notes to capture and cluster ideas, or create a visual collage such as a tree - with roots representing your values, the trunk representing your purpose, and leaves representing the behaviours and activities that bring these to life.

Developing shared values, purpose and desired team activities and behaviours.

Revisit these agreements regularly to ensure they continue to support how you actually work together. You can hang a shared team agreement or manifesto in the team's shared work space as a daily reminder and to make it more accessible as something you can always easily come back to.

For a structured template to guide a team agreement process, we recommend using The Hum's *How do we want to be together?* exercise which can be found at thehum.org/visitors/resources. (It's free. Create a free account to access it). This exercise provides a framework for creating team agreements that support your collaborative culture.



Voices from the field

The practitioners we spoke to have each developed their own answer to the question of what cultural change actually looks like in practice, not as a set of abstract principles but as repeatable ways of being together that teams can build into their daily work.

Mette Aagaard draws heavily on the sociocracy toolbox*, a set of principles and structures she has seen work across very different organisations. "Personally, I find it hard to take part in meetings or dialogue that don't adhere to these kinds of principles," she says. The practices are specific and unglamorous, but that is precisely the point.

It starts with the check-in: not a 30 update on what everyone has been doing, but a brief moment to ensure that each person is genuinely present and that nothing is standing in the way of their full attention. Then there is decision-making by consent, which she is an enthusiastic advocate for because it sidesteps the power struggles that tend to emerge from consensus-based processes. Speaking in rounds ensures that talking time is distributed rather than captured by the most confident voices. Having a dedicated facilitator for each meeting means that when something difficult needs to be brought to the table, whether because the content is complex or because emotions are running high, there is someone whose explicit role is to hold the space. "It's about helping the team refrain from moving into decision-making mode when what we are discussing is not yet ready for a decision, but needs more exploration of perspectives in order to better understand the complexity of an issue."

Working with roles and how they are distributed and nominated among colleagues is another piece, one she acknowledges can be genuinely sensitive. And then there is transparency, which she finds teams often struggle with in unexpected ways. She describes one team that considered introducing full transparency around the registration of working hours. The idea came from a place of mutual care: without a manager surveying hours, colleagues had no way of knowing if someone was accumulating far too many and needed help or protection. But others experienced the proposal as surveillance. “I don’t want my colleagues to monitor when or how much I’m working, and I feel it becomes a competition for who’s accumulated the most hours, as in who’s the best colleague.” The conversation took a long time and carried a lot of hard feelings. Eventually, they went ahead with it. And what happened was not competition or blaming each other: they discovered that one colleague had been registering fewer hours than she should have been.When they asked what was going on, it turned out she was navigating a difficult situation at home involving a child who was struggling to attend school. “And then the team said: now that we know this, how can we help you?” The transparency that had felt threatening became the condition for support.

Nati Lombardo offers two stories from her own experience that, together, capture something important about what makes this work succeed and what can make it fall apart even when everything seems to be in place.

* sociocracyforall.org/
and Sociocracy handbook “Many Voices One Song”:
sociocracyforall.org/many-voices-one-song/

The first is the case of Loomio, the organisation where she first began working in this way. By most measures, the conditions were right. The culture was strong, the processes were well designed, and the team had even built their own technology to support their way of working. “We had great processes. We had the technology. We built it ourselves to enable this way of working.” And yet it became unsustainable, not because of anything internal to the culture or the organisation, but because the funding was not there. The income was not being generated. “So it’s like: we can look at all the pieces, but sometimes it’s not just about the culture and how we organise. It’s also about what’s happening in the world. What is the context? How do we pay ourselves?” The lesson Nati draws from Loomio is not a counsel of despair but a reminder that cultural and organisational transformation does not happen in a vacuum. External factors matter, and sometimes, despite everything, you have to let go.

The second story is more hopeful. Working with a cooperative in the UK, Nati encountered a team that had already been on their journey for five or six years by the time she came in to support their decision-making processes. What struck her was not the absence of challenges but the quality of the response to them: a genuine collective willingness to keep improving, keep changing, keep trying rather than giving up. “Everyone was really engaged in what was happening.” The team had a high level of trust, and had built real relationships with each other despite being geographically distributed. They also brought something to their difficulties that cannot be installed through a workshop or framework: the disposition to stay in it together. That, she suggests, is what the culture ultimately needs to make possible.

3.7 Questions for reflection

1. What are your team's shared core values and purpose?
2. How are they connected to the overall values and purpose of your organisation?
3. What kinds of behaviours are crucial for enacting your team's shared values and purpose in your daily work?
4. How do you experience psychological safety in your team?
5. What small, concrete actions can your team take to strengthen psychological safety?
6. What is the most common way of listening in your team (downloading, factual, empathic, or generative)?
7. How can you integrate intentional practice of more empathic and generative listening and dialogue into your daily work and into your team rituals?
8. How is coaching and the giving and receiving of feedback practised in your team/organisation today?
9. Does responsibility lie with the manager(s) or is it shared among team colleagues?
10. How can you develop and integrate peer-to-peer feedback and coaching practices into your team/organisational culture?
11. How do you deal with conflicts in your team/organisation?
12. What would it take to build a culture in which you can openly talk about conflict together?
13. How is power exercised in your team/organisation (formally and informally)?
14. Can you talk openly about power in your team/organisation? If not, what would need to change to make that possible?
15. Which forms of power (*power-over*, *power-under*, *power-within* and *power-with*) would you say are most often exercised in your team/ organisation? In what situations?
16. How can you strengthen your team/organisation to practise more power-within and power-with?

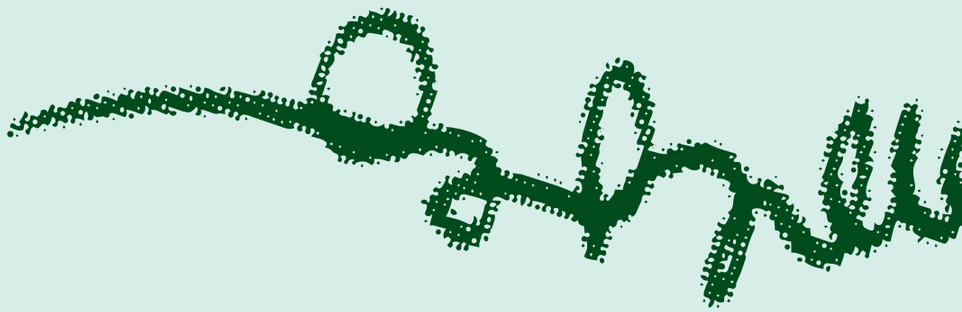
3.8 Conclusions

In this chapter, we introduced different aspects of building a culture for leading together – from psychological safety to deeper levels of generative listening and dialogue. Feedback, coaching, conflict resolution, and distributing power have been discussed as cornerstones for sharing leadership. We argued that creating a culture where team members feel safe to be themselves and experience trust between each other – allowing them to take risks to both try out new things together and bring tough questions to the table – is a crucial condition for developing shared leadership. Teams need to openly discuss and reach a consensus about their shared values and purpose, as well as ways of working together that can support them in enacting their values and following their "why" through daily work routines. Too often, values and purpose statements remain glossy words published on corporate websites but are not felt and embodied in workplaces through people's behaviours.

Building a culture of shared leadership is not easy. Especially in organisations with a long tradition of hierarchies and in a fast-paced, digitalised society where remote working is increasingly common and closing ourselves off in our own digital bubbles is fast becoming the norm. Building strong team rituals that cultivate deep relationships as well as support between team members and collective learning has become harder and is, nowadays, rather an exception than the norm. Such rituals demand a conscious effort that goes beyond yearly get-together meetings, and is sustained over time.

Formal managers often play an important role when a culture of shared leadership is being built, especially in the first phase as the organisation or team transitions away from traditional hierarchies. They must dare to break away from established patterns and norms and model another type of leadership, being courageous enough to open up, be vulnerable, and talk about their own challenges in the transformation journey. Managers need to actively let go of control and invite other colleagues to take up more space, assuming a more facilitative approach to leadership. This entails shifting from a parent-child dynamic in their relationship with colleagues towards an adult-adult dynamic. Sharing power and responsibility is not easy for managers who have built their whole career in a hierarchical setup.

What can help managers is adopting a practice of continuously inviting other colleagues into co-creation processes and facilitating them in a way that gives all team members the time and space they need to contribute. As part of these processes, the team can discuss and agree upon shared ways of working together, and establish regular team rituals. Team rituals should support the deepening of relationships and trust in the team while opening a forum for talks about challenges and conflicts, retrospectives on what's going well and where there is space for development, as well as for discussing challenging topics like power. Holding space for team members to practise giving and receiving feedback and coaching each other is an important part of team rituals for shared leadership. Especially in the beginning, when team members are not well-versed in these practices, dedicating time and space for developing and practising feedback and coaching skills is necessary before they can be smoothly integrated into daily ways of working.



4

Changing roles and competencies for managers and employees

In his work on reinventing organisations, Frédéric Laloux describes how most of us show up to work wearing a mask. We learn which aspects of ourselves are welcome at work and which are not (our curiosity, our doubt, our care for others, our desire to do things differently), and we learn to forget and put the rest away. Over time, the role we play and the person we are begin to feel like the same thing. The manager becomes the one who decides, and the employee becomes the one who executes. The title on the door and the behaviour in the room blend together to the point that stepping outside of them can feel wrong – like betraying our professional identity.

In our experience – and as discovered by the practitioners and teams in this chapter through their own processes – wearing a mask is a choice team members often make without even realising it. To the contrary, when people are invited to be themselves at work, using their full potential, something shifts in the sense of who they discover they can be in the workplace. They realise that they can contribute much more based on their interests and passions, as well as a wide range of their life and work experiences. The journey towards leading together begins with asking the question of what hidden potential lies within each of us, and what might become possible if we were to stop pretending and start embodying our whole selves at work. In this chapter, we explore how roles and their associated behaviours must evolve on the journey towards leading together. Especially how both formal managers and employees need to rethink their traditional roles, which are often linked to a job description. To explore this evolution, we introduce the concept of *dynamic roles* and present practices that have been tested with public sector teams who have embarked on this journey.

OVER THE LAST FEW MONTHS, ELENA HAS FELT LIKE something is shifting, slowly but genuinely. The open hour meetings. The honest conversations.

But now, alone in her office, a question starts to haunt her: *If my team doesn't need me to have the answers, who am I?*

For seven years, Elena had been the one who absorbed chaos from above and translated it into clarity below. The one who solved problems before they escalated. The one people would come to when they didn't know what to do. That was her value. That was why she mattered. Even the changes she'd been making recently: the new meeting format, the honest feedback, the space she'd been trying to create. She had *designed* those. She had been the architect of openness. Which meant, she now realises uncomfortably, that she had still been in control of it.

Her phone buzzes: a message from her director requesting an update on the quarterly targets. KPIs. She puts the phone face down.

Elena thinks about Jonas. Three months ago, after their conversation, something had reawakened in him. He'd started staying late again, not every day, but sometimes. The open hour had given his thinking a place to land. Watching this, she had felt something close to what she'd written down on the train: *to see people become more than they thought they could be*.

Elena decides to say nothing in the first open hour meeting. She won't facilitate. Won't redirect. She'll just sit, notebook in lap, and see what happens when she steps back from being the gravitational centre of the room.

It is harder than she expected.

The meeting begins without her usual whiteboard question. Jonas had volunteered to prepare something this week, partly as an experiment. He writes: What is one thing we're doing for our care recipients that we're proud of, and one thing we wish we could do differently?

They are good questions.

The conversation moves. Sara talks about a family she's been supporting through a difficult transition. Jamal tells a story about a care recipient who asked him, last week, whether anyone at the municipality actually reads the feedback forms. The room laughs, and then goes quiet. It isn't really funny.

Elena grips her notebook.

The question hangs in the air unanswered. The silence stretches. Every part of Elena wants to speak. Her mouth opens slightly.

She closes it.

Jonas glances at her briefly, not for the answer, she thinks, but just to check. She gives the smallest shake of her head. Not yet.

Sara makes a connection that surprises her. Jamal builds on it. They begin discussing ways to make citizens participate more and what it means to be listened to. The direction that emerges is not the one Elena would have taken. She finds herself leaning forward slightly, genuinely interested in where this is going.

After the meeting, as people gather their things, Jonas stops beside her.

"You were quiet," he says.

"I was listening," she replies.

He nods. Then says, "It felt different. The room felt different."

Elena knows what he means. There had been a quality to the conversation: a kind of energy, people building upon each other rather than referring back to a centre. It was something she had not been able to manufacture when she was running things.

*

4.1 Transitioning from fixed job descriptions to dynamic roles

In hierarchical organisations, managers are expected to make most of the decisions and are held accountable for a broad range of leadership activities such as planning and coordinating work, driving team performance, setting a vision, mediating conflict, coaching and developing employees, and supporting the different external and internal flows of communication, among others. While this model offers structure, it rests on the assumption that formal managers are capable of excelling across many different management tasks and dimensions of leadership. However, managers are human. And they bring their own strengths and limitations based on their personality, experience and background. Some are skilled at shaping team culture, building a positive atmosphere, and delivering honest feedback that is appreciated by employees. Other managers are natural motivators who are great at sharing a vision for the future of the group and possess the networking and presentation skills needed to represent the team in other parts of the organisation. However, expecting one person to lead across all these fronts and succeed at all of them places an unrealistic burden on the manager. Consequently, this implies that the team has growth potential that is still untapped.

Employees, on the other hand, are expected to fulfil tasks based on their job descriptions, which they were recruited for and which often change only once they are promoted. This way of dividing work into fixed roles has clear advantages: responsibilities are well-defined, accountability can be traced, and performance can be measured through key performance indicators (KPIs) linked to a specific job role. However, this "clarity" has negative consequences. For one thing, the full potential of employees is not explored and used. Team members with valuable skills, ideas, or interests that fall outside their formal job descriptions have little room to contribute to them. The consequence is that over time, these role boundaries limit employees' development by reducing their freedom to explore new tasks and potentially making them feel they are not realising their full potential. The result can be a low level of engagement and sense of ownership among employees who become more passive and less likely to take initiative. Another reason why activating leadership potential and distributing leadership among employees and managers is import-

ant today is that teams and organisations are facing higher levels of complexity and uncertainty. In this context, collective leadership and intelligence are of great importance. One person can rarely make the best decision or find the best solution in a complex and unknown situation alone. It is more likely that what will make the team perform better is utilising collective intelligence and effort, with flexible and more fluid roles that allow different people to take the leadership role when their competence and experience are most needed. Distributing responsibility for tasks typically linked with the formal manager role allows the team to develop more leadership potential across its members and become more effective and adaptive, gaining the capacity to respond to various uncertain and complex situations by tapping into everyone's leadership potential. Moving towards dynamic roles, therefore, enables teams to respond to constant change and work in more emergent and agile ways. It prevents employers from confining employees to specific boxes and labels. Instead, it increases autonomy and engagement, enabling employees to begin realising more of their potential.

In contrast to the traditional hierarchical model, leading together therefore involves redistributing many of the management responsibilities across the team. Instead of reassigning these tasks based on role title, team members can take them on based on their interests, relevant experience, and availability, given their current workload. This perspective on how to distribute managing tasks recognises that people perform best when their work life is balanced with their personal life. Sometimes, team members go through periods where personal circumstances make it difficult for them to perform their responsibilities. When leading together, a person experiencing a difficult situation in their personal life can temporarily step back from demanding tasks and instead take on ones that are easier or better fit their situation, such as tasks that can be done remotely or outside normal working hours. Once the person feels better, they can return to their usual responsibilities. This change in perspective has many benefits. To name a few: tasks are performed by people who are motivated and capable, team members grow through new challenges, people pursue their interests and benefit from higher levels of flexibility and well-being, and teams are more engaged and can adapt better to unforeseen challenges.

Moving from fixed to dynamic roles is a process that a team needs to navigate together. During our research project, we had the opportunity to work with Helen Triggs from The Hum. She describes dynamic

roles as a structure that enables autonomy within clear guidelines: instead of one fixed job description, team members can have multiple roles. Such roles can be small or large, time-bound or ongoing, and can be transferred to another person when necessary. Roles are defined around outcomes (what needs to be achieved) rather than tasks, which means they set the goal rather than prescribing how to get there. This distinction is important because it gives team members the freedom to find their own way of doing things.

This dynamic approach to roles has a few core principles. The first one is Stewardship Over Ownership. It means that employees steward multiple roles rather than one job description and each role is linked to the work that needs to be done within that role rather than to a specific person. This makes a person steward a role during a specific period of time and then pass it on to another person, rather than owning it. Roles therefore become less vulnerable: different people can step in and out of them over different periods of time, and there is more flexibility in rotating them. The second principle of dynamic roles is Invitation Over Allocation. This means that it is not the formal manager who allocates responsibilities for different roles and tasks to team members, but rather there is a clear process in which people are invited to take on different roles, as well as a possibility for team members to suggest each other for specific roles. In this way, people are brought into roles through a conversation rather than assigned to roles from above.

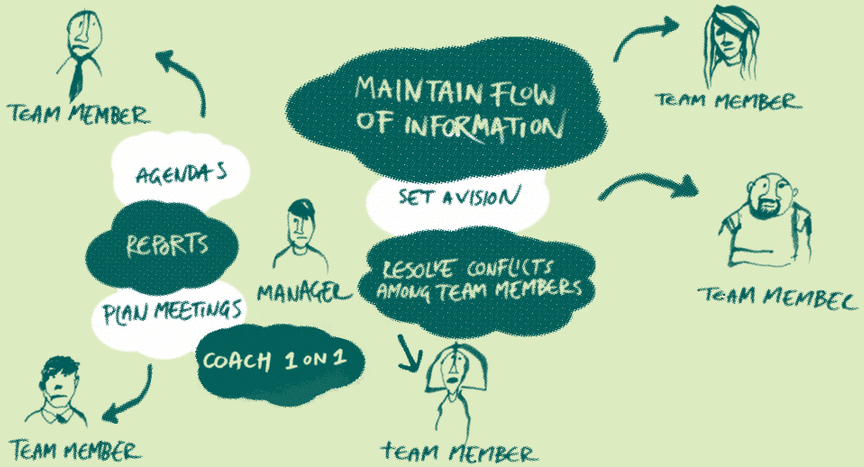
Before a team can practise dynamic roles, they first need to define together which roles are needed to accomplish the work the team is doing, including those typically connected to the formal manager, such as championing purpose, coaching, and hosting team meetings. Each role is defined not by describing how one performs it, but rather through its purpose (why it exists and end result of doing it well) and its outcomes (broad outcomes that fulfil the purpose of the role, not tasks). For example, the coaching role is usually linked with formal managers and can be practised by any team member when distributing leadership within a team. The purpose of this role could be defined as "supporting others to be their best selves", and the outcomes could be described as "coaching others and creating space for deep conversations". Describing a role in this way makes what a team does more explicit and reduces conflict by defining clearer boundaries between roles. At the same time, it leaves a lot of space and autonomy for people to find their own ways of fulfilling the role.

If you would like to explore the rationale behind this transformation from fixed job descriptions to dynamic roles in greater depth, we recommend the series "Insights for the Journey"* by Frederic Laloux, author of the book Reinventing Organisations. And for a more concrete overview of how dynamic roles work in practice, we recommend the interview where Nati Lombardo speaks with Helen Triggs specifically on this topic: Dynamic Roles (youtube.com/watch?v=5hhuPwaYgHU). Finally, if your team is ready to begin mapping your own roles and experimenting with the process of distributing roles as a way of sharing responsibilities more fluidly, The Hum offers practical resources* and tools to support that process.

One video we recommend from the series is "Distributed roles replace the manager". youtube.com/watch?v=VGzbUbAE4lk&t=142s

you can find the resources in the link thehum.org/members/resources (requires a free registration)

To test how it feels to share leadership in a more embodied way, moving away from the clear idea of the manager leading and employees following, try this movement exercise with your colleagues. Within a



Leading together means redistributing most managerial responsibilities across the team.

short time, you can experience a more fluid and emergent leadership dynamic, in which all team members continuously shift between leading and following until an emergent dynamic surfaces that makes it unclear who is leading and who is following. Together as a group, you develop a shared rhythm and a knowing of when to pause, when to move faster or slower and how to move seamlessly together through shared leadership.

Movement score: self leadership/shared leadership (30 min)

a. Walk through a space and observe the shapes, colours and objects that you see. Find a detail you haven't noticed before. Turn your gaze towards other people and look them in the eyes. Maintain awareness of your breathing. As you breathe out, release your neck, then your jaw, your feet. Release your weight to the ground. (5 min)

b. Shake hands with people and, as you do so, say your name. You can meet the same person multiple times. As you continue walking, follow another person by walking close by or far away, playing with distances. You are clear with where you are walking so that others can adjust their walk in relation to you. Do this for a few minutes before adding more layers to the walking.

c. If anyone in the room stops, we all stop. If anyone starts to walk, we all walk. Once stopped, take care that others have stopped before anyone starts walking again. Notice the whole space, all the people at once. (10 min)

d. Divide into teams of four and do the exact same exercise, but only follow your teammates. If any of your teammates stop or walk, everyone in the team follows. Travel through the space individually, meaning you don't need to be close to your teammates. After a few minutes, notice the compositions that all the groups in the space create instantaneously. Do this for around 15 minutes.

e. In a team of four, give each other feedback on how it felt and what the challenges and joys were of leading, following, observing and moving together versus alone.

Sharing leadership by both leading and following each other in an emergent way.

In the following sections, we will see that the transformation towards leading together can be scary, requiring both employees and managers to step out of their comfort zones to reshape their roles and relationships with one another. This often necessitates the development of new skills and competencies.

4.2 The evolving role of managers: from controlling outcomes to supporting co-creation processes

When an organisation begins moving towards leading together, the manager's role is where the transformation is most felt and challenged. In traditional hierarchies, managers are expected to be in control of decisions, outcomes and direction. Shifting away from hierarchy makes managers feel like they need to change their identity because it asks them to step outside what has always felt like solid ground and learn to lead in a different way.

For the manager, the inner journey begins with understanding why leading together is important. Before anything else can change, managers need to make sense of what leading together means in practice: what does it look like on a normal Tuesday morning? Or during a difficult meeting where a project budget is cut in half? Learning about this requires consulting resources, such as this handbook or the ones you find throughout its chapters. From there, a natural step is opening up that conversation with the team: what values do we want to guide the way we work together? How do we want to distribute responsibility? The manager's job is less about having the answers and more about creating the conditions for the team to find them together. This involves asking relevant questions, ensuring everyone is heard during meetings, and helping the group move through disagreement.

As the team begins experimenting, the manager's attention shifts towards encouragement. This means inviting people to take on new responsibilities and step into leadership. Trusting that they can. Making that trust visible. It also means holding space for mistakes. People will experiment and try things that will not work. That is part of how they grow. A manager who steps in too quickly to fix things (however well-intended) is undermining the confidence they are trying to build.

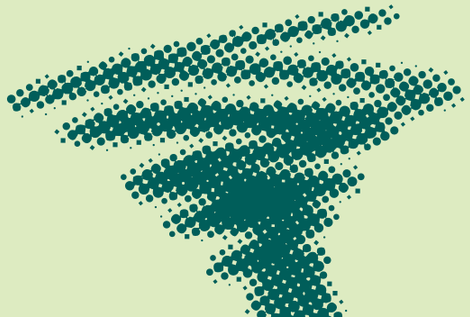
When difficulties arise, the instinct to solve the problem directly is one of the hardest things to resist. But the more useful role is to help the team reflect: What happened? What did we learn? What might we try differently? This requires the manager to be patient, to believe that the team is capable of finding its own way through the problems.

Managers also play an active role in designing the rhythms and structures that help (and maintain) leading together: regular check-ins where people share what they need, retrospectives where the team steps back and reflects on how things are going. These activities are the spaces where leading together becomes real and the team can grow, as it is where the team develops the habits, the language, and the trust to take ownership.

Another responsibility is keeping the team connected to its purpose: reminding people and helping them navigate through questions of why they exist and what they care about. Another is helping team members get to know each other better – their skills, experience, and strengths – so that they can turn to each other directly when in need, instead of asking the manager.

And then there is the work that happens outside the team. Managers in hierarchical organisations often need to translate what their team is doing into language that makes sense to those above them. This can include advocating for the autonomy and resources the team needs, shielding them from pressures that could pull them back towards old ways of working, and bringing back useful feedback.

In our experience, including frequent interviews with managers, the most personal challenge is this: learning to let go. Trusting the process even when it feels slow. Sitting with uncertainty. Allowing the team to struggle without rushing to rescue them. This is uncomfortable in ways that are hard to anticipate. It asks managers to examine their own assumptions of what good leadership looks like. It also requires being honest with the team about the effort required, as the new skills and responsibilities needed will demand more from everyone, especially in the beginning.



4.3 The evolving role of employees: learning to take initiative and responsibility

The shift towards leading together requires that employees step out of the roles where they often performed tasks defined by others and instead, become active co-creators of the team's direction, processes and outcomes. This entails that team members expand their scope of responsibility, and it asks something of them: courage, new skills, and a willingness to keep growing.

The fundamental shift is learning to take initiative rather than wait for direction. In traditional hierarchical organisations, employees often have managers who set priorities and determine how work gets done. Leading together necessitates that team members proactively notice what needs attention, then propose solutions and bring ideas forward without waiting to be asked. This is about recognising when the team is facing something that calls for action from somebody, and then being willing to be that person. For many, that shift from reactive to proactive can feel unfamiliar and a little exposing, especially when the boundaries of the role have always been clearly drawn in the past. This process requires different forms of bravery as team members need to overcome self-doubt, be willing to be imperfect, and trust that colleagues will receive their efforts with generosity. It also means making peace with mistakes, viewing them as part of how people learn rather than as evidence that they should not have tried.

Leading together also means caring about the team as a whole, not just your own piece of the work. That includes noticing how colleagues are doing, whether the team is living up to its values, and being willing to speak up when something does not feel right, even when it would be easier to be silent or look the other way. This runs against many workplace cultures, where the pressure to appear competent can be too strong to resist. Leading together invites a different kind of presence: one where saying "I don't know" or "I need help" is not a sign of weakness but an act of trust that makes collaboration possible.

There is also a very practical dimension to this shift that is easily overlooked. For a team to lead itself well, people need to stay curious about what their colleagues know, what they are good at, and what experi-

ence they bring. That shared picture of who knows what allows for the right person to step forward at the right moment, not because a manager directed them, but because the team has developed enough mutual awareness to recognise it together. This is something that needs continuous attention, as people grow and circumstances change.

It also helps to take a longer view of how this process unfolds. As employees grow more confident in leading collectively, the manager is naturally pulled away from the centre. This is a positive sign that leading together is working. However, the manager is still there and needs to care about maintaining the leading together perspective, as well as the structures, processes, culture, and the representation of the team outside of the team. What makes all of this possible is not a particular method or structure. It is people being willing to see themselves and each other differently: not as fixed roles doing what is in their job descriptions, but as individuals with great potential to contribute. The practitioners and artists we spoke to have each, in their own way, been working to create the conditions for this shift. And their experiences bring these ideas to life.

Voices from the field

The shift from hierarchical leadership to leading together asks something from everyone involved, not just those at the top. The practitioners we spoke to have thought carefully about what it requires – both from the managers learning to let go and the employees learning to step up.

Karin Tenelius locates the starting point in something that seems simple: awareness. Most managers who operate in a parent-child dynamic with their employees don't realise they are doing it. Neither do the employees. "It's an invisible power, a hierarchical dynamic going on," she says. In Sweden in particular, she observes that managers often believe they are coaching, involving and listening when, in practice, they are not. The theory is there; the behaviour has not followed. "So it's an awakening." And from awareness, she argues, comes the possibility of choice: the ability to notice the pattern you are in and decide, in that moment, to do something different. That choice requires honest feedback and straightforward interaction, catching yourself over and over again as old habits reassert themselves. At Tuff Leadership Training, where she and her colleagues have been self-organised for 23 years, they have developed a direct language for this. When someone slips into a passive or victim-like stance, a colleague might say: "We don't have any employees here; we just have owners. Can you choose to be an owner? How would that sound?" It takes time, she says, especially for managers who have spent years in a different role. But it is learnable, through sustained practice and repeated choice.

Nati Lombardo approaches the same question from the manager's perspective and offers something like a practical checklist for what genuine role modeling requires. It starts with showing up authentically: being willing to be vulnerable if you want others to be vulnerable, receiving feedback openly, and asking for it proactively rather than waiting for it to arrive. It means saying "I don't know" when you do not know, making it visible that mistakes happen and that they are survivable, and holding yourself accountable if you want accountability to become a shared norm. "Those are probably some of the crucial pieces," she says. Beyond that, it calls for making a real change to the way you occupy meetings and decisions: moving from directing to facilitating, from deciding to involving, from delegating tasks to opening up shared processes. "How do you involve others? How do you bring them into the conversation? How do we encourage shared decision-making or shared delegation?"

For employees who are more used to a traditional passive role, Nati is honest about the challenge. Change on that side of the relationship is harder to sustain if the people with formal power have not shifted first. "You first need the leaders and the people in power to shift out of their current perspective, their roles, or their ways of doing things, to model something different, so that others can pick it up and start doing it as well. Otherwise, you can talk as much as you want." Given that foundation, she points to a few practices that

can help employees grow into more active participation. Learning facilitation skills is one, not only because it equips people to run meetings but because the act of facilitating is itself a form of stepping into leadership. "It gives you a sense of empowerment, a sense of: I can also do something that is leading the team towards some outcome." Proactively asking for feedback is another practice she recommends, as it helps build self-awareness and opens space for the kinds of difficult conversations that most teams find hard to sustain.

One practice Nati returns to with particular enthusiasm is what she calls pods: small peer coaching groups of three to five people who meet regularly, usually every two weeks, specifically to support each other's development. The groups are deliberately composed across different parts of the organisation, bringing together people who do not normally work together, which gradually strengthens the social fabric of the organisation. They are rotated every six months or so, so that trust and relationships keep building in new directions. What happens in a session varies by team and by moment. Sometimes someone brings a specific challenge they want to think through together. Sometimes it is more of a check-in: how are you feeling, what are you struggling with, what do you need? Some pods use more structured formats – like Troika from Liberating Structures[1] or Case Clinic from Theory U[2] – for delving deeper into something. Others keep it more conversational. Sometimes the focus is tied to a specific developmental goal a person is working on. "If that person is currently focused on bringing

1. To find out more, check out: liberatingstructures.com/8-troika-consulting/

2. To find out more, check out: u-school.org/caseclinic

more appreciation into the team, the focus of the meetings will be on that developmental goal and how they're doing." Sometimes it is as immediate as: "I just need feedback on this presentation I'm preparing."

What Nati finds significant about the pods model is what it replaces and supplements. The standard HR procedure of a once-or-twice-a-year developmental talk between a manager and an employee, with a few follow-up meetings scattered throughout the year, leaves people without the kind of continuous, in-time support that actually helps them grow. A manager responsible for 20 or even 50 people cannot realistically be the primary source of assessing their performance and knowing what development is needed for each employee. "I have no idea what they all do in everyday operations, so I cannot be the main and only person evaluating their performance and helping them develop," as one manager she worked with put it. Peer coaching, distributed across the organisation and built into regular rhythms, begins to fill that gap. And in doing so, it shifts the culture: from one where development is something steered for you by someone above you, to one where it is something you and your colleagues are actively doing together.

Voice from the artistic field

In most organisations, a manager's role comes with a very clear "score". There are expectations about how to occupy a room, how much to speak, where to stand, and what to know. Managers are expected to have the answers, to perform and be competent, and to be the central presence in meetings. Their schedules reflect this: dense with meetings – occasions to demonstrate that they are managing others. In the workshops he facilitated, Dejan Srhoj proposed something that goes directly against all of this. What if managers became listening structures instead? What if they spent time simply hanging around the kitchen, observing with their whole body, entering meetings only when invited, attending to what was actually happening around them rather than performing their role at the front of the room?

The proposal sounds simple. What it asks of people is considerable, because the role is not just a set of behaviours. It is, as Dejan describes it, a score that people inhabit so completely that they become it. "A lot of what we do is: we perform our job role, and the role has a quite clear set of instructions. And the moment you find yourself in it, suddenly you become this role." What dance and choreography do to make this visible is they invite people to shift perspective, to move differently in the room, and to relate to others from an unfamiliar position in which the role and the person are not the same thing. The role demands certain behaviours, but there is space, always, for negotiation between what is expected and how you actually inhabit it. We just need to provide a rehearsal ground for practising other ways of being with each other.

When that space opens up, something changes in how people are viewed and view themselves. Employees who had been silent through entire workshops began, over time, to facilitate, to propose, to lead. In one case, a person who had said almost nothing in the early sessions ended up reading a poem to a room of politicians and moving them to tears. The shift of power was not announced or planned. It emerged as people encountered themselves and each other outside the positions their roles had assigned them. "By shifting roles, or by inviting people to change perspectives, or how they see things, or how they are in the room, how they relate to others, we get different aspects and qualities of the people, and see them as individuals that have their own perks and qualities, which are different from the role that they are expected to fulfil or embody." What becomes possible then are relations that are fuller, more trusting, more capable of genuine dialogue and even criticism, because the people in them are no longer being taken as monolithic structures but as dynamic, emerging processes.

Dejan is careful about how he views managers. He does not experience them as powerful beings who could change things but choose not to. He experiences them as people under enormous and rarely acknowledged pressure, caught between the desires and needs of the people below them and the expectations and demands of the people above them, constrained from every side, and often privately longing for exactly the kind of

playfulness and flexibility they are not supposed to show. "At the end of the day, you are also just a human being who also maybe wants to be playful and not give a damn, but you're not allowed to. Or you don't allow yourself, because you think you're not allowed." These restrictions he describes are real, and they are structural. What the workshops try to do, at their best, is create a temporary suspension of that structure: a space where a manager can spend a day performing as an employee, or as someone deeply critical of everything, and where an employee who has never led anything can suddenly be the one creating a choreography and discovering what it actually takes.

The invitation, ultimately, is not to blame individuals for the roles they play but to look honestly at what produces those roles. "Let's not assume that they are simply very stiff beings afraid of change. Let's assume that they actually want change. Let's assume that they are not stiff, and let's look at what does not allow them to be playful or flexible. Let's look at the structural context to see why they are like they are." That shift in framing, from judging people to examining the systems that shape them, is one of the quieter but more consequential things that artistic practice, with its attention to how roles are constructed and inhabited, brings to the work of leading together.

Practice: Redefining my own role

This tool is used to help people reflect on how they could expand their current job role by trying out new roles, through which they can contribute to shared leadership in their team or organisation. The first section of the Re-thinking My Role Canvas asks you to reflect on the different new roles you could assume to contribute to leading together, defining the purpose of these new roles. The second section invites you to reflect on the challenges and development opportunities that come with the new roles through which you think you could contribute to shared leadership. The last one invites you to visualise what the signs of success would be-evidence that you are performing these new roles well and contributing to shared leadership in your team or organisation.

The overall aim with this practice is to help team members reflect on how they might rethink their current job roles in order to contribute to shared leadership in their team or organisation. It maps both the potential challenges and the opportunities for development that each person sees in this transformation process.

The expected outcome of this activity is a map of the new roles through which different team members can contribute to the practice of shared leadership in the team and/or organisation. When team members share their personal reflections, they can together agree on how different team members can contribute to leading together in the best way by assuming new responsibilities and roles.

Practice: Redefining my own role

RE-THINKING MY ROLE CANVAS

(1) My new roles and responsibilities are...

How could I expand/rethink my current job role to contribute to shared leadership in our team/organisation? Which new roles would I be interested to take or try out? List the new roles and the purpose of these roles. For example, a meeting facilitator role or a coaching role... For each role define the purpose of the role.

(2) My challenges and opportunities

What might be the challenges in fulfilling these new roles as part of practicing shared leadership? Is there something I need to stop doing or something I need to change in my own behaviour to fulfill these new roles? What new skills can I develop or other development opportunities I see for myself fulfilling new roles?

(3) I can tell I'm succeeding when...

What are the external visible signs when you perform well these new roles? What are the desirable outcomes of these roles? How would you measure your own success?

A practical tool for rethinking your current job role through the lens of your desired contribution to shared leadership.

4.4 Competencies needed for managers and employees

Leading together requires developing skills that are often not rewarded in traditional hierarchical settings or taught in a typical classroom or university course. These skills are often difficult for the untrained eye to notice. They are usually skills developed through practice, experimentation, awareness and reflection on the dynamics that emerge when working with others. We have compiled an initial list of these skills, including listening, dialogue, navigating conflict, giving and receiving feedback, coaching, daring to be vulnerable at work and facilitation. In this section, we provide an overview and highlight some related resources worth exploring.

For those who want to explore this further, Scharmer's u.lab is an initial resource we recommend visiting: presencing.org/theoryu

Listening is perhaps the most underestimated. Obviously, it is not only about hearing what someone is saying. Otto Scharmer, the creator of Theory U*, describes four levels of listening that illustrate the extent to which this skill can be developed. The first is *downloading*. This happens when you listen while confirming what you already think, filtering everything through your own experience. The second is *factual listening*, when you are able to notice what is new or different in

generouslistening.org/

what someone says. The third is *empathic listening*, when you are able to shift perspectives to see the world through the other person's eyes. The fourth, which Scharmer calls *generative listening* is the one hardest to acquire: a quality of presence where something new can emerge that neither person could have arrived at alone. Most of us spend more time than we realise at the first level. Moving towards the deeper ones is a practice. Another resource to check out is the Vuslat Foundation and their concept of *Generous Listening**: listening not just as a way to understand, but as an act of genuine care and attention towards the other person. It involves listening to yourself, to others and to nature.

Closely connected to listening is the skill of **dialogue**. This means being able to host conversations where the goal is not to convince but to explore. Where you can remain open to having your mind changed, and where disagreement is treated as something useful and appreciated. This skill is harder to cultivate in cultures that value having the right answer.

In Chapter 3, "Transforming culture and the way we relate to each other", you can find more information and suggestions for practising listening and dialogue.

Navigating conflict well becomes more important as more people become involved in shaping the direction and making decisions. More voices naturally means more friction. It is part of how teams think together. Learning how to express disagreement respectfully, stay present when things get uncomfortable, and work through tension are vital qualities to develop.

Coaching and **giving feedback** have traditionally been associated with managers. However, in a team that leads together, these skills are also shared among members. Supporting a colleague's development, asking a good question at the right moment, offering an honest observation or coaching support are all practices that help the team take care of itself and keep learning. What matters just as much is **receiving feedback** – cultivating openness and approaching feedback with curiosity rather than defensiveness. You can find more tips on coaching and feedback in Chapter 3.

Vulnerability is about having the courage to say "I don't know", asking for help and admitting when something is not working. In many organisations, these things have been treated as signs of weakness, and people are often scared to practise them. Leading together asks people to unlearn that, and to discover that being honest about uncertainty or a tough situation you are going through is often what opens up the most meaningful and productive dialogues. Being vulnerable means having the courage to share intimate and vulnerable things about yourself that you might not dare to reveal in a hierarchical and performance-driven organisation. For example, sharing that you are stressed because you have been spending a lot of your time worrying and taking care of your child or parent with health issues, which has resulted in you not being able to focus at work or devote the time and energy others expect you to.

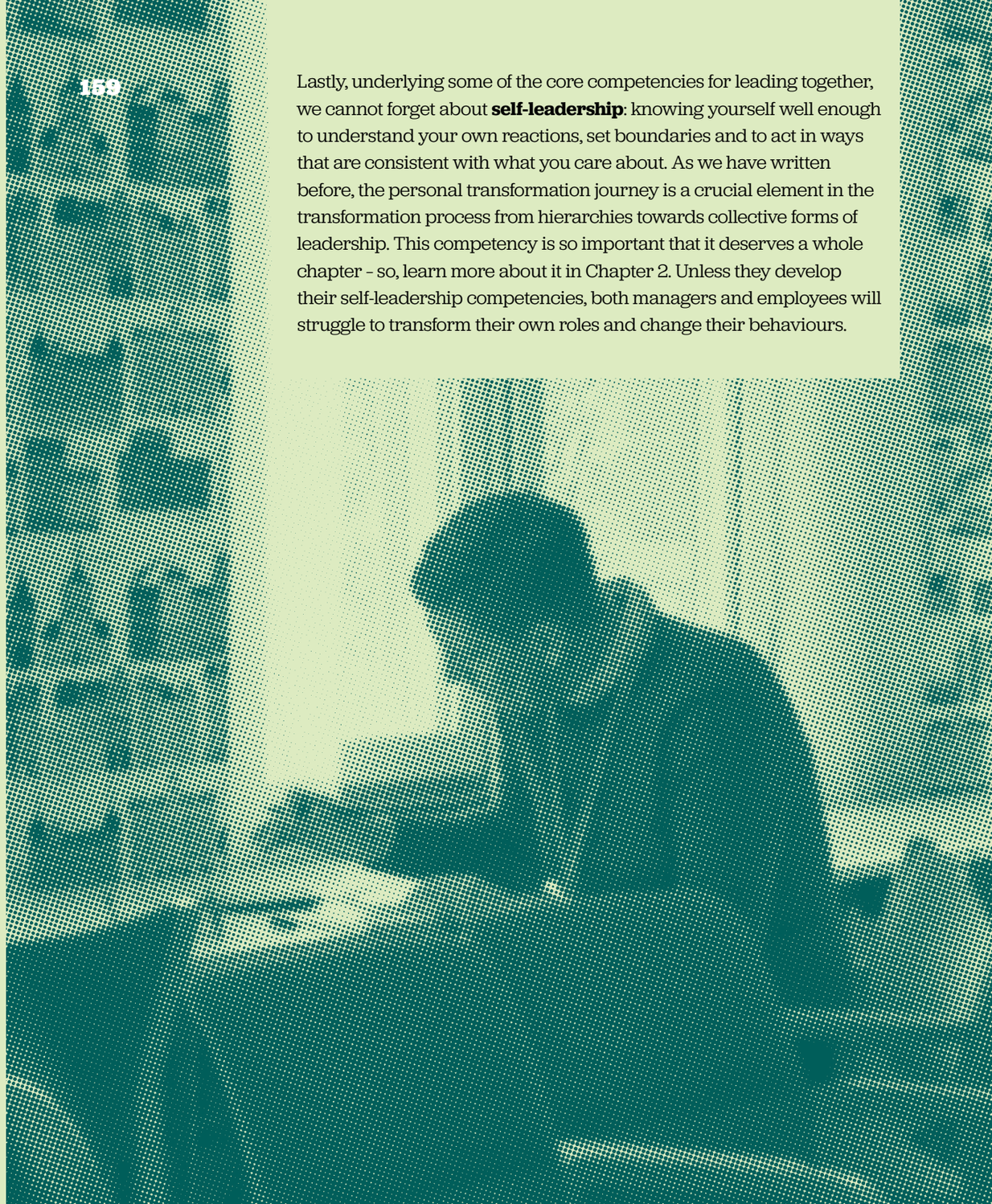
And then there are **facilitation skills.** These are about creating the conditions needed for meaningful conversation and co-creation. They also involve helping to maintain focus on the purpose of a meeting or workshop and helping ensure that all voices are heard. Facilitation means helping a group converge when their voices are too fragmented, going in different directions, or diverge; when everyone is stuck in existing ways of thinking and becoming too complacent with the status quo. We were surprised to discover that not many of the managers in our projects had the skills needed to facilitate co-creation within their teams. Furthermore, many employees would benefit from developing these skills. Some organisations participating in our projects have therefore actively invested in sending people from across their organisation to facilitation courses. Anyone can develop these skills through practice.

artofhosting.org

If you want to learn more, you can explore the Art of Hosting* community, a global network of people interested in applying facilitation through participatory methods in different organisational contexts. Two other practical resources we recommend are books. One is the Swedish book *Facilitera*! (Facilitate!), featuring a lot of facilitation exercises written by Anna Gullstrand. The other one is the Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making, a practical book by Sam Kaner that helps groups develop shared understandings. Diane Musho Hamilton* is also a master facilitator and award-winning mediator whose courses we found useful for further developing facilitation skills.

dianemushohamilton.com

Lastly, underlying some of the core competencies for leading together, we cannot forget about **self-leadership**: knowing yourself well enough to understand your own reactions, set boundaries and to act in ways that are consistent with what you care about. As we have written before, the personal transformation journey is a crucial element in the transformation process from hierarchies towards collective forms of leadership. This competency is so important that it deserves a whole chapter – so, learn more about it in Chapter 2. Unless they develop their self-leadership competencies, both managers and employees will struggle to transform their own roles and change their behaviours.



Voices from the field

In both Denmark and Sweden, the law requires that every employee have a person formally responsible for their workplace. That legal reality means that in the public sector, the question has never been whether to remove managers, but rather how their role needs to change. Mette Aagaard has spent years working with this question, and her answer is grounded in what she calls the hybrid model: an organisational design where formal leadership structures continue to exist alongside distributed decision-making. Here, the challenge is learning to make both work together without one undermining the other.

The clearest example she draws on is a child welfare NGO in Denmark with around 250 employees. Mette has followed them closely, and their approach, work, and impact formed an important part of the research for her own book on shared leadership*. They started their journey in 2018 and have persistently continued to develop their own model. The way they explain it is through a spatial metaphor. The traditional organisational structure, the reporting lines, the formal manager, the place where someone assesses how you are doing and whether you have access to development, is what they call "the place where you live". It is where you feel a sense of connectedness, where someone holds responsibility for your well-being and growth. The circles, the distributed decision-making structures, they call "the place where you go to work". The two serve different purposes and neither replaces the other.

Within that model, the role of the formal manager shifts considerably. At "home", the manager's job is to maintain an ongoing dialogue with each employee: asking how they are doing, if anything is standing in the way of them feeling committed and able to thrive, and whether there are conflicts that need addressing. Checking whether the base is safe. When it comes to the work, the manager's role is to ensure that mandates are clear, that aims are well-defined, and that decision-making authority is genuinely distributed rather than just nominally so. If two teams are struggling to coordinate, the manager does not step in and solve it. Rather, the manager creates the conditions for the people involved to solve it themselves. "My role would be to invite that dialogue, but not to solve the problem. To facilitate, to keep the dialogue open, not jump into solution mode right away." There is even a phrase for the temptation to do otherwise: "stealing decisions". Once you have given the right to decide to someone else, you cannot come and take it back. "You have to keep them there."

However, certain responsibilities remain with top management. Strategy, for instance, is still the responsibility of senior leaders, even if others should be involved in it. What's important is the overall shift in the manager's role – from the go-to fix-it person to a facilitator of dialogue, decision-making, and exploration.

djoefforlag.dk/products/medledelse

According to Mette, what this shift requires goes deeper than a set of new skills. There is thinking that needs to be unlearned before new thinking can take root, and it operates at such a subconscious level that making it conscious is the necessary first step. One held assumption she often works to dismantle is the belief that consensus is the foundation of all good decision-making, and that when consensus cannot be reached, the manager must step in and decide. Replacing that assumption requires developing a genuinely different relationship to disagreement: the capacity to refrain from using whatever formal or informal power you hold to push your own preferences through, and to stay in a mode of exploration rather than resolution. "It's perfectly fine that I don't agree with you. I don't need to agree with you in order for us to move forward and explore and improve and execute." That is not primarily a skill, she says. It is a fundamental belief which, once understood and held, gradually translates into action and eventually becomes a skill.

The same logic applies to what Mette calls the dance between managers and employees, a dynamic she has seen play out in every organisation she has worked with. The steps are familiar: an employee notices something that is not working and reports it to the manager, and both parties operate from the shared assumption that it is the manager's job to fix it. If the manager does not act, the employee is entitled to complain. And managers, she says, largely accept this arrangement, feeling the full weight of a responsibility that is both isolating and structurally impossible to discharge well. "If someone

tells me two colleagues cannot collaborate, or an employee looks completely exhausted, or a department can't make sense of a recent change, I feel it's 100% my responsibility to fix it. That leaves managers in a very lonely place, but also a very inefficient one, because we are very rarely able to solve these kinds of issues alone."

The dance becomes a blaming cycle. Managers want employees to take more responsibility for the shared workplace and grow frustrated when they do not. Employees feel ready to take responsibility but find that without a real mandate, their initiative leads nowhere. "It's only if he or she agrees with me that my responsibility can actually be used for anything." Both sides are right about the other, and neither can move without the other moving first.

The shift Mette is pointing towards calls for a replacement of that whole dynamic with something different: the idea that whatever occurs is a shared responsibility, and that simply naming a problem does not fulfil your part of it. "I offer my willingness to come up with ideas. I offer my collegial support regardless of whether you are a manager, an employee, or a colleague. We need to figure out what we can do together." It sounds straightforward when stated plainly. She is honest: getting it to work in practice is something else entirely.

4.5 Challenges with changing roles forleading together in hierarchical organisations

While the vision of leading together can be promising, it rarely happens without encountering obstacles, friction and problems along the journey. One common source of resistance comes from above. Leaders at higher levels of the organisation may see leading together

as a risk to control, compliance, and standardisation, since many of its initial benefits may not be easily captured by traditional key performance indicators. Managers from above can worry that greater team autonomy will lead to misalignment, or that allowing a group to experiment will create pressure for change when the organisation is not yet ready for it. This can show up as scepticism, a lack of direct support, or even more direct interventions that pull a team back towards hierarchical models.

Resistance can also come from the manager, even when their intention is to offer support. As we previously mentioned, letting go of control is harder than it sounds. Particularly for people who have built their job identity around being the one who decides and takes responsibility for solving problems and fixing things. Sharing those responsibilities can feel like losing something important to them and can lead to contradictions they might not be aware of. For example, saying the right things about leading together while stepping in too soon or overruling decisions made by the team. Working through this with self-reflection is part of what the transition asks of managers. Building a feedback culture where colleagues dare speak up when managers overstep is necessary. Forums where managers and external coaches can discuss these issues, learn from each other, and offer support are also a vital part of the transformation process.

From the employee side, perhaps the most underestimated challenge is that not everyone wants more responsibility, at least not directly. Some people find genuine clarity and comfort in knowing that someone else is responsible for the direction and makes the tough decisions. Others worry that stepping forward will expose what they do not know. And some have been disappointed so many times before, in environments where taking initiative was encouraged in words but undermined in practice. Building the trust needed to move past this takes time. People come to lead together at different paces and from different experiences: the baggage of the past needs to be respected.

There is also the question of how the group fits within the broader organisation. Teams trying to practise leading together while embedded in traditional hierarchical structures often find themselves navigating ongoing tensions. For example, performance systems are usually built around individual accountability. Such systems can make it hard to recognise shared contributions. Budgeting processes can require decisions to be made faster than dialogue allows. Career paths can follow traditional ladders, leaving people uncertain about what growth looks like in a team that shares leadership. These aspects can erode a team's efforts unless they are named and negotiated with the wider organisation, or at least recognised openly within the group.

The early stages of leading together also tend to require more time. This might be perceived as extra work: more conversations, more meetings, more processes, new learnings. In teams where there is a need for short-term results, the transition can be viewed as an inconvenience, which is not taken well and can feel difficult to justify. In those cases, teams will need to be thoughtful about where they put their energy, understand the potential benefits in the medium and long terms, and be honest with themselves about when a quicker approach is the right call.

Another important point we want to highlight is that the journey towards leading together is not linear. There are many factors that will affect it, from internal changes like the arrival of new team members, to external pressures such as budget cuts, shifts in organisational priorities, or managerial changes made above in the hierarchy that can affect the progress towards leading together. When some of these things happen, it is a signal that the manager may need to step back into a more active role for a time, to help rebuild the structures and the processes that allow the team to lead together. It also entails that team members continuously look for and reflect on the obstacles, and see how they can adapt and evolve as a group. Recognising that rhythm, rather than treating it as failure, is part of what makes the approach sustainable over the long term.

This last reflection pinpoints the challenge of maintaining the commitment over time. Especially when progress feels slow or the collective work becomes demanding, teams can unintentionally fall back into old patterns. Leading together requires regularly revisiting why the transformation matters, reflecting collectively on what has changed, learning continuously from what is happening, and renewing the shared intention to keep growing together.

Voices from the field

Resistance is one of the most consistent challenges in any transformation towards leading together, and it takes many forms. There are those who are sceptical from the start, those who engage initially but pull back when things get difficult, and those who have been in an organisation long enough that the prospect of changing now, perhaps close to retirement, simply does not feel worth the effort. Karin Tenelius has worked with all of these, and her approach begins with a fundamental observation: much of what appears to be resistance is usually misunderstanding.

"If people understand what it could be, most are actually positive," she says. The problem is that in the early stages of any such process, people fill in the gaps of their understanding with their worst fears. They imagine chaos, or the loss of things they value, or something vaguely threatening that they cannot name. "There are so many misunderstandings in the beginning when introducing shared leadership that make them negative, so you have to invest a lot of time early on to distinguish what this is about, what it is and what it is not." That investment of time upfront, she argues, is not a detour from the real work. It is the real work, because people who operate from misunderstanding will resist even the changes they would welcome if they understood them properly.

Once the misunderstandings are cleared, the next step is to move from the organisational level to the personal. It is not enough to explain why the change is good for the organisation. People need to be able to see what it means

for them individually before they are genuinely ready to engage. "Getting to the level of individual self-interest is necessary before people move. If they understand what's in it for them, they can be onboarded much more easily and quickly, without getting stuck." And the framing matters too. Presenting change as a destination, a fixed end state that the organisation is moving towards, tends to generate more resistance than presenting it as a journey, something that will evolve and that people are part of shaping. "It's not about 'this is where we're going'; it's about starting a journey towards something, and things will evolve."

Karin has also made a deliberate shift in the language she uses. She no longer leads with the term "self-organising", which can trigger exactly the kind of anxious misreading she is trying to avoid. Instead, she talks about strengthening collaboration, a word that most people already believe in and want more of, and that carries none of the associations with chaos or loss of structure that self-organisation can evoke. "Real collaboration, in the end, leads to self-organising," she says. But you do not have to start there.

If you would like to explore the ideas in this chapter further, Samantha Slade's book *Going Horizontal: Creating a Non-Hierarchical Organization, One Practice at a Time* offers a practical guide to redistributing authority and rethinking roles in everyday organisational life.

4.6 Questions for reflection

1. How would you describe your current role? What parts of the job give you joy and energy and what parts of it drain you?
2. What responsibilities do you hold that you think someone else on your team might be better placed to take on, or more motivated by?
3. What tasks would you like to do but you haven't tried because they fall outside your job description?
4. What assumptions do you carry about what a "good manager" or "good employee" looks like? Where do those assumptions come from?
5. If you are a manager, in what moments do you find it hardest to let go of control? And if you are a team member, in what moments do you find it hardest to step up and take initiative?
6. How do you respond when a colleague makes a mistake or tries something that doesn't work?
7. To what extent do you feel you know your colleagues' strengths, interests and life circumstances? What can you do to get to know them better?
8. When something isn't working in your team... What is your first instinct? Is it to report it, fix it yourself, stay quiet, or bring it to the group? What does that instinct tell you?
9. How do you support the leadership in your team beyond your formal role? What else do you think is possible?
10. What would it mean for you personally if your team led itself more collectively? What do you feel would be the benefits for you, and how would you perceive it as a loss?
11. What is one leadership responsibility that you could imagine taking on? What would you need to feel ready?
12. How comfortable are you with saying "I don't know" or "I need help" in your team? What shapes that comfort or discomfort?
13. What would change in your team if roles were more fluid and distributed based on interest and capacity rather than fixed titles?
14. In what ways could you better support a colleague who is going through a difficult period? And how would you ask for such support in case you needed it?
15. What is one small step you could take today to contribute differently to how your team leads together?

4.7 Conclusions

The journey towards leading together asks something from everyone involved. For managers, it requires letting go of control and learning to lead through questions, space, and trust. For employees, it demands taking initiative and stepping into ownership, letting go of past experiences and previous work culture. Neither shift happens quickly, and neither happens alone. What makes it possible, over time, is not a method or a structure. Instead, it's a gradual change in how people see themselves and each other – less as fixed roles performing a score, and more as individuals who are continuously learning, evolving and contributing. The competencies explored in this chapter (listening, dialogue, feedback, coaching, facilitation, being vulnerable) are not add-ons to this process. They are the process. Improving these skills requires practice, honest self-reflection, feedback from colleagues, and a culture that allows mistakes and supports people to keep trying and experimenting – especially when things become uncomfortable and uncertain.

5

Embedding participatory structures and processes for leading together

{ELENA'S STORY}

THE EMAIL ARRIVES ON A THURSDAY AFTERNOON IN early February: the department's annual budget, broken down by category, with a note from the director asking managers to confirm their allocations by the end of the month. As usual.

Elena reads it twice. The numbers are almost identical to last year. Home visit hours: same. Administrative overhead: slightly up. And yes, there is the footnote reminding managers that all new initiatives require approval through the standard submission process.

She forwards it to her calendar. She has done this every February for seven years.

Then she stops.

She thinks about the last four months. The open hour meetings, Jonas's question on the whiteboard, Sara's growing confidence. She thinks about participatory structures: *If you change the culture but not the structures, the structures will eventually win*.

She looks at the budget email again.

The structure, she realises, has been saying something to her team every year without anyone noticing: *the important decisions are made before you arrive. Your job is to implement them*.

Every open meeting, every honest conversation, every carefully created condition… and then this email lands and quietly undoes the message. Not maliciously. Just structurally.

She opens a new email to her team. She stares at the blank subject line for a moment. Then she writes: "This year I'd like us to decide the budget together. Can we put 90 minutes in?"

She sends it before she can talk herself out of it.

Elena comes to the meeting having done something she has never done before: she shares the full budget document with the team in advance, with no prior markings, no suggested allocations, and no hints about what she thinks the right answer is. Just the numbers and a single question at the top of the shared document: "If this were your budget to allocate, what would you prioritise and why?"

The conversation does not go smoothly. Per wants to protect the administrative hours because he's seen what happens when they get cut. Sara pushes for more investment in community-facing work. Jamal asks a question nobody has a clean answer to: "How do we measure whether we're spending this money on the right things?" It's the same question the KPI dashboard has been failing to answer for years, and here it is, surfacing from the team itself, in the middle of a budget meeting.

Jonas is quiet for the first 40 minutes. Elena notices but says nothing.

Then he puts something on the table.

Not the coffee morning proposal that he initiated one year ago, but a question: "What if part of the budget was not pre-allocated at all? What if we kept a small amount of it fluid, and decided how to use it quarterly, based on what we're actually seeing out there?"

The room considers this.

It is, Elena thinks immediately, *slightly impractical. The approval process would require…* she stops herself. She lets the thought form fully before judging it.

It is slightly impractical. It is also exactly right in principle. A small pool of truly flexible resources, governed by the team, responsive to what

they're actually encountering in the field. It would require her to negotiate something with the director… It would require a different kind of accountability structure. It might be very impractical for the IT systems that require filing some reports…

"I think we should try it," she says. "I'll work out what it takes to make it possible."

The final allocation looks nothing like what Elena would have decided alone. She approves it with a feeling she recognises from the team meeting three months ago: the particular discomfort of trusting something you didn't design.

Six weeks later, Jonas uses the first quarterly allocation of the flexible pool to fund three community coffee mornings. Previously, the community coffee morning concept had been cited as an example of why clearer submission guidelines were needed. This time, there is no submission. There is a fifteen-minute conversation in an open hour meeting where Jonas explains what he's seeing, the team asks three questions, and it is a safe enough experiment to test.

They do it.

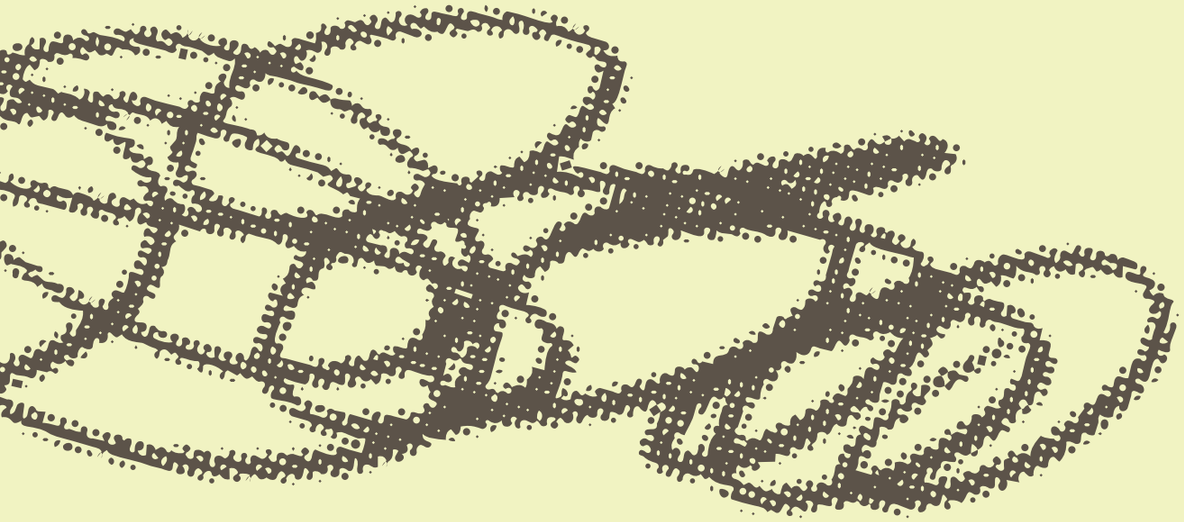
Mrs. Andersson comes to the first community coffee. She brings a neighbor Elena has never heard of –a woman in her eighties who, it turns out, has been entirely unknown to the department despite living only two streets away.

There is no column on the KPI dashboard for this. Elena writes it in her notebook instead.

*

5.1 Creating participatory structures for leading together

The shift towards more collective forms of leadership not only requires cultural transformation, but it also necessitates making concrete changes to how work is organised, how decisions are made, and how resources are allocated. Participatory structures provide the frameworks and processes that allow genuine collaboration and shared leadership to function in practice. Without these structures, it becomes difficult to sustain new practices, and organisations tend to default back to conventional hierarchies. Participatory structures inscribe the principles of shared leadership and participation into the system, making the system a little bit less vulnerable and reducing reliance on the specific individuals who initiated the principles in the first place to maintain them. When the practice of leading together spreads to other parts of organisation - beyond the initial teams that prototyped them - structures and processes become easier to transfer and spread than culture, which is more sensitive and bound to people and context.



5.2 From top-down to co-creation principles

Traditional hierarchical organisations operate on top-down control principles. Decisions flow from senior leadership downwards, information is shared on a "need to know" basis, and participation is often limited to implementing decisions made elsewhere. This approach assumes that those at the top have the best view of the entire system and possess the needed expertise to make good decisions.

Co-creation principles operate from fundamentally different assumptions. They recognise that valuable knowledge and insight exist throughout the organisation–those closest to the work often understand its realities better than those in distant leadership positions. Co-creation assumes that better decisions emerge when diverse perspectives contribute to shaping them, and that people are more committed to implementing decisions they helped create. The shift from top-down to co-creation principles means redesigning organisational processes to enable meaningful participation in the decisions and work that affect people.

This doesn't mean everyone participates in every decision–that would be both inefficient and exhausting. Rather, it means thoughtfully designing participation into organisational processes: determining how meetings should be held, who needs to be involved in which decisions, creating clear processes for how decisions will be made, and building in mechanisms for input, feedback, and accountability. The goal is not maximum participation, but appropriate participation–involving the right people in the right ways at the right times.

In the following section, we describe some examples of participatory structures. These are the structures that have been identified by experts and organisations who have worked with collective forms of leadership and self-management for a long time as the most important for change. In the following "Voices from the field" sections, experts who have been advisors in our research projects also reflect on where to start as you begin to test participatory structures in your own organisation. Which structures might be easier to introduce than others and which structures demand a higher maturity level for leading together before teams and organisations are ready to adopt them?

Voices from the field

When it comes to introducing participatory structures, Mette Aagaard's first piece of advice is about pace: "I would definitely take it slow, because there's so much at stake for the managers in particular." Managers need to feel safe enough to genuinely distribute mandates, and employees need to feel confident that what is being proposed is not just another initiative that will be replaced by a different buzzword in three years. Change fatigue is real, and moving too fast feeds it.

With that caveat established, her practical recommendation is to work simultaneously across four tracks. But when asked to identify the easiest starting point, she points to something specific: find a task, not a team, that could genuinely benefit from distributed mandate and faster decision-making, and build a small experiment around that task. "Look at the task more than at the teams: which tasks could benefit from distributed or shared leadership? Then start organising a team around that task, where you would immediately start deploying the principles of shared leadership." The key is to choose something that is meaningfully connected to daily operations, but not the most complex or high-stakes thing you could possibly attempt.

She draws on an example from an elderly care home she worked with some years ago. One team was made responsible for nutrition and food: a task that was integrated into daily operations, and where a different way of organising seemed likely to help. They formed a team around it, introduced participatory meeting structures drawing on sociocracy, defined clear roles, and developed new ways of engaging with the elderly residents living in the home. Full decision-making power was given to that team. It became, as she puts it, a small experiment that would test not only the team's capacity to work in a new way, but the leadership team's actual readiness to hand over the mandate.

That readiness, she says, is where the most common and most consequential pitfall lies. "It sounds so appealing to most modern leaders that they really want to do this. But then, when it comes to it, the day the team makes a decision you do not agree with, that's usually when the mandate disappears. And that doesn't work." Giving a team decision-making power and then quietly retrieving it the moment a decision is made that the manager would not have made is not distributed leadership. It is distributed leadership with an invisible veto attached. "You need to figure out what to do when the team makes a decision you do not like." Starting with a task that is relevant but not the most difficult one you can imagine is partly about manageability, and partly about giving the team a realistic chance of following through.

The same elderly care home had a second team organised around activities for residents, including sing-alongs, small excursions, visits from a neighbouring school, and knitting groups. Again, relevant and meaningful work, but not the kind of territory where a bold decision would provoke a crisis. Around that task, the organisation began structuring what distributed leadership actually required in practice: what decision-making power would look like, how roles would be distributed, what the manager's role would become, how interactions between the team and leadership would be defined, and how targets would be set. "You have these small labs where you test the structures at a micro level," she says, "and then afterward you start figuring out how to deploy this to a larger part of the organisation."

The sequence matters. Starting with the whole organisational structure and trying to redesign everything at once is, in her view, simply too challenging to be workable. The small lab approach allows teams and leaders alike to learn what a distributed mandate actually feels like before they are asked to trust it at scale.

5.3 Participatory meeting structures

As described earlier in this handbook, adopting participatory ways of working involves shifting towards more purposeful work–both in terms of how people experience it and the value it creates. Since meetings constitute a large proportion of work time, it is crucial to design meetings that create genuine value and include only those who need to be there. Our research consistently shows that meetings consume a lot of people's time (especially for managers), leaving little room for other activities, yet they often fail to deliver meaningful value. Compounding this problem, organisational norms around meetings are not always questioned or challenged, even when ineffective. If we genuinely want to encourage participation–whether in generating ideas or making decisions–developing intentional practices for how we meet becomes essential.

Different purposes call for different meeting designs. An information-sharing meeting should look fundamentally different from a decision-making meeting, which should look different from a creative problem-solving session. Each type of meeting requires appropriate structures to enable genuine participation rather than passive attendance. This means being intentional about several dimensions of meetings:

Purpose clarity: Why are we meeting? What do we need to accomplish together that cannot be accomplished asynchronously or through other means? If the purpose is simply information sharing, which could be accomplished through documentation, the meeting may not be necessary.

Appropriate participation: Who actually needs to be present for this meeting's purpose? Who has the relevant expertise or perspective? Who will be affected by the decisions made? Who needs to be informed but doesn't need to actively participate in the discussion?

Process design: What meeting structure and facilitation approach will enable the level of participation needed? Should we focus on small group discussions, paired conversations, silent reflection, or a dialogue with the whole group? How can we ensure the quieter voices are heard alongside the louder ones?

Role clarity: Who will facilitate the meeting to keep it focused and participatory? Who will document decisions and next steps? Who is responsible for the content and outcomes?

Organisations transitioning towards shared leadership often need to look over their meeting culture: Which meetings are actually necessary? Which ones leave people feeling energised versus drained? Where is genuine participation happening, and where are people just going through the motions? This audit often reveals that many meetings can be eliminated or redesigned, freeing up time and energy for more meaningful collaboration. Moreover, considering the importance of in-person meetings for supporting relationship building (as described in Chapter 3), it is important to agree on which meetings should be in person.

A practice for participatory meetings

Meeting roles: Purpose driver, Facilitator, and Documenter

One practical way to make meetings more participatory is to explicitly assign key meeting roles. This approach, drawn from sociocracy and other collaborative governance methods, ensures that necessary functions are fulfilled while preventing any one person from dominating.

Purpose driver: This person holds the meeting's purpose and content. They have proposed the meeting because there's work that needs to be done collectively. As the Purpose driver, they contribute clarity about what needs to be accomplished–whether that's a decision that needs to be made, a problem that needs to be solved, or information that must be shared. However, they don't run the meeting–that's the facilitator's role. The Purpose driver participates in the meeting just like anyone else, sharing their perspective and expertise. What distinguishes them is the responsibility they have for the content and outcomes–ensuring the meeting actually accomplishes what it was convened to accomplish.

Facilitator: This person serves the meeting's process. They're not responsible for the content or outcomes, but for helping the group work together. As the Facilitator, they watch the time and recommend process structures (for example, should we break into pairs? Do we need silent reflection? Shall we go around the table and share?). They ensure everyone who wants to speak gets heard, notices when the conversation is circling or getting stuck, and helps the group move towards its purpose. Critically, the Facilitator should generally not be the same person as the Purpose driver. Separating the roles allows the Purpose driver to fully engage with the meeting's content while the Facilitator focuses on the process. It also prevents the common pattern of one person both driving the content and controlling how the conversation unfolds.

Documenter: This person captures key decisions, action items, important points raised, and questions that need future attention. They're not documenting the transcript verbatim but rather distilling the meeting into what needs to be remembered and acted upon.Like the Facilitator, the Documenter generally doesn't lead the content discussion–their attention is split between listening and capturing. Good documentation makes the meeting's work available to others in an easily accessible format and makes it easier to follow through on commitments.

Rotating roles: Rather than always assigning the same people to drive the meeting's purpose, facilitate, or document, rotating these roles each meeting helps build capacity across the team. It also prevents power from concentrating–when everyone takes a turn facilitating, no one person will always control the meeting process.

Practice: At your next team meeting, assign each of these roles to a different person. Before starting, have each person briefly explain what their role entails. After the meeting, take some time to debrief by exploring these questions: How did having clear roles change the meeting? What worked well? What was challenging? How might you refine these roles for your team? Try using these meeting roles in your upcoming meetings and see what happens when you rotate them among team members.

Voices from the field

In our research projects, we've found participatory meeting structures to be the easiest way for teams to introduce new structures and invite more participation and co-creation among all team members. The perceived risk of trying new formats for weekly team meetings or monthly workplace meetings was low, and employees were ready to share responsibility for preparing and co-facilitating them. It was a safe space for colleagues to practise facilitation skills, and as their confidence grew, they also started facilitating workshops and events with other teams or external guests.

Where should one begin when teams are ready to start introducing more participatory structures? When we asked Nati Lombardo, she cautioned that not everything can change at once, and some changes are more accessible and welcome than others. Having considered this carefully, Nati says that decision-making is usually one of the most accessible entry points because you can start on a small scale. You do not need to overhaul the entire way the organisation makes decisions but can begin by identifying which decisions should involve more people, drawing boundaries around them, and giving clear mandates.

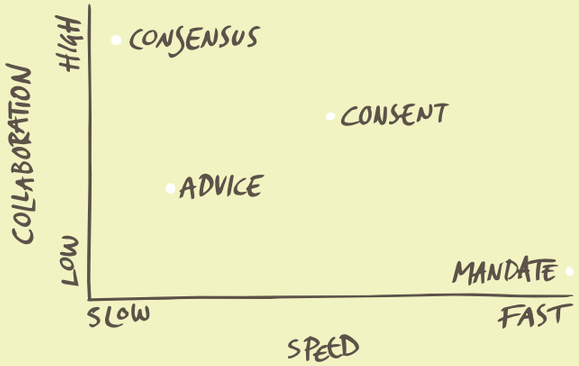
Sharing the Facilitator role during meetings and processes is another early win, she says. The reason is one she returns to often: the act of standing at the front of the room and facilitating a process gives individuals a sense of empowerment, which shifts the way they understand their own role. Pods, the peer support and coaching structures she described earlier, are also relatively straightforward to introduce to a team. Partly because they operate alongside existing structures rather than replacing them, and partly because they decouple development and support from the manager, which most people quickly recognise as a relief rather than a threat.

5.4 Participatory decision-making

Perhaps nothing reveals an organisation's true approach to collaboration more than how decisions actually get made. In hierarchical systems, decision-making authority is tied to position: managers decide for their teams, senior leaders decide for the organisation. Even when input is solicited, the person with formal authority retains veto power and makes the final call.

In participatory decision-making, authority is distributed more widely, but this is done thoughtfully rather than assuming all decisions should involve everyone. Different decisions call for different approaches:

Different types of decision-making processes.



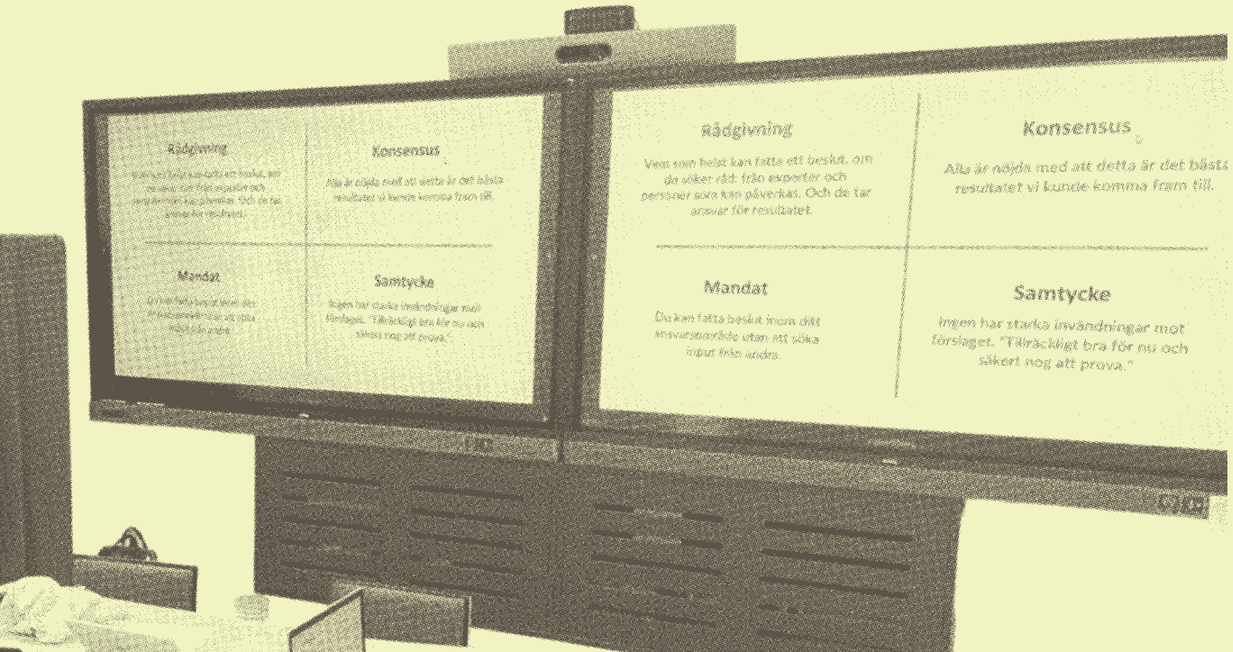
Advice process: The person closest to the decision or with the most expertise makes the decision, but only after seeking advice from those who will be affected and those with relevant expertise. This maintains clarity about who makes the decision while ensuring the decision benefits from diverse input. The advice giver doesn't have veto power, but the decision-maker is expected to genuinely consider the advice received.

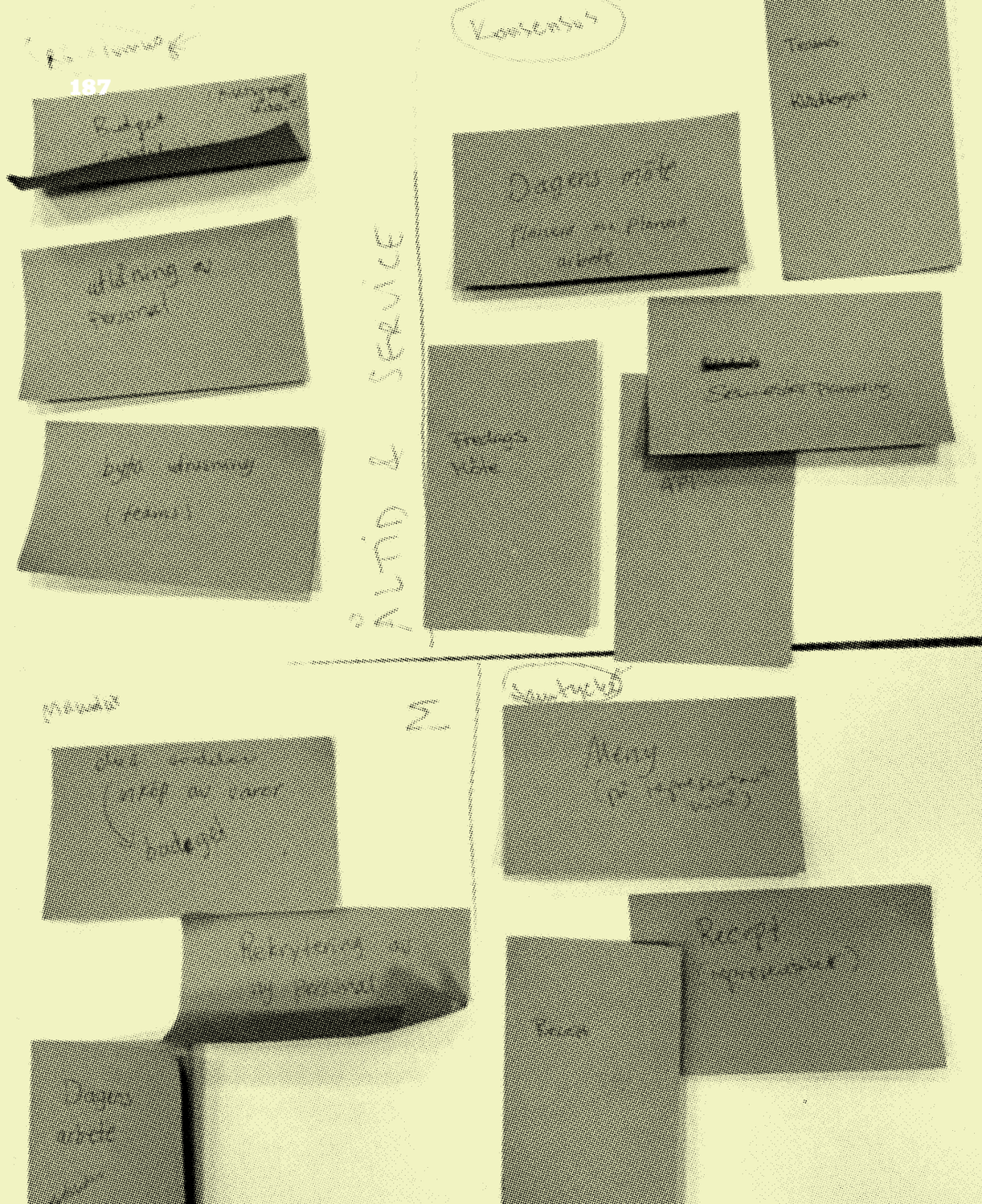
Consent-based decision-making: The group decides together, but instead of requiring everyone to agree (consensus), they only ask whether anyone has a principled objection–a reason to believe the decision would cause harm or move the organisation backward. This allows decisions to move forward when they're "good enough for now, safe enough to try" while still protecting against harmful choices. Consent recognises that in complex situations, we often can't know the perfect solution in advance–we need to experiment and learn.

Consensus-based decision-making: The group makes decisions by seeking solutions that everyone actively agrees with and supports. Through discussion and iterative refinement, proposals are modified until all members reach full agreement. While consensus builds deep commitment and ensures comprehensive input, it requires a significant amount of time and can create barriers to action when unanimous agreement cannot be achieved. Consensus assumes that the group can and should reach complete alignment before proceeding, which may not be suitable for complex or time-sensitive contexts where experimentation and learning are necessary.

Mandate: For certain operational decisions that need to happen quickly or repeatedly, the team can give an individual or small group a clear mandate to make decisions within defined boundaries. This isn't a return to hierarchy–it's the team consciously choosing to delegate authority for the sake of efficiency, with the understanding that the mandate may be reviewed and adjusted in the future.

The key is to clearly specify which decision-making process should be used for each type of decision. Without this clarity, groups often default to seeking consensus on everything (leading to exhaustion and slow decision-making) or deferring to whoever has the loudest voice or most formal authority (undermining genuine participation).





Practices for different decision-making processes

Decision protocol

Different types of decision-making processes.

The Decision protocol exercise helps teams identify and redesign their decision-making processes. First, ensure that participants understand the various types of decision-making processes. To create a protocol, participants begin by writing down the different kinds of decisions they make - whether in their work, team or organisation. Each decision should be written on a separate sticky note. Once complete, ask participants to place their sticky notes on the group's two-axis diagram: Risk vs. Reversibility. This creates a shared understanding of the decisions currently being made and how they are being made. The team can then negotiate which decision-making processes they want to change and begin redesigning them. Low-risk decisions that are reversible should be made by mandate. High-risk and reversible decisions should be made through an advice or consent process. Low-risk but more permanent decisions should also be made through an advice or consent process. Lastly, high-risk decisions that are permanent should be made through a consensus process. In hierarchical organisations, teams may find it challenging to make all decisions on their own since some decisions may fall outside their authority. However, this limitation itself can reveal important areas for broader organisational redesign and inspire next steps for addressing them. We recommend revisiting the protocol after a trial period to discuss and revise it based on experience.

For detailed facilitation guidance, see "Make Your Own Decision Protocol" at thehum.org/visitors/resources

Consent-based decision-making process

Consent-based decision-making offers a middle path between one person making the decision (mandate) and everyone having to agree (consensus). It's based on the principle, "Is this good enough for now, safe enough to try?"

The consent question: Instead of asking, "Does everyone agree with this proposal?", the consent process asks, "Does anyone have a principled objection to this proposal?" A principled objection is not simply "I don't like it" or "I would do it differently"–it's saying, "I have reason to believe this will cause harm or move us backward".

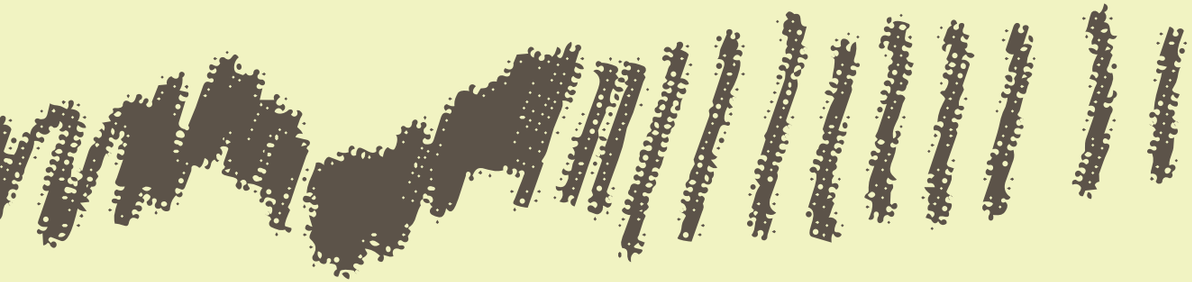
The consent process:

1. *Proposal development*: Someone develops a proposal–a specific suggestion for what should be done. This should be concrete enough to allow for evaluation. "We should improve our communication" is too vague. "We should have a 15-minute daily standup meeting at 9am" is concrete.
2. *Clarifying questions*: The group asks questions to gain a better understanding of the proposal. These are not opinions or concerns yet–just questions to clarify what's being proposed. "Would the standup be on video or just audio?" "What happens if someone can't make it at 9am?"
3. *Quick reactions*: The group completes a quick round where everyone briefly shares their immediate reaction. "I like this". "I'm uncertain about the timing". "I'm excited to try this". This tests the temperature of the room without requiring deep discussion yet.
4. *Concerns and suggestions*: Participants are now invited to share concerns and suggestions for improving the proposal. The proposer listens and can modify the proposal based on what they hear. This isn't a debate–it's a collaborative improvement of the idea.
5. *Amended proposal*: The proposer presents any changes they've made based on concerns and suggestions.
6. *Consent round*: The facilitator asks clearly: "Does anyone have a principled objection to this proposal?" Each person responds:
   - "I consent" or "No objection"
   - "I have an objection" (which they must explain)

7. *Integration*: If there are any objections, the group works to understand them and, if possible, modify the proposal to resolve the objection. This may necessitate making further amendments, gathering more information, or sometimes determining that the objection reveals a fundamental problem with the proposal.

Key principles:

- *Proposals are experiments*: You're not trying to find the perfect solution, but something good enough to try. You can always revisit and adjust based on what you learn.
- *Silence means consent*: If someone doesn't speak up during the consent round, the proposal moves forward. This places responsibility on each person to voice concerns rather than remaining silent and then complaining later.
- *Principled objections require reasoning*: You can't just say "I object". You must explain why you believe the proposal will cause harm or move the organisation backward. This prevents arbitrary blocking while protecting against genuinely problematic decisions.
- *The proposer has the authority to modify*: As the group shares concerns and suggestions, the proposer decides what changes to make. The group doesn't negotiate wordsmithing by committee–the proposer integrates feedback as they see fit. However, if they don't adequately address concerns, objections are more likely in the consent round.



For a detailed guide to facilitating processes for decision-making, visit "P.T.O – Decisions Games" in The Hum's resources at thehum.org/visitors/resources (free with account creation).

A practice for consent-based decision-making process: Try consent-based decision-making by applying it to a real but relatively low-stakes decision your team needs to make. Before starting, review the process steps and clarify the difference between "I would prefer something different" (not an objection) and "I believe this will cause harm" (a valid objection).

Voices from the field

Nati Lombardo reflects on some observations regarding decision-making processes and common tendencies around them. The pull toward consensus is understandable, being rooted in a genuine desire for inclusion, but it creates its own problems. “It falls into the trap of: everything needs to be decided by consensus, everyone needs to be involved in everything, and the pendulum swings too far the other way.” The tendency towards consensus is particularly strong in certain cultures, like Sweden. Nati’s preferred starting point is the advice process: a structure in which the person with the formal mandate to make a decision is expected to consult with those who will be affected by it or who have relevant expertise, before deciding. The final decision might still rest with the manager, but the act of genuinely seeking and listening to input changes the nature of the process in ways that matter. “Involving people in the process is what becomes important. People actually do listen.” It is a way of opening up the idea that participation is real, without the paralysis that full consensus processes can create.

For the kinds of decisions where managers might begin modelling the advice process, she thinks about situations where the outcome will directly affect the people around the decision-maker. Hiring is one example she finds useful across many different contexts: the person being brought into a team is going to work closely with colleagues who have relevant knowledge and a real stake in the outcome, so widening the process to include their perspective, even when the final decision remains with HR or a manager, makes the hiring more considered and signals something important about how the organisation operates. Budget questions are another possibility, particularly when there is discretionary money to allocate. Asking the people closest to the daily work how a pot of resources might best be

used, and genuinely taking that input into account, is a concrete and low-risk way of practicing the advice process while building the habit of involving people in decisions that affect them. “In smaller teams it’s a bit easier,” she acknowledges, “but in larger organisations it can be more challenging.” The principle, however, translates across contexts. Start with decisions that are meaningful but limited in scope. Involve the people who have the most relevant knowledge and the most direct stake in the outcome. Then let the manager or person responsible for the issue make the final call, ensuring the consultation is genuinely real rather than merely procedural.

5.5 Participatory budgeting and resource allocation

Money and resources represent real organisational power–they determine what work gets done and whose priorities get attention. In public sector organisations, budgets are typically allocated to specific silos in the yearly budget planning process, where top management makes key decisions, often without meaningful dialogue with those who will use the funds. This rigidity makes it difficult to respond to emerging needs, support cross-organisational collaboration, or adjust spending based on actual usage. Competition for resources between silos (and within them) further undermines collaboration. For example, one department with surplus funds may be unwilling to share with another facing shortfalls, even when doing so would benefit the organisation as a whole.

Hierarchical approval processes–where managers must sign off on every expenditure–signal a lack of trust in employees and waste valuable time that could be spent on strategic work rather than administrative gatekeeping. Moreover, managers are often the only ones with permission to approve costs related to IT systems. This lack of financial transparency can be a problem for employees who lack access to budget information that would help them make informed decisions about their work, even when such insight is essential to their roles.

Participatory budgeting aims to address these issues by fostering collaboration and transparency in resource allocation. There are several approaches organisations can take to make budgeting more participatory. First, organisations can redesign IT systems to increase budget transparency, ensuring that relevant employees have access to financial information. Second, budgets can be made more flexible, allowing adjustments based on actual spending and evolving needs–whether within teams or across departments. Third, funds can be allocated cross-organisationally as a way of supporting collaboration by creating shared resources that transcend departmental silos, thereby reducing competition and enabling joint initiatives. Specific processes can be designed to enable dialogue and collaborative decision-making among employees, both within teams, departments and across organisational silos. Organisations can begin by setting aside dedicated funds–even a small percentage–to pilot participatory

budgeting processes and test more flexible, collaborative approaches to resource allocation. A further approach could be to reimagine and experiment with how citizens can participate in budgeting questions.

Introducing participatory budgeting often demands a certain level of trust and is not the easiest participatory structure to introduce into a team or organisation that is still learning how to practise shared leadership. This is especially true for transparency and decision-making processes around salaries which lies at the furthest spectrum of working with participatory structures and is generally only reachable for teams and organisations once the basics are genuinely in place. In the public sector, where salaries are more regulated, the possibilities for employees to have an impact on them are limited. However, other parts of the budget might be more flexible and open to participation.

Participatory budget practice

When moving towards a more participatory budget process, one of the first steps a team or department can take is to remove salary costs from their yearly budget (since this will be hard to influence) and make the rest of the budget open for different proposals. Different groups responsible for specific initiatives, projects or tasks can estimate their budget needs and submit proposals. Proposals can be presented and mapped together by the entire team/department, and linked to the team's overall purpose and yearly goals or priorities. The team should decide how best to distribute the budget based on supporting the overall purpose and impact the team wants to make on society/their users (for example, what is best for the citizens they are serving?) rather than the specific needs of particular projects.

Financial information and recurring costs connected to different projects, initiatives or work areas can be made transparent to everyone. Every three months, the team can review the actual budget together and flexibly move resources between initiatives based on who needs them most to achieve the desired shared impact. Things will change during the year; some groups might be able to spend less money than initially planned and vice versa. Therefore, it benefits the whole team/department to maintain flexibility and distribute resources in a more emergent way. This process can strengthen a shared sense of responsibility and ownership, rather than having different departments, teams or groups always competing for resources.

5.6 Information sharing, transparency and accessible documentation

Meaningful participation in decision-making and budget allocation fundamentally requires access to relevant information. Individuals cannot participate effectively in decisions without understanding the key factors at play. Beyond enabling participation, improved documentation practices can capture situated knowledge from frontline practitioners, making local needs visible across the organisation. This better informs funding decisions and prevents redundant efforts caused by poor knowledge coordination. However, managing complex datasets across diverse domains and contexts presents significant challenges. Developing robust information-sharing systems is, nevertheless, critical if the public sector aims to make evidence-informed decisions and respond effectively to local needs–requirements now mandated by the new Social Services Act (Socialtjänstlagen). People who work closest to citizens and local contexts need systematic means to articulate and communicate these needs throughout organisational hierarchies.

Shared leadership requires much higher levels of transparency and more intentional approaches to information sharing. The default should be transparency: unless there are specific reasons for confidentiality–such as personal information, legal restrictions, or competitive sensitivity–information should be accessible to anyone in the organisation who might find it useful. However, simply making information available isn't enough. Information must be organised and presented in formats people can actually use. This might involve creating accessible summaries alongside detailed reports, using visual representations of data, or maintaining evolving documents that get updated as situations change rather than sending endless email updates. Indeed, participatory organisations invest in helping people understand not just what the numbers say, but what they mean–what trends they reveal, what questions they raise, and what context is essential for interpreting them properly.

Example of an inspirational practice

Buurtzorg: Participatory leadership in practice

Buurtzorg, a Dutch neighborhood nursing organisation founded in 2006, has become one of the most compelling examples of participatory leadership at scale. With over 10,000 nurses organised into self-managing teams of 10-12 people, Buurtzorg operates with virtually no middle management—just frontline teams and a small back-office of around 50 support staff. Each team has complete autonomy: hiring its own members, managing schedules, coordinating patient care, and controlling its budget. Such radical decentralisation is enabled by having robust systems for transparency and information sharing, which allow teams to operate independently while learning from each other.

Each Buurtzorg team has direct access to financial dashboards showing their costs, productivity metrics, and patient outcomes in real time. Teams can see their own performance data alongside anonymised comparisons with other teams and organisational averages, creating transparency without competitive pressure. This visibility allows teams to make informed decisions about resource allocation—whether to invest in additional training, purchase equipment, or adjust staffing levels—without seeking approval from managers.

Beyond financial data, Buurtzorg developed BuurtzorgWeb, an internal knowledge-sharing platform that functions as both a social network and an organisational wiki. Teams use it to share solutions to care challenges, access clinical protocols, find expertise across the organisation, and coordinate regional

initiatives. The system makes situated knowledge from frontline practitioners visible and accessible organisation-wide. When a team encounters a complex medical situation, they can quickly locate colleagues with relevant experience rather than waiting for hierarchical channels to connect them. All organisational information—from strategic plans to quality metrics—is accessible to anyone who needs it. With the exception of specific privacy or legal restrictions, the default is transparency.

This participatory approach has delivered remarkable results. Buurtzorg consistently ranks highest in patient satisfaction across Dutch home care providers and achieves better health outcomes, with fewer hospital readmissions and complications. Despite nurses spending significantly more time with each patient (focusing on holistic care rather than task-based checklists), overall costs are lower than traditional providers because preventive care reduces expensive crisis interventions. Employee satisfaction is exceptionally high, with very low turnover rates—nurses report feeling trusted, autonomous, and able to provide meaningful care. This model demonstrates that participatory structures and transparent information sharing aren't only ethically preferable, but can also produce superior outcomes – including higher quality, efficiency, and improved worker wellbeing – even in highly regulated, high-stakes environments.

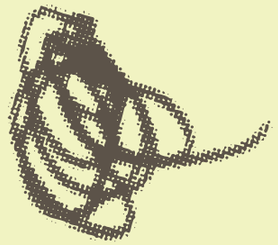
5.7 Challenges in introducing and maintaining participatory structures

Organisations implementing participatory structures face several systemic obstacles. Many organisational systems–from IT platforms to approval workflows–are built on hierarchical assumptions that force work to detour through traditional channels regardless of stated collaborative values. This requires auditing and redesigning processes to eliminate embedded hierarchical patterns. Resistance often emerges from other parts of the organisation that maintain hierarchical structures. Additionally, legal and regulatory requirements create real boundaries around certain decisions, though many assumed constraints don't actually have legal requirements attached. When distinguishing between actual legal requirements and organisational habits, it is necessary to consult with compliance experts. They can help identify where participatory approaches are genuinely possible.

Beyond structural barriers, participatory work requires developing different skills and maintaining an ongoing commitment. Many people lack experience with facilitation, distributed decision-making, and transparent communication, making skill development essential before implementing new structures. Time pressures can create tension, as participatory processes often take longer at first. However, this initial investment can lead to better decisions, greater effectiveness and smoother implementation down the line. Maintaining participatory approaches requires building them into organisational habits through documentation, regular review, explicit onboarding, and a collective commitment to preserving these practices - even when reverting to hierarchy might seem easier.

To learn more, explore these additional resources:
Sociocracy For All: sociocracyforall.org/content/

The Hum (thehum.org/visitors/resources): Tools and exercises for participatory processes



Voice from the artistic field

One way to directly experience what participatory structures actually feel like is to build something together under a set of enabling constraints. Dejan Srhoj describes an exercise he has used in organisational workshops that makes this clear: a group has to create a three-minute performance, and each person can contribute a movement or a movement sequence. That is the score. Within it, almost everything else is open. Nobody knows in advance who will contribute what, whether there will be music, how the space will be used, if one person will end up shaping most of the choreography or whether contributions will be distributed evenly. What is known is that everyone is invited, that the knowledge and desire each person brings is a legitimate resource, and that the goal is shared.

What emerges from the exercise, in a very short time, is a lived encounter with most of the questions that shared leadership poses. How do we co-create under the pressure of a real goal? Who do we need to satisfy: ourselves, the process, an audience member (customer)? What material conditions are required, and who provides them? Leadership shifts from person to person as the work unfolds, and that shifting is not theoretical but embodied, felt in the moment of deciding to step forward or step back. "In a very short time, you get to embody many of the topics or theories of how we can share leadership. And this usually allows for a much deeper reflection on questions like: *How am I acting in this group? How are we behaving together as a group? What is needed? What kind of environment do we need in order to do this collectively?*"

Beyond the workshop settings, Dejan draws on examples from his own artistic practice that point towards what organisations might look like if they trusted emergence over predefinition. He describes being part of an improvisational performance called Special Edition, by choreographer Andreja Rauch Podrzavnik, in which musicians and dancers would meet and perform together for approximately an hour. The only thing decided in advance

was the structure of duets, trios and quartets. Everything else, what actually happened between the performers, would emerge from the relations and the dialogue in the room. Magical moments might occur. So might complete miscommunication, egos taking over, and failures of listening and observation. "You're interested in all of this as an audience but also as a performer. And you go consciously into that risk, and everyone involved knows what those risks are. And this is not an inhibition but actually a quality that you're looking for."

Dejan can imagine a team within an organisation working with a similar proposal. We have a month, we have these people, and we want to create a certain service or achieve a certain goal. But how we do it, and exactly what emerges, we do not decide in advance. We allow for experimentation, knowing that some things will produce magic and some things will fail, and that both are part of the learning process. The contrast with how most organisations actually operate is obvious: "They first define a very clear goal but also processes for how to get there, and then there's very little space to actually experiment and find out how you could do it in different ways."

His own practice of mapping the city offers another angle on this. Dejan sets a score, in which the audience observes everything that unfolds in a certain part of the city as if they were watching a dance performance, translating what they see into a kind of fiction. The information one can gather in this way is rich: about how people relate, about how architecture defines the choreography of movement through space, about what they themselves are attending to and what they are looking for. He brought a version of this observational practice into the organisational workshops, inviting participants to observe their own working environment as if seeing it for the first time: noticing when people arrive at the office, when they leave, when they take breaks, how they relate to each other, and whether the space invites them to connect or to be isolated. "Without the assumption that they already know. So one goes into the practice with openness to seeing what emerges."

The most extended example he offers is a festival his collective once organised, an experiment in what a dance festival could be if it trusted its participants entirely. Instead of a fixed programme, they invited around 50 artists and performers, and asked each of them to bring along an invitation (instead of a finished artwork): an invitation to a workshop, practice, lecture, or proposal to explore something together. Each morning, the programme for the day was co-created over a shared breakfast. Nothing was scheduled in advance beyond those gathering moments. The score, as he describes it, was ten days and fifty people, with one rule: each day we create a menu for the day, and then that is it. "You trust the participants, that they have an interest in getting to know each other, sharing something, and learning together. You trust that they will show up even though they don't need to. You understand everything that is happening as information that you can work with."

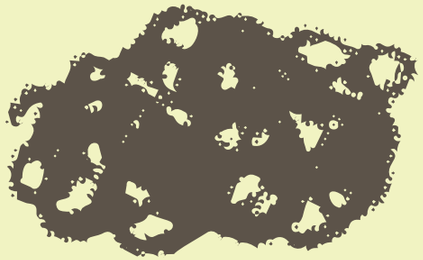
What emerged during those ten days was not chaos but festivity in its original sense: people celebrating together, teaching things they were still learning themselves, raising the topic of care, and questioning what it means to invite artists rather than artworks – to say we want people with whatever they can bring rather than inviting products. The experiment cost them 50 percent of their budget for the following year because funders did not recognise it as a festival in the expected sense. "By pretending, you usually get more money and budgets than by actually doing what a festival is – a festivity."

This last experience, in our opinion, illustrates the tension that runs through this handbook: between the systems that reward the appearance of control and the practices that make something new and meaningfully possible.

5.8 Questions for reflection

1. What processes do you already have in place in your team/ organisation that invite participation, co-creation and shared leadership?
2. What processes in your team/organisation do you feel are more top-down or within the domain of formal managers?
3. What enables versus hinders participation and shared leadership in your team/organisation today?
4. Which of the processes that formal managers are responsible for today would be most meaningful to democratise?
5. Which work tasks or teams in your organisation could be the best place to start for testing participatory structures?
6. Where can you find pockets of possibilities in your own team's work processes where it might be easy to start testing more participation and collective leadership?
7. How could you test more participatory meeting formats?
8. Which type of meeting could you most easily start prototyping with and how could such a meeting be redesigned to invite more participation and shared leadership?
9. How can you create possibilities for training and skills development in areas like facilitation that are at the core of practicing participatory structures?
10. Who might be the first ambassadors/people in your team/ who would be interested in participating in such training? How could you engage them?
11. What are the different types of decisions being made in your team and how do you typically make these decisions today?
12. If you could introduce more participative decision-making processes, which decisions would you make through mandate, advice process, consent and consensus?

13. In which areas would it be important to increase the mandate for individuals to make decisions within their own areas of responsibility and expertise without involving managers?
14. How could you try sharing responsibility for the processes that traditionally fall within the domain of formal managers and support functions (like HR)? For example, recruitment and onboarding of new team members, development and feedback talks, holding meetings, planning vacations, and creating a thriving work environment.
15. How is the budget planned and decided upon today in your team/organisation?
16. What are some first steps you could take to introduce more participation in budget planning and budget management within your team/organisation?
17. How transparent is information sharing in your team/organisation?
18. Which types of information should be made accessible to more people in your team/organisation to enable greater participation in decision-making and the practice of shared leadership?
19. In what forms should this information be made available to make it accessible and easily understandable?



5.9 Conclusions

In this chapter, we have discussed different aspects of how to embed participatory structures that enable leading together. We have argued that, without participatory structures, it becomes difficult to sustain practices for leading together over time, and organisations tend to default back to conventional hierarchies. Embedding participatory structures into an organisation makes the system less vulnerable and dependent on the specific people who initiated practices for shared leadership.

Not all participatory structures are easy to implement. Some demand a higher level of trust and maturity than others. Often, starting with participatory meeting structures and decision-making processes is the easiest, while structures around participatory budgeting, role distribution, and changing information-sharing systems for increased transparency might be more difficult. In this chapter, we suggested different practices and processes that can help you start implementing participatory structures in your own team and organisation.

Working with participatory processes requires different skills that are often lacking in traditional organisations built on hierarchies. Training and competence development in skills like facilitation and distributed decision-making are therefore crucial. Especially at the beginning of transformation processes, providing training can help you build a critical mass of people with the skills needed to introduce and spread practices and processes for shared leadership across your organisation.

6

Designing and navigating your own transformation journey

{ELENA'S STORY}

THE CONFERENCE IS BEING HELD IN THE MAIN HALL of the municipal building. The grand one on the first floor which is normally used for formal ceremonies. Two hundred people. Managers, employees, elected officials, and a few curious people from other municipalities who have heard something is happening in this department.

Elena appears on the programme twice: once as a panelist in the morning session about new ways to organise public sector work, and once in the afternoon, giving a short presentation on her team's journey. She has given versions of this talk seven times over the last six months: three times internally, twice at a national conference, twice to a delegation from a neighbouring municipality that had reached out after someone forwarded them the internal newsletter article about their success. Each time she gives the talk, she finds she has to update it, because things keep changing quickly in her department.

Her team's work is described in the third paragraph of the introduction: "A pilot in shared leadership that has produced measurable improvements in both team engagement and service outcomes, including a 23% reduction in staff sick leave, improved response times despite a flat budget, and qualitative feedback from care recipients indicating significantly increased sense of connection and support."

She reads the 23% figure and reflects back on February, one year ago, when she was staring at a KPI dashboard that told her almost nothing about Mrs. Andersson. She had not set out to improve the KPIs. She had set out to create conditions where her team could do

the work they actually believed in. The KPIs had followed quietly, like a byproduct.

She thinks this is probably the most important thing she has learned and also the hardest to put on a presentation slide.

The morning panel goes well. Elena speaks less than the other two panelists (a habit she has been cultivating) and asks the audience a question at the end rather than summarising her points. A few people appear slightly startled by this. Most lean forward.

In the break afterwards, she is approached by several people. She has learned to be present in these conversations, to resist the urge to hand people a reading list and move on. She asks questions. She listens to what people are actually asking beneath what they say they're asking, which is usually not "what did you do?" but "do you think this could work for someone like me?"

Jonas finds her between sessions.

He looks, she thinks, like someone who belongs in rooms like this one. He had facilitated this morning's opening activity: a 20-minute exercise with the whole room that he had designed himself, drawing on the embodied practices from Karin's workshops, but adapting them for a group of 200 skeptical public servants. It had worked out better than anyone expected. She had watched from the side of the room, genuinely surprised, as 200 people who'd been checking their phones when they arrived were suddenly in conversation with someone they'd never met, talking about something real.

"How did it feel?" she asks him.

"Terrifying," he says. "Good."

She nods. She knows exactly how this combination feels.

He tells her that two people have already approached him about the community coffee morning model: one from social services, one from the youth department. He has their cards. He is going to follow up next week. He says this without asking her whether he should, without checking whether it fits inside some boundary she has drawn. He says it the way someone says a thing they have already decided.

She remembers the person who'd turned his phone over and over in his hands at the Monday morning meeting. The one who wrote the date at the top of his notebook and nothing else for 20 minutes.

The afternoon session ends, and the formal programme dissolves into the noise of 200 people deciding whether to go home or keep talking. Elena is gathering her things when a man she doesn't recognise stops beside her.

He introduces himself as David. He manages a team in the urban infrastructure department with 12 people, mostly engineers, and a culture he describes, with a kind of exhausted honesty, as "very hierarchical, very technical, very convinced that this kind of thing isn't for them." He'd been at the morning panel. He'd heard her talk in the afternoon. He looks like a man who has been sitting with a question for a long time and has finally found someone he thinks might have the answer.

"I want to do what you've done," he says. "I just don't know where to start. What's the process? What did you do first?"

Elena's first instinct is precise and immediate: she knows exact-

ly what to give him. The personal canvas exercise. The open hour meeting format. Starting with culture before structure. Having honest conversations first. She could map it out on a napkin in 10 minutes. She has basically done exactly that, four times over the last six months, for four different people who'd asked her similar questions.

She opens her mouth.

And then she stops.

She thinks about the first leadership workshop. The workshop facilitator's words: *your role is to create conditions, not control outcomes*. She thinks about how she had sat in that workshop and nodded along at all the right moments and then gone back to her office and continued, for months, to hand people the answers they asked for because it was faster and it felt like helping.

She thinks about what Karin asked her, in the circle, when she described Jonas: *has it worked?*

She thinks about David's team. Twelve engineers. Very hierarchical, very technical, very convinced this isn't for them. If she gives David a sequence (step one, step two, step three), he will follow it or he won't. But either way, it will be her sequence, built for her context, her team, her particular combination of a Jonas and a Sara and a Per. It will not be his.

"Can I ask you something first?" she says.

David looks slightly surprised. "Sure."

"What made you come and talk to me just now? Out of everyone in this room?"

He thinks about it. "Something you said in the afternoon session. About the budget process. About deciding to try something before you knew if it would work."

"What was it about that specifically?"

He pauses. "I think… I've been waiting until I understood the whole thing before starting. And I'm starting to think that's not how it works."

Elena looks at him for a moment.

"*What's one thing*," she says, "that you could try next week? Not the whole transformation. One thing. Small enough that if it goes wrong, it's recoverable. Real enough that it would actually mean something to your team."

David is quiet. She waits. She has learned to wait and does not fill the silence.

"Well, there is this thing…"

*

In this chapter, we introduce you to some basic principles and tips for facilitating systemic transformation to keep in mind when designing your own journey-as you shift your team or organisation towards collective forms of leadership and an improved ability to navigate complexity.

6.1 What should you consider before embarking on a transformation journey?

Through our work with different teams and organisations, we've learned that how you approach this journey and what makes you successful at it depends on several factors. It's important to realise that each transformation journey is, to a large extent, context-specific. This means that, even though we would like to have a clear answer for how to go about it, there is no standard recipe. There are, however, common factors to consider, basic principles that apply across contexts and specific practices that can help you on this journey. Some of these practices have been described in previous chapters, so let us now focus on the factors to consider before starting your journey.

1. Finding your organisational and personal "why" for transformation

The first thing to consider is WHY you, your team, and your organisation want to embark on this journey in the first place. Developing a compelling narrative around why transformation is needed and what its benefits are will help you create the need for transformation within your organisation. In the first chapter of this handbook, we listed some common arguments and possible benefits. What will make your story stronger, however, is anchoring it in a specific challenge that your organisation faces, or a benefit that could arise from introducing collective forms of leadership, culture and the structures for it. To make this narrative even more powerful, complement your organisational motivation with a very personal story that motivates you on this transformation journey.

Tip: Motivate the transformation journey by crafting a powerful story around it that people in your organisation can relate to. You can find inspiration from Fredric Laloux's book, "Reinventing organisations" (2014), and in this film from his online library: thejourney.reinventingorganizations.com/12.html

Voices from the field

Mette Aagaard doesn't talk about where to begin, but about what kind of conviction needs to be in place before anything else. The transformations she has seen sustain themselves are those where the impulse to change is deeply tied to the organisation's actual mission, often because an external pressure or a new strategic direction has made it impossible to continue as before. "It's not just a communication task. It's a fundamental conviction that we cannot continue to do what we're doing now if we are to serve the citizens or the employees." That conviction must be real, not rhetorical, because without genuine commitment to the underlying purpose, the journey will become cumbersome and people will quietly return to what they know.

Karin Tenelius reflects on the specific question of the public sector, and the importance of connecting the transformation towards leading together to its purpose. Around half of her clients work in the public sector, and she finds it more meaningful than private sector work. The public sector has more tolerance for inefficiency than the private sector, which also means it has more to gain. Its advantage is that it is not driven by quarterly results and tends to carry a genuine sense of purpose, of being there for citizens, for pupils, for improving the health and well-being of communities. That sense of purpose, she argues, is something many public organisations have lost touch with, and reconnecting with it is not just motivationally useful; It's what makes transformation feel worth the cost. "Municipalities can start to look like ordinary organisations instead of finding their soul again." And when they do reconnect with that, the scarcity of resources, which is so often experienced as a constraint, can become a driver. When you lack the resources to do everything yourself, you have every reason to activate the community around you, and that activation is itself a form of leading together with citizens.

2. Starting on a small scale

In more traditional change initiatives within organisations, top management determines the direction and then sets into motion large-scale change processes that are led in a top-down manner. When working with systemic transformation and paradigm shifts in leadership that promote increased participation and co-creation, the top-down approach needs to be complemented with bottom-up initiatives and experiments.

Transformation is not always initiated by top management, even though their support will be needed in the process. When searching for the right allies to support you in driving your transformation journey, a helpful question to ask is, *who (individuals or teams) in the organisation would probably be most interested in embarking on this journey?* Often, it is known that certain individuals, teams or parts of an organisation are more progressive and open to trying out new things and innovating new ways of working. On the other hand, it is useful to ask, *who/which parts of the organisation would benefit most from such transformation?* Transformation is more often likely to happen where there is a struggle or crisis, or where current ways of working aren't providing the right solution to existing challenges.

Another aspect worth considering is that it might be best to start prototyping new ways of working around a task that is close to the core operation of your organisation, but not too complex. Something that is important for the users, and where relevant results could be shown quite quickly. For example, if we were to introduce shared leadership into an elderly care home, we could start with a team that works with a service catered to elderly home residents, for example, the kitchen team or the team in charge of fun activities. It depends on which teams show interest, as well as the need for change towards a shared form of leadership. It also depends on which teams have enabling conditions, such as a supportive manager that wants to initiate a change process and work tasks that benefit from people meeting and working together.

Starting on a small scale and focusing on areas where impact matters allows you to showcase the benefits of this way of working, while creating inspirational stories you can share within your organisation to generate curiosity and interest from other teams.

Tip: Start your transformation journey on a small scale by engaging only those parts of the organisation where there is interest, energy, or a sense of urgency, and where you can make a significant impact in a short time. It is helpful to work with teams that are close to the core purpose of an organisation, but avoid complex tasks that are difficult to grasp. In this way, you can quickly show results that matter to the organisation and motivate others to follow.

It is very important to follow the process wherever the energy is, rather than spending too much effort trying to change parts of the organisation or individuals who resist the change. It is very human to resist change, unfortunately, as it is far more demanding and energy-consuming to change than to keep doing things the same old way. Most large organisations get stuck protecting and maintaining existing structures and ways of working, rather than being eager to evolve them. This often requires considerable energy from transformation agents. It is not uncommon to see the most driven transformation agents eventually leave the organisation because they are so exhausted from dealing with obstacles and resistance in the transformation process–something we have witnessed firsthand.

Voices from the field

Nati Lombardo's starting advice is directed at the change agent who does not hold formal power: find an ally who does. Without someone in a position of authority who is genuinely on board, the initiative will remain fragile. Once that foundation exists, her recommendation is to resist the temptation to go wide and instead go deep in one place. Choose a team that already has some spark for this, or a strong culture of trust, or people who are ready to experiment. Try things, see what works in that specific context and culture, and then let it spread from there organically. "You can cross-pollinate to other teams and see what takes hold." For leaders who want to begin changing their own practice without waiting for an organisation-wide mandate, the same logic applies: bring a different way of being into the spaces you already occupy, propose something to your team, see how they respond, and build from there.

On scaling up, Nati has observed that the most sustainable expansion happens not through top-down rollout but through curiosity. When a team is working in a different way and something is visibly grabbing, useful, and enjoyable, people from other teams start to notice and want to try it themselves. "It expands organically instead of being enforced from the top." At some point, once several groups are already experimenting, it becomes possible to establish cross-team structures that begin to hold everything together. And at the point where an organisation decides to transition more fully, a larger conversation with everyone becomes necessary: about what the change will actually entail for individuals, what it will look like in practice, and whether people really want it.

Karin Tenelius is candid about the distance between where she started and where she is now in her thinking about how to support these transitions. "I've gone from a very naive vision to a more down-to-earth one," she says. She no longer encourages organisations to pursue complete transformation. She encourages them to be genuinely inspired by self-organising principles and take from them what they can realistically absorb. The conditions matter more than the ambition. Managers need to be not just intellectually persuaded but personally willing to change. If the working climate in a team is unhealthy, that needs to be addressed before new practices are introduced, because no new way of working will take root in soil that is already poisoned. And the starting point should always be the people who are already ready: the pockets of the organisation where there is genuine longing for something different. "Work with people who are engaged and brave. You can find them in any organisation. Build on those people, support them, invest in them, and see the change they can create."

When those first teams have genuinely shifted, the most powerful thing they can do is become ambassadors, not because someone asks them to, but because they cannot help it. "Two women managers really became ambassadors because they couldn't help themselves, they found it so valuable." But that only happens when the results are significant enough to be undeniable. Small improvements do not generate ambassadors. Transformative experiences do. Which means doing everything possible to create the conditions for real results in the first teams before expecting the word to spread. And it's crucial to find change agents higher up in the hierarchy, because without eventual top management engagement, the work remains–as she puts it–a guerrilla project. Fine as far as it goes, but limited in its reach.

3. Support from top management and other key decision makers

Through our projects, we observed that even the transformation agents with a strong drive and will to initiate the transformation journey, sooner or later, met organisational obstacles that demanded involvement from top management. For example, a manager starts to delegate responsibility to colleagues with the most expertise to represent the team in other parts of the organisation. In this situation, other managers in the organisation start to complain to the formal manager, and top management needs to get involved. Or internal IT systems demand approval for any minor decision from formal managers, which prevents managers from delegating more power and authority to employees. But making changes to the IT system demands the involvement of top management and the IT department.

Top management, especially the CEO, HR, IT and Innovation and development directors might be - in our experience - the most common targets with whom transformation agents will eventually need to collaborate and build alliances. These people are most often involved in driving change initiatives related to organisational culture, leadership, ways of working and organisational processes.

That said, we also observed many cases in our research projects where the transformation journey was not initiated by top management, but by eager individuals. They could be either managers of a specific team or department or simply engaged colleagues who saw the need for such change. These transformation agents then sought the support they needed from top management along the journey.

Therefore, it is important to identify at least one individual from the top management team who can support the journey and serve as the spokesperson for the transformation. Ideally, the whole top management team will be on board and act as a role model in the change process. If top management starts to share leadership in their own team, working strongly together for the benefit of the whole organisation and its ecosystem, it will be easier to spread systemic thinking and shared leadership across the organisation. Unfortunately, that is rarely the case, so transformation agents shouldn't give up when this is not possible.

Tip: Having an ally in top management is important. Even if you are an employee and only interested in working with transformation within your own team, your team will probably–sooner or later–run into organisational obstacles that demand involvement from higher levels of management and structural support.

When engaging top management in transformation, it is helpful to find connecting points between the transformation initiative and the existing strategy, goals and priorities that top management has established. The aim is to illustrate how moving towards a more shared model of leadership can support the organisational strategy, goals, or specific challenges. For example, one could argue that the transformation could support broader organisational goals, such as increased effectiveness and agility, while also helping to achieve shorter response times to changes happening in an external environment. In addition, it could contribute to lowering sick leave and fluctuation among employees, as well as increasing employee motivation, engagement and well-being. But one could also argue that specific societal challenges that organisations need to address could benefit from this transformation. For example, when a mandate is given to employees in direct contact with citizens-and those employees can have the possibility to quickly respond to citizens and make decisions that better meet their needs- the engagement and well-being of citizens will increase. They will feel heard, understood and empowered to actively participate in decision-making processes that affect their quality of life.

In politically steered organisations like municipalities, it's also important to work together with politicians and craft a narrative about transformation that can support their goals and agendas. Understanding how political cycles operate before, after and between elections, is important for gaining political support at the right time-when politicians are looking for new ideas. You can demonstrate how new ways of working could create support for their programme and goals.

Voices from the field

When Nati Lombardo talks about the role of top management, she is direct: without their involvement, the change will not hold at scale. But the way they engage matters just as much as whether they engage. The worst version is a top-down announcement that the organisation is now going to self-manage. The better version is top leadership that holds the process rather than driving the outcome– presenting the concept as a question rather than a decision. This approach models the kind of participatory stance that the transformation asks of everyone from the outset. “What would it look like if they held the process: ‘I’ve been considering this, what do you all think?’” That positioning, she argues, changes everything about how the change lands.

4. Your role and personal journey as a transformation agent

When embarking on a journey towards more shared forms of leadership, it is useful to practise self-awareness and acknowledge your personal strengths and weaknesses as a driver of this change process. This should impact both what you focus on during your transformation journey and where you start. It is also informative when it comes to identifying what competencies or aspects of your leadership you need to develop, and who you may want to involve to complement your weaker sides.

Driving a transformation journey towards more participation and collective forms of leadership within your team and organisation will always also be accompanied by a personal transformation journey. Therefore, proactively thinking about your own role–how you need to re-shape it, or what competencies you need to strengthen to be an active agent in this change–is an important aspect of the journey. For example, in our research projects we realised that not many managers are good facilitators of co-creation processes in teams; yet facilitation is a core skill for moving a team towards greater participation. However, there may be other team members who already excel at facilitation, and the manager could ask them to support the transformation process.

If you are a manager who struggles with working with structures, but you have a natural strength in building caring and trusting work environments, it makes sense for you to start from where your strength lies. Before you start rethinking and redesigning processes to foster more participation within your team, focus on building a strong culture that is conducive to shared leadership. On the contrary side, if you are very good with structures and processes and you work in an organisation that is driven by a lot of rules, structures, and clearly defined processes, it might be smart to start testing participatory meeting structures in your team that will, in turn, increase inclusion, participation and engagement in your team culture.

Tip: Consider your role in the transformation and how you may need to develop your own leadership skills to support the transformation journey. Identify people who can complement your weaknesses and bring them along as partners in driving the transformation journey together.

Voices from the field

Mette Aagaard insists that leaders who want to initiate this change must fully understand what it demands of them personally before they start expecting it from others. One of the most common pitfalls she sees is leaders who grasp the concept and then assume the work is now for everyone else to do. “If you want to change the organisation, everybody needs to take a critical look at their own behaviour, practice, and habits, and that goes for leaders too.” The middle management layer, she adds, is consistently underestimated and underinvested in these processes. If you want to change a hierarchy, you need the hierarchy to work with you rather than against you.

Karin Tenelius reflects on what the journey has meant for her personally. As a founder and CEO, she has had to learn to trust that her ideas can survive without her defending them, and that being vulnerable and honest about why something matters to her is more effective than using the power she has to push it through. “I’ve learned other ways that are much more collaborative.” And what she has gained is something she describes as immense freedom: the freedom of not needing to control outcomes, write reports, or monitor everything. The freedom of being surrounded by people who are honest with her, and of not needing to be afraid of honesty in return.

Nati Lombardo has spent years supporting other organisations through transitions toward self-management, but she is candid about the fact that the learning has run in both directions. When asked what she has taken from the journey personally, the first thing she names is the sheer amount of inner work involved, something she had not anticipated at the start. “I didn’t really consider that at the beginning. How much I had to look at my own behaviours and patterns.” The personal dimension of this kind of transformation, the need to examine your own habitual ways of operating and the assumptions you carry without knowing it, turns out to be as demanding as anything on the organisational side.

5. Raising awareness and building knowledge about systemic transformation

The paradigm shift from hierarchies to more participation and shared leadership involves a complex process. It demands shifting our values, beliefs, worldviews and our understanding of organisations, leadership and ways of working together. It is therefore useful to identify ways to increase awareness of what systemic transformation towards distributed leadership and more self-managed teams means.This includes developing a new vocabulary and shared frames of thinking within the organisation.

Different approaches can be applied to raise knowledge about systemic transformation in your organisation, such as inspirational lectures, which can be integrated into existing forums where managers and employees usually meet. Study circles are another example, where you invite colleagues to read interesting books on systemic transformation and discuss them together. You could also design shorter interactive online seminars that provide small pockets of inspiration and collective learning in accessible ways, or even simply share a podcast episode, video or shorter article with colleagues on a regular (weekly) basis to raise awareness and knowledge on the topic.

Interactive learning formats are more effective, as they offer participants the chance to reflect on what they have heard, seen or read and share their thoughts with other colleagues. Through our research projects, we’ve learned that developing a shared understanding and language around transformation is an important part of the journey.

Tip: In parallel with piloting shared leadership in selected teams or parts of your organisation – to demonstrate results and build motivation for transformation–it helps to increase awareness of the transformation towards shared leadership across the wider organisation. Simple ways of inspiring and sharing knowledge with colleagues can spark curiosity and help develop a shared understanding and language around shared leadership.

6.2 Things to consider during your transformation journey

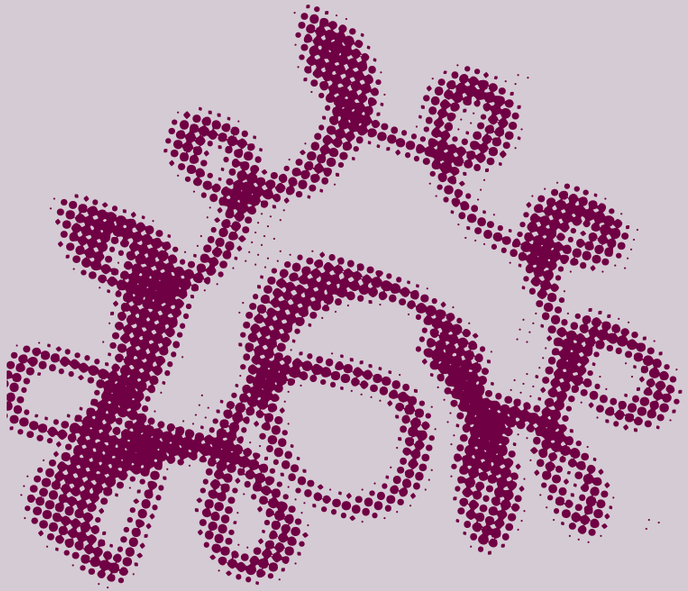
1. Transformation processes are messy and demand time

Transformation processes are often messy, complex, iterative and non-linear, which makes them difficult to plan and control. In the various teams we followed during our research projects, we observed that teams would often take a step forward after being energised and inspired by participating in a few workshops, but then something would happen in their external environment. For example, a reorganisation process might be initiated, or a cost-saving and layoff plan launched, which would suddenly create a high level of fear and paralysis in the organisation. Even teams that had started to eagerly engage in a process of transformation might take a few steps back in these situations before they can move forward again in their transformation process.

Transformation agents, therefore, need to be prepared for these setbacks, working with emergence and uncertainty. There will probably be very different opinions circulating about what is being done in the transformation initiative in different parts of the organisation or even within teams that are prototyping practices for shared leader-

ship. This means you must be able to listen to different voices, holding space for various perspectives and complexity, and not see it as a problem. In a constantly changing world we live in–where large-scale changes such as wars or pandemics can occur at any time and impact our society and workplaces–it is more manageable to work with fast prototyping and many shorter iteration cycles. This way, you can continuously adapt and integrate changes in the process as they happen.

Sometimes external changes result in transformation initiatives being completely dropped– and there is nothing we can do about it. We have witnessed a new director enter an organisation and shut down a whole project, even though the project had approved funding, a clear mandate and strong employee engagement. Similarly, if the manager who has initially supported the team to prototype practices for shared leadership leaves the organisation, the work already done can be put on hold. If the new manager is not interested in continuing the process they might stop the initiative, even if other team members want to continue with it. These kinds of changes can be deflating for transformation agents who have devoted a lot of energy and effort to a change initiative, leaving them with the sense that they are starting from scratch. That is why it is wise to prepare oneself for the fact that transformation is a long-term journey that doesn't have a clear goal and will certainly include many ups and downs along the way. It demands patience, persistence and a long-term perspective.



Voices from the field

There are always setbacks alongside the successes, Karin Tenelius observes. Always forces working to keep things as they are, and always moments that feel like failure. But culture, she says, is like air. It can look completely stuck and then suddenly crack open. "When it looks really horrible and ugly, all of a sudden it cracks and opens. And then that is a genuine breakthrough, a true leap forward." Which means that the most important quality for anyone doing this work is the capacity to stay connected to the process, to resist the urge to plan everything, and to stay ready for the unexpected. "You don't have maps, really. You have a few, but very little guidance. You have to stay connected to the process all the time and see what's happening."

2. Removing what isn't working to create more space for the new

When employees are presented with new development initiatives, a common response is: "Oh no, another change program! Aren't we already more than busy with ongoing development initiatives?" This is not a strange reaction. Organisations often have a tendency to continuously initiate new development and change programs, which can be quite stressful for colleagues who already feel swamped with their existing workload.

Therefore, when it comes to creating space and time for engaging colleagues in a transformation journey, a useful practice for transformation agents is to examine the current systems, ways of working, leadership, and culture. That helps to identify what no longer supports the organisation's purpose, values and priorities-things that could be taken away to create more space for experimenting with new ways of working and leading together.

The process of letting go of old habits and procedures will certainly evoke emotional responses in people who will then need space and time to share frustration, grief and other feelings that may emerge. Hospicing old habits, work practices and procedures that might have been ingrained in an organisation for a long time is not an easy process. Creating connecting rituals that provide space to acknowledge how old habits and practices have served the organisation, and to appreciate them for their contribution, is crucial for preparing people to let them go.

Even as new practices are introduced, it's important to continually reflect on which ones should be kept and sustained over time and which ones should be removed if they are not working.

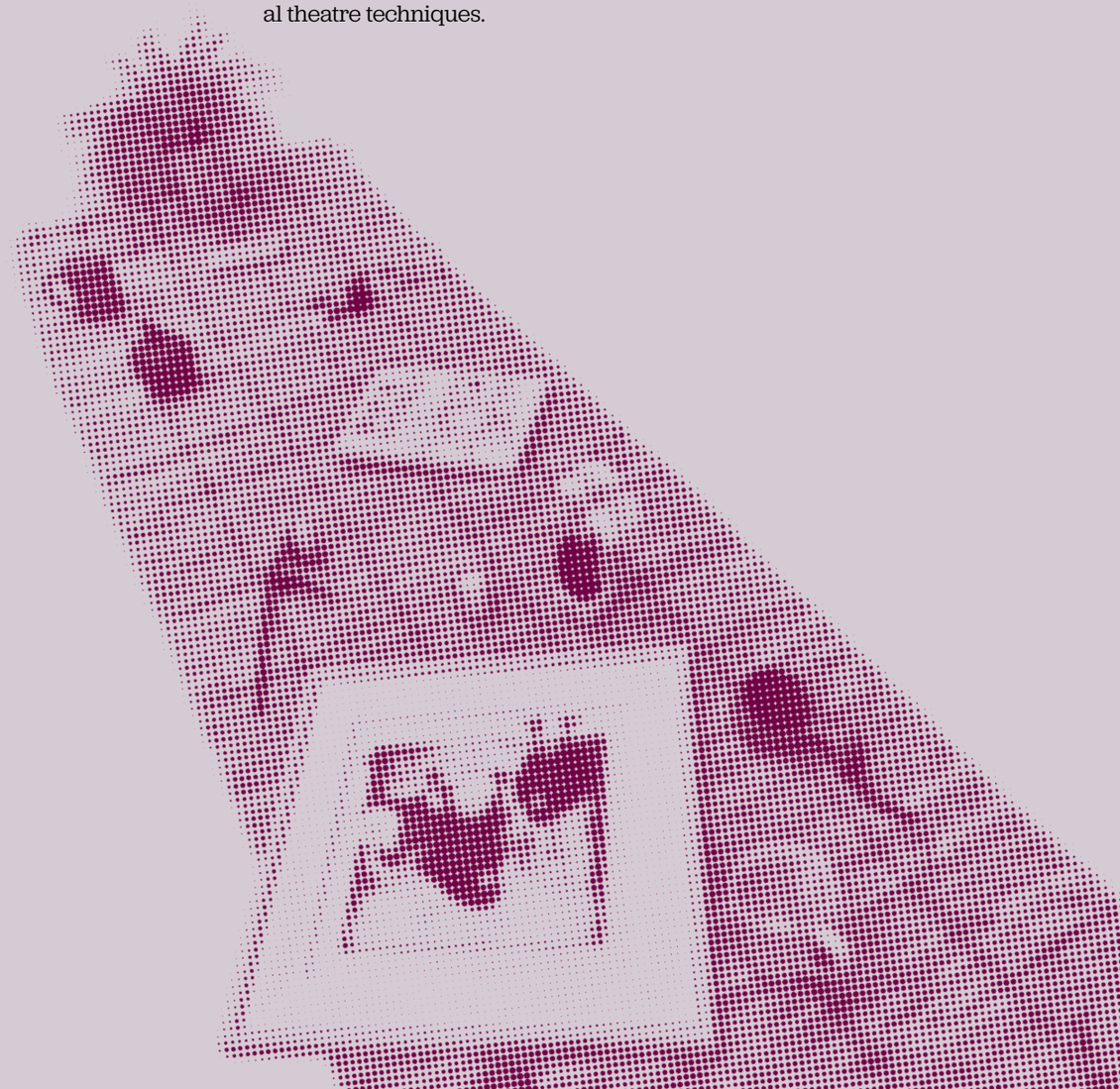
Voices from the field

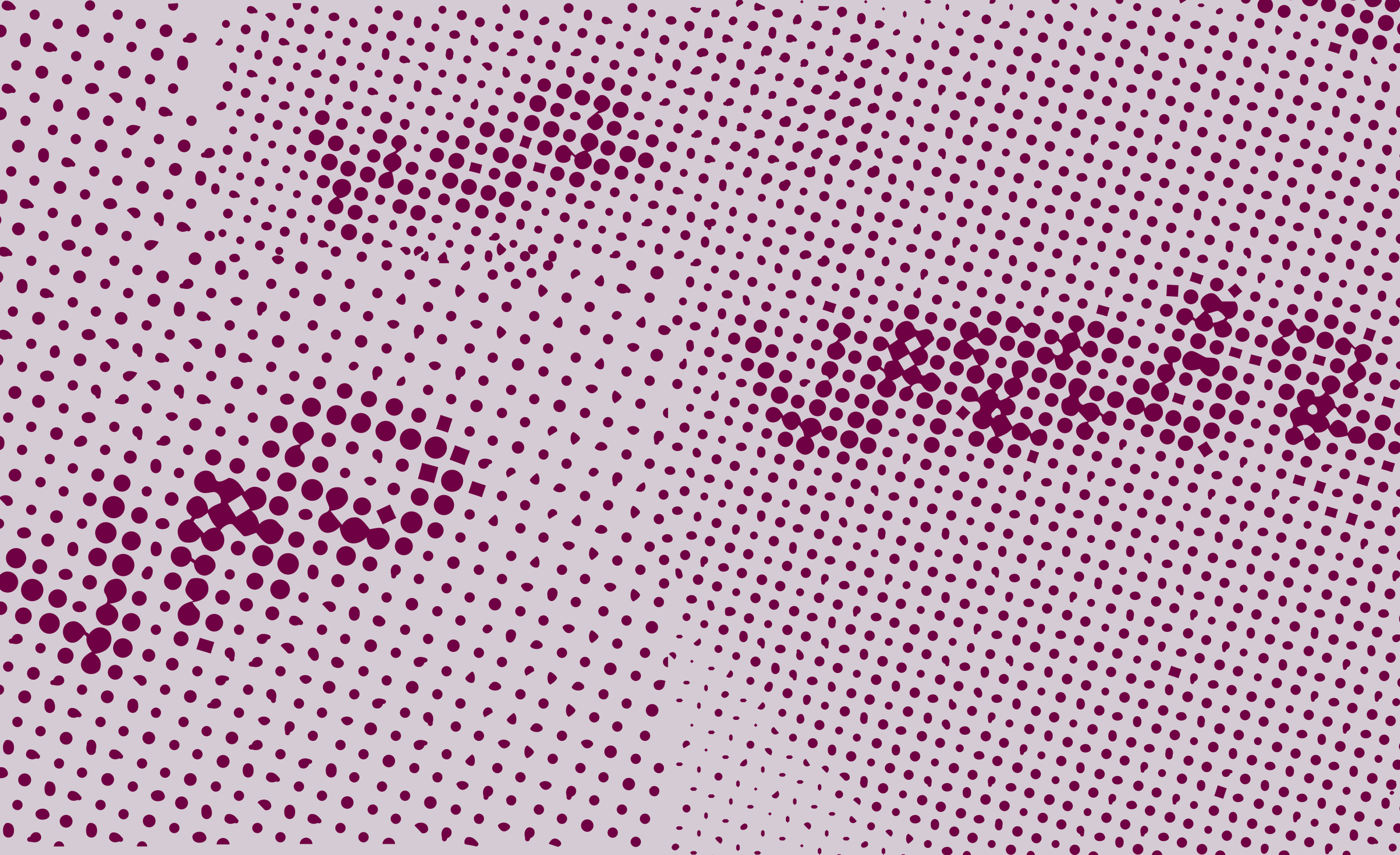
Nati Lombardo suggests that retrospectives are useful for sustaining the practice of leading together over time. The ability to regularly come together and name what is or isn't working, and continually make adjustments, allows the practice to keep evolving rather than calcifying or quietly dissolving. "At the beginning the ideal can look beautiful, but once you start putting it into practise things emerge, and it's not so easy. So at least being able to talk about it, to name what's not there yet, and to keep looking for improvements is key."

3. Working with storytelling and other creative practices that support transformation journeys

Transformation cannot happen only through people cognitively learning about new ways of working. It must be embodied and accompanied by a deeper transformation process on both individual and collective levels. Creative methods such as storytelling are very supportive in transformation processes. They allow people to open up on a much more personal level, share their own vulnerabilities through stories, and weave deep relationships with each other. Storytelling also allows complex learning processes to be communicated in engaging, relatable and accessible ways. Creative practices inspired by the arts often activate the whole human, including their feelings, senses, imagination, intuition and deeper senses of knowing that are not accessible through language. In our prototyping processes with the public sector, exercises drawn from photography, poetry, improvisational dance and theater, and visual art and collage, have proven to be very supportive. These practices often stimulated creativity among participants and strengthened their courage to explore new things, vocabulary and ways of expressing themselves. They also supported participants in the transformation journey by fostering trust among them and enabling them to connect on a deeper level. Creative methods further strengthened co-creation among participants and supported them in developing some key skills for transformation processes, such as slowing down, deep listening, imagining, improvising, navigating uncertainty and complexity, co-creation and facilitation.

Although participants appreciated the creative methods used in workshops facilitated by researchers and artists, they found it challenging to transfer these methods to their everyday work. Many found ways to do it by adjusting the methods to their own context, using simpler exercises and methods that are more familiar to colleagues. For example, taking photos during a reflection walk with mobile phones and then sharing personal stories about them. Or using music in their own meetings and workshops, and inviting colleagues into simple meditation, dance or energising exercises inspired by improvisational theatre techniques.





Voice from the artistic field

The hardest thing about bringing an artistic practice into an organisational setting, Dejan Srhoj says, is not proposing the exercise. (That part is relatively straightforward.) The hard part is standing behind it, holding space for whatever needs to unfold, and resisting the urge to intervene. "Like a psychotherapist, my role is to hold a space for the creative process to unfold. And I feel the biggest challenge for people who haven't done it a lot is not to propose, because that's not so hard, but to stand behind it and to hold the space for whatever has to unfold." It took him many years to develop that quality of presence: the ability to see very quickly what could have been done differently, what might have helped, and to leave that knowledge unused, because the experience itself is what people need, not the correction.

That is why he sees the natural next step in this work as training people both from artistic and organisational backgrounds not only to participate in co-creation processes around shared leadership, but also to facilitate and hold space for them. This knowledge should be widely distributed, not kept by a small number of practitioners.

But there is another entry point, available to anyone, that doesn't require specific training at all. Every person already has a relationship with movement. They walk to work, breathe, sleep, go to the gym, play a sport. The question Dejan invites us to consider is, *what happens when you shift something small within what you are already doing?* What if the 10-minute walk from the underground to the office became a half-hour walk, with stops? What if you ran it as fast as you could? What if you took a different path? What if you walked it with a colleague in silence, or talking loudly? "We are already professionals at walking from the underground to the office, we are already professionals at observing the space. What if I just observed it for a longer or shorter time?" These are not trivial variations. They are scores, in the choreographic sense: simple enabling constraints that change how you inhabit time, space and relationships that generate real information about yourself and others.

The same logic applies inside the workplace. What if the meeting rooms were rearranged? What if the meetings were held in a forest, or conducted while moving? What if there were more time, or less, for a meeting? He describes a score developed by choreographer Lisa Nelson in the 1970s, in which a group closes their eyes and simultaneously creates a movement. What tends to happen is that people begin making the same movement, or nearly the same movement, without being able to see each other. Something in the shared space has been informed in a particular way, and people begin working from it without knowing how. "I don't know how it's possible. But there's something that the space has been informed with in a certain way, and people suddenly start to work from that common space."

For more extended or demanding processes, facilitation and training are necessary. But for beginning, for shifting something small in everyday life and seeing what it opens, the knowledge required is already in the room.

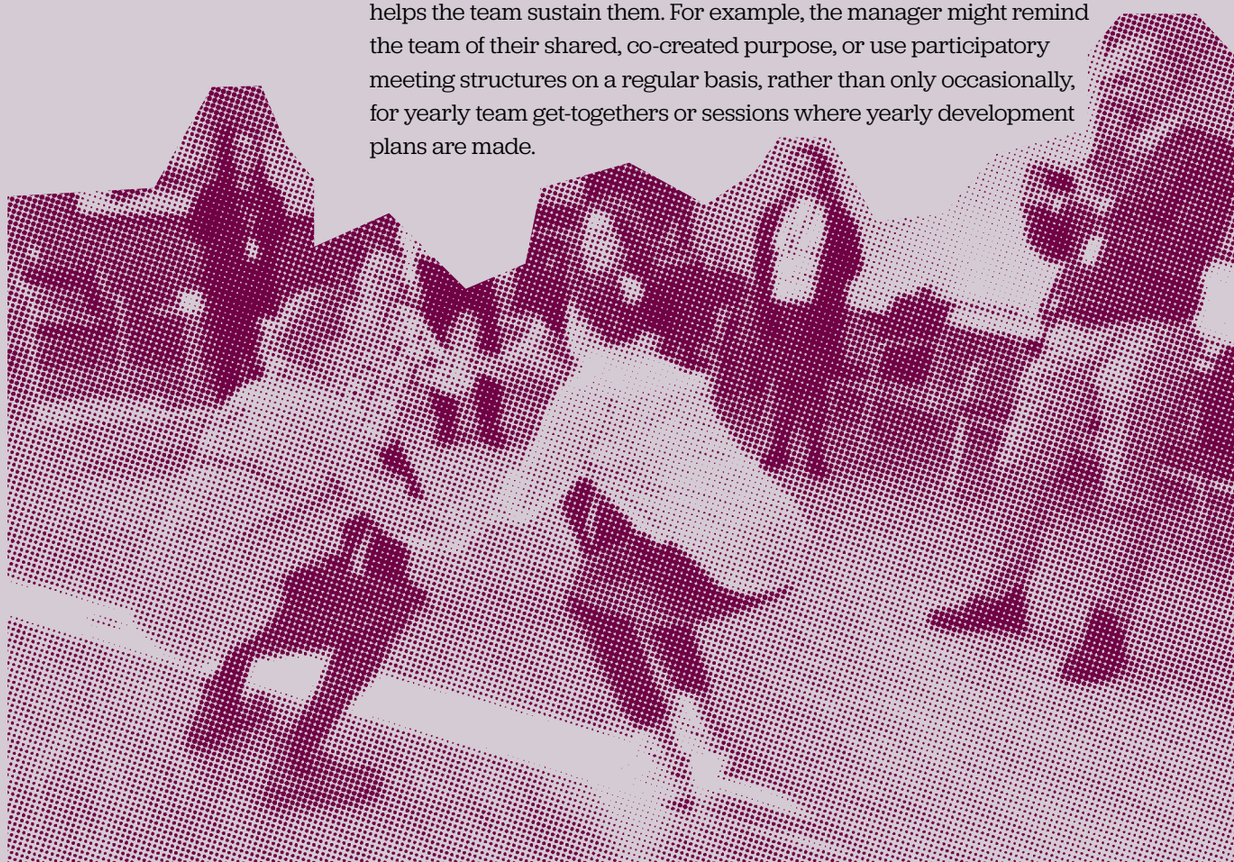
For those who want to go further and collaborate with artists directly, Dejan's first piece of advice is to address the prejudices that run in both directions. Artists often carry an assumption that organisations are purely efficiency and profit-driven, indifferent to everything that does not generate output. Organisations often assume that artists are unreliable, working from mysterious inspiration rather than a specific method and knowledge. All these assumptions get in the way of what could be a productive collaboration. "Artists are workers. They have methods, they have a lot of knowledge, they have a lot of references and experiences." The first step is personal: finding an artist whose work interests you, approaching them, and starting a dialogue. It takes time, and it is not self-evident that it will work. But there must be a basic trust that there is knowledge on both sides worth sharing.

Dejan is also clear that not all art is the same, just as not all organisations are the same. Within choreography, as within any field, there are practitioners who work in deeply traditional, hierarchical ways and have no interest in questioning authority or structure. What matters is finding the right meeting point between a specific artistic sensibility and a specific organisational readiness. “I would not say there is one recipe. There is really a dialogue.”

What he’s observed in the organisations that have engaged with this work is that change tends to begin in small and concrete ways. Managers who participated in the workshops reported learning how important it is to create space at the start of a meeting for people to arrive, slow down, and land in their bodies before the work begins. Some have started reading a poem or conducting a short breathing or grounding exercise with participants. Some have begun rethinking the spaces where they meet, taking their team into a forest instead of a meeting room. Some have shifted their own roles, moving towards the listening structure proposed in the workshops proposed and finding ways to be present and attentive rather than performing and directing. One manager described wanting to give their team time to simply sit in the kitchen for a few hours, observing and listening. “Things are starting to happen,” Dejan says. “But you have to be quite courageous to question these existing patterns in organisations with a lot of established expectations.” The courage required is not dramatic. It is the quieter courage of doing something differently, in a context where the pressure to do things as they have always been done is constant and palpable.

4. Embodiment, continuity and persistence with a long-term view – transformation is not a training programme

In our research projects we found that a key challenge with change programs or interventions - like those we facilitated during our research process-is sustaining the change effort and integrating new work practices into regular team routines. It is easy to keep high engagement and try new things while external experts come in and support teams with new knowledge and tools. However, once external support is gone, only teams that manage to integrate the new practices into regular team rituals and routines will sustain the change. Transforming culture, leadership and work processes in an organisation is an embodied process that cannot happen if one sends a few individuals to a training course on distributed leadership. Embedding new work practices into daily routines and persisting with them is often difficult unless the formal manager takes a proactive role in setting up new work routines with colleagues and then helps the team sustain them. For example, the manager might remind the team of their shared, co-created purpose, or use participatory meeting structures on a regular basis, rather than only occasionally, for yearly team get-togethers or sessions where yearly development plans are made.



Voices from the field

Mette Aagaard is firm that this process must be understood as an organisational transformation, not a toolbox. “Organisations that approach this as if it’s a toolbox, you take a course, learn to use the tools, start implementing, and then when that doesn’t solve all the problems, look for another toolbox, that’s a different thing.” If you genuinely think of it as a transformation, approach it that way.

One concrete investment Mette always recommends in the startup phase is developing facilitation skills. Not everyone needs to be trained, but the people who will facilitate dialogues do, and so do the leaders who will be giving them the mandate to do so. Once the process is underway, she recommends having some kind of unit or entity–ideally itself organised through distributed leadership–whose ongoing role is to sense what the organisation needs and respond: developing new training, facilitating new dialogues, creating new tools as the situation demands. And on the question of how far along any organisation is, the most honest answer she has heard comes from organisations that say they do not know, because they are never done. “It’s a constant development journey. You have to love the journey. It’s not a matter of getting there.”

5. Building and maintaining the transformation agents community in the organisation

When you initiate the transformation journey with the first teams in selected parts of the organisation, you will start to identify those individuals who are most engaged in the process and want to take on a more active role in driving the change process and spreading knowledge to other parts of the organisation. As you share knowledge about systemic transformation and disseminate learnings from the first pilot teams to the rest of the organisation, you will identify other potential transformation ambassadors. They might show curiosity and choose to initiate transformation within their own teams or parts of the organisation. This is why it is smart to progressively and step by step build a network of support ambassadors or transformation agents, who can drive the movement together and support you in your efforts.

These ambassadors need to build relationships with each other and continue learning how to work with transformation in practice, while also maintaining the energy and motivation required to drive transformation. It is therefore important to create a community among them that offers opportunities to meet and support each other on a continuous basis. These meet-ups should provide both emotional support for transformation agents dealing with pushback and resistance to change within the organisation, as well as opportunities to exchange knowledge experiences, learn new tools, and strengthen relationships and collaboration.

6. Rethinking existing office space and developing dedicated spaces for experimentation

Since existing work spaces often carry the history and culture of an organisation-including specific norms and expectations around what behaviours are promoted-daring to break with current norms and behavioural patterns can sometimes be difficult. Office spaces are often designed in ways that support hierarchy. For example, meeting rooms are commonly populated with a long table and a screen on one side of the room. This results, many times, in classical meeting formats where one person with authority stands in front of the screen and delivers information to the rest of the room that passively receives it for the majority of the meeting time. When we started to experiment with more participatory and creative formats of meetings and workshops, project participants reflected: "How can we do these kinds of meetings and workshops in our own workplace if we don't have flexible meeting rooms where we can sit in a circle without a table in the middle? We lack bigger, flexible rooms where we can dance, move, paint or build prototyping models and collages together like we're doing here."

In the organisations in our projects that had more traditional office buildings, with long corridors and many small rooms, participants experienced a lack of natural spaces that encouraged spontaneous meetings and shared learning between colleagues. The increased amount of online meetings and remote working-and even people from the same team being dispersed across several floors of the office-further exacerbated the situation. It has become hard to create shared rituals and build a strong team culture.

Therefore, to create better conditions for shared leadership, it is important to challenge how existing workspaces are designed and used. For example, simply rearranging the furniture and trying out new set-ups in existing rooms can encourage more participation. Move aside the tables, place chairs in a circle, and add some cosy accessories from other parts of the office (like plants, pillows, and a carpet)-and suddenly, a rather stiff and traditional meeting room is transformed into a more informal and cosy environment where colleagues can relax and open up to each other.

A bigger step in this process is to build a dedicated space or hub for innovation and transformation, which some organisations in our

projects have done. These dedicated spaces for experimentation often look more creative than the rest of the office space, and different rules and behavioural norms can apply. Such neutral spaces become a sort of oasis or safe space for experimentation, where new things can be tested without fear of failure. Here, you can host the community of transformation agents through different events and study circles, or invite teams working with transformation and shared forms of leadership to meet, hold workshops, and share their stories and learnings with colleagues from other parts of the organisation. These hubs can be internal and exclusively available to employees, or open to external stakeholders and citizens who are invited to participate in co-creation and transformation processes.

7. Keep learning from others and connect to external communities of transformation agents

Driving transformation towards greater participation and collective forms of leadership can be challenging-especially when encountering a lot of resistance in one's own organisation. For this reason, connecting transformation agents from different organisations has proven to be especially nurturing and supportive. Building a shared community through events and workshops fosters knowledge exchange and relationships across organisational borders.

Meeting like-minded people who are on a similar journey can offer strength and inspiration, while helping you feel less alone. It is easy to start doubting yourself if you receive internal critique. Meeting transformation agents from other organisations can provide the emotional support needed to maintain healthy self-confidence and motivation, helping you persist with transformation efforts-even during challenging times.

Voices from the field

Karin Tenelius has advice for the change agents who feel alone in this work–which, in her experience, is most of them. “Form communities across organisations. Create communities where you can find your allies, and gain energy and inspiration from them.” And for those encountering colleagues who are skeptical or resistant, her counsel is to not argue or persuade, but to listen to them, understand what their concerns actually are, let them be where they are, and trust that they will find their way when the time is right. “Respect them, listen to them, and be genuinely interested in what’s bothering them. That’s the way.”

Nati Lombardo adds another piece of advice. This work is complex. It is not a switch you flick. It requires personal involvement and ongoing inner work alongside the organisational changes. But it is also a field with a growing body of collective experience to draw on, and nobody starting out today needs to begin from nothing. “A lot of people are out there trying it. You don’t have to reinvent the wheel. You can build on what all of us have tried in the past. You’re not alone.”

6.3 Examples of different journeys

In this section, we present different case studies from some of the organisations that participated in our research projects conducted in Lidingö, Umeå and Uppsala municipalities. Drawing on collective learning from several organisations, we also created a case that describes how HR as an organisational function can support the transformation from hierarchy towards embodying collective forms of leadership and building culture and structures for more participation. These cases are based on interviews with participants in our research projects who were responsible for implementing learnings from our projects in their own teams and organisations. They illustrate the different paths that teams and organisations might take when exploring the same questions and discovering their own practices for leading together in everyday work. Yet, the basic principles they applied in their transformation processes are shared. We hope their stories inspire you in your own transformation journey.

LIDINGÖ'S JOURNEY: transforming through culture and ecosystem

This case is based on our work with the elderly care department in the Lidingö municipality and an interview with Linda Löfkvist, who leads the department.

Some transformation journeys begin with a mandate or a structural redesign. Linda's journey began with a question she kept asking out loud throughout her journey: "What kind of organisation do we need to become, and why does it matter beyond our own walls?"

Linda leads the elderly care department within the Lidingö municipality, a small island city outside of Stockholm. What she and her team have built over several years is a living culture, one that started internally and has gradually extended outward into the neighborhood, the city, and eventually to far remote places like South Korea. Yes, South Korea.

A clear vision and purpose as the foundation

Before any ritual, any community initiative, or any structural change, Linda invested heavily in communication as a sustained narrative: painting a picture of what was coming and why their way of working needed to change to meet it.

The picture she painted was honest. Demographic pressure is increasing. The proportion of older people is growing while the working-age population is shrinking. AI is reshaping what humans do and what they need. The traditional service delivery model, where the municipality acts as a provider and citizens as recipients, cannot scale to meet these challenges. Something more distributed, more relational, more co-creative was needed.

She adapted this argument in different contexts depending on the audience. In management meetings, it was strategic. In conversations with her staff, it was personal. At every level, the core message was the same: we are not doing this because we have been told to. We are doing this because the world has changed, and we need to change with it, and when we do it, it creates something better for the people we are here for–citizens.

This investment in shared purpose and a picture of the desired future became the pillars that supported their transformation journey. When people know where the direction is and trust the intentions behind it, they can take initiative without needing to check in at every step. Linda describes this directly: everything that has followed came from people who felt safe because the direction was clear.

Saying "yes"

One of the most consistent observations about Linda from colleagues is that she says yes to almost everything her team proposes. Ideas arrive, often unusual ones, and she does not filter them through an approval logic. She listens, reflects, and finds a way to support.

This is a deliberate practice, grounded in a specific belief: if people bring an idea, they are bringing a piece of themselves with it. Shutting it down sends a message about what kind of organisation this is. Welcoming it, even if it is imperfect or risky, sends the opposite message.

Building a strong culture for shared leadership

The result is that the team has developed a creative set of practices entirely from within. A colleague who is a trained chef organises outdoor barbecues where the team gathers, cooks, and eats together. He thinks of everything: the skewers, the fire, the flatbread. He is not doing this in his administrative role. He is bringing his whole self, and the invitation to do so came from the culture the team has built together with Linda's support.

On Fridays, they have yoga sessions which are held in a circle and led by staff members. It is not exercise in the conventional sense. Participants check in with themselves, share what they are grateful for, and speak openly about what is difficult. The format creates connections that are hard to develop during work meetings. Attendance is not obligatory, and some people sit on the edge for the first session or two. By the third, something has usually shifted, and people end up joining.

There are "learning books", small notebooks each team member carries. Meetings often begin with someone sharing a reflection from their learning book, something captured during the week, a high or a low, whatever feels true. They have developed other forms of meeting each other. Walking meetings in the forest. Monthly learning forums where colleagues share what they have discovered, present new ideas, try out new methods, sometimes unfamiliar, like poetry, movement, and new forms of dialogue. These forums are intentionally driven by team members.

What these practices share is that they build the relational tissue that makes shared leadership possible. You cannot ask people to take initiative, give feedback, navigate conflict, and make decisions together if they are essentially strangers who happen to occupy the same department. The rituals create a safe space to build trust, open up to each other and slowly get to know each other on a deeper level–the foundation that helps strengthen collaboration and mutual support in the team.

Results of the work done

The outcomes are visible. Individuals have grown and developed their potential way beyond their formal roles and job titles. Some of the individuals who were quieter and whose voices were rarely heard in group settings before are now the lead facilitators and drivers of change. They have the courage to read their own poems and share stories in front of politicians and other important decision-makers.

Hard-core indicators have also flourished. Sick leave has fallen. Staff retention has improved. Fewer external consultants are needed, and therefore, costs are lower. Colleagues report high levels of motivation, work satisfaction and well-being in yearly workplace surveys. People who work in other parts of the city's administration have started asking to be placed on Linda's team, or, if needed, have the opportunity to collaborate with them–even in their free time. Because it gives them energy.

Distributing leadership beyond the team and into the bigger ecosystem

What makes Lidingö's journey different is how far they have already come. Most teams that embark on this kind of work focus inward, strengthening the culture and capabilities of their own group. Linda's team did that, and then kept going.

The reasoning was clear to her from the start. The challenges she was working on– loneliness among the elderly, social fragmentation, the disconnection between institutions and communities–cannot be solved by any single department or organisation acting alone. The municipality is one actor in a wider ecosystem. If the goal is resilience and belonging at the community level, then the work has to involve the whole community.

Using GIS data (geodata) to map out where isolated residents lived, the team identified specific neighbourhoods and began building local, self-governing communities in each. These are local communities led by residents who take their own initiatives, and are part of a network connecting them to each other, which the municipality helps to organise.

In Skärsätra, one such community gathers on the first Tuesday of every month for a shared meal. Leo and Kiki, who ran a restaurant until the pandemic forced them to close, cook for the community. Kiki has been blind since childhood and still cooks. The meal this particular evening was polenta, slow-roasted meat and lemon panna cotta, with a proper wine list, for eighty kronor (80 SEK) a head. Neighbours arrived, greeted each other by name, noticed who was missing and went to check on them. A local politician attended at Linda's invitation. He sat, ate and listened. He is coming back and wants to spread this concept.

This is a community that has found its own form and feeds itself. Linda's team created the initial conditions and helped it establish its structure. Now it largely runs itself, and the municipality's role is to stay connected, notice what is needed, and link this community to other parts of the network when it helps and when they need to work together for the greater good.

The network of different actors and local communities that the municipality has built has grown substantially over time. An interactive map covers the entire island: churches, civil society organisations, local businesses, including hotels, and art institutions are all working together. Millesgården, the famous sculpture museum, is now an active participant. When the group identified that some segments of the elderly population were not being reached by anyone, they brought the question to the network and asked who would be willing to take it on. The Red Cross and a local church developed something new together.

The municipality has also encouraged relational bonds and shared leadership across different generations of citizens. On one hand, they placed senior citizens in schools who became friends and mentors to children who were isolated, without friends and struggling with mental health issues. The seniors are warmly welcome. On the other hand, senior cafés at schools run by students were initiated. They are attended weekly by older residents who feel lonely and need company. The students bake, organise activities, and handle the music quiz. The seniors come. One elderly man learned how to use his mobile phone because a student helped him download an app. He was delighted.

Linda describes a phone call she received from a colleague while riding the bus to a hospital. They agreed: this community, all its actors, and all its work, needed to be formally celebrated once a year. They found a date – All Friends' Day on June 30th. Three years later, the national public health authority adopted it as a national day in Sweden, with other municipalities following their lead and joining the celebration. South Korea and the World Health Organisation (WHO) have shown interest in Lidingö municipality's work and invited them for exchange and collaboration so they can spread their good practices internationally too.

Working with resistance

Linda does not suggest this journey has been frictionless. The main challenge has been internal: reaching parts of the organisation where managers are accustomed to more traditional patterns and either do not see the need for change or find it threatening.

Her approach has evolved. Early on, she tried to engage everyone. That took a lot of energy without producing much movement. Over time, she shifted her strategy: start where the engagement already exists, work with the willing and the curious, let results build visibility, and trust that the platform creates its own momentum. Working with people who are engaged brings her the joy she needs as motivation in her own work.

When someone who was previously resistant eventually comes around, the response is simple and genuinely welcoming. No bragging about the past results or telling them what they should do. Just: "What do you think? How can I help?" Begin where you are. This quality of reception–available to anyone regardless of where they are starting, and attuned to their specific needs and situation–is part of what makes her approach work.

The same principle applies at the organisational level. When connecting with a new team or leader, Linda starts with their challenge rather than her method. What are they struggling with? What do they need? The approach follows from that, rather than leading with it.

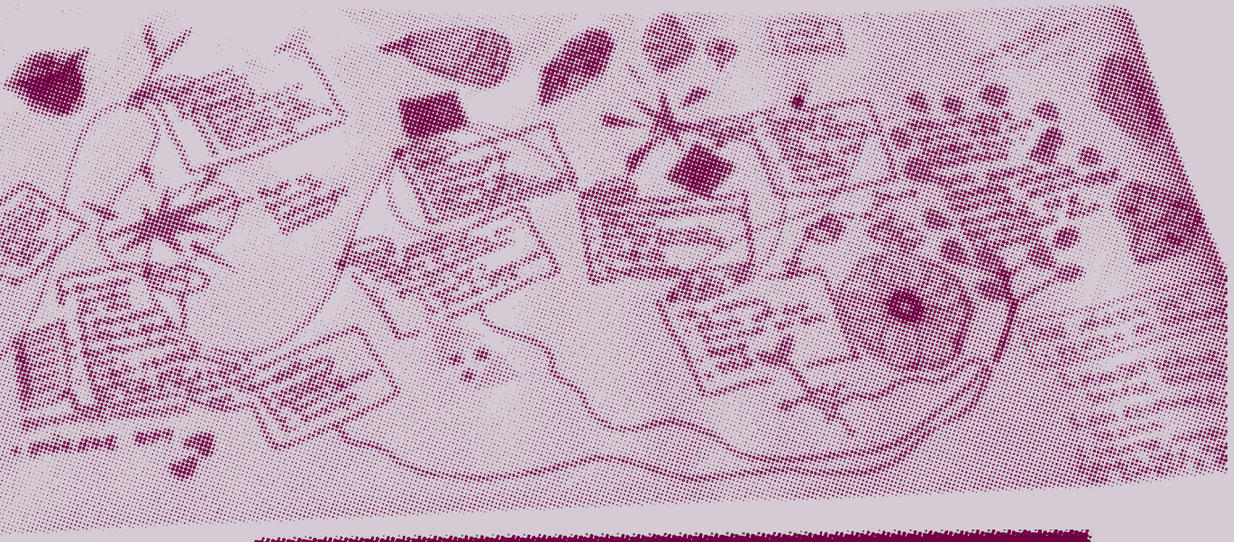
One last piece of advice

Lidingö's journey describes, in a powerful way, what can happen when leaders invite colleagues and citizens to be their whole selves, using their passions and potential beyond formal roles or titles. It also tells a story of how focusing on building trust, deep relationships, collaboration and collective leadership–not only within the team and other parts of organisation but also with different stakeholders, including citizens–can have a strong effect on the broader well-being of the whole society. In some ways, it is hard to summarise the Lidingö case because it covers so many interesting examples, stories, and practices, and many of their outcomes cannot be measured only with

traditional performance indicators. They have improved the quality of work life for many colleagues, and the quality of life for many local residents by building a strong local community that sustains itself. They have built an ecosystem that connects many actors who collaborate around a shared purpose, which has had an impact on the lives of many individuals.

Linda talks about this in terms of what she believes organisations are ultimately for. The work of building resilience in communities, of weaving connections across generations and organisational boundaries, of creating places where people want to be and feel that they can contribute, is not a side effect of the real work. It is the real work. Everything else–the structures, the rituals, the measurement frameworks–exists to support it.

Her advice to others who want to start is simple: find a community of people who are exploring the same questions, because the sense of shared direction and mutual support is what makes it possible to keep going. Begin with and focus on the curious rather than the skeptical. Create forums for reflection to capture learnings. And trust that what you build, if it is rooted in people's own energy and initiative, will grow further than you can currently see. Since you will run into resistance and obstacles along your way, connect with other like-minded people from other organisations–even other countries–who can inspire you and keep you motivated. Linda also mentioned that the group of transformation agents in our project, and before that, at Samverket (a hub for co-working and systemic transformation in the Swedish public sector), had that role for her. So find yours.



UMEÅ: A journey of building the new inside the old

This case is based on our work with the Strategic Development department in the Umeå municipality and an interview with Mikael Brändström, who leads the department.

When the Strategic Development department was formed under Umeå's City Management Office, it came with an unusual mandate. Rather than organising the new unit the conventional way, with clear unit managers, defined sub-teams, and a layered hierarchy, the city director at the time gave Mikael and his team permission to try something different. Forty-three people. No fixed hierarchical subdivision below the department level. An open question: *Can a public sector unit of this size operate with genuine shared leadership and self-organisation, and if so, what does that actually require?*

That question has been the spine of a two-year journey, and the answer (still emerging) has produced some of the most concrete and transferable learnings of our Forte project.

The power of language

One of the first and most deliberate choices Mikael made was to be careful about language. Terms like psychological safety, self-organisation, and self and shared leadership carry weight in some contexts, but in a municipal environment, they can also trigger skepticism, eye-rolls, or the kind of defensive confusion that slows everything down before it starts. Mikael drew on a lesson from an earlier project: the more new concepts you introduce, the more energy is spent on the concepts rather than the change in behaviours and ways of working you are trying to create.

So instead of talking about these concepts, the team talked about what behaviours they wanted in their department. Instead of calling it "culture work", they called it "working out what kind of work principles they needed in order to function well". The difference is subtle, but one conversation invites people to discuss an abstraction, and the other invites people to talk about what actually happens when someone takes a phone call in the quiet zone and just keeps talking.

The team landed on working with five key areas, building partly on Laloux's work on self-managing organisations and finding their own approach to it. These covered decision-making, information transparency, conflict resolution, dynamic roles rather than fixed roles based on job descriptions, and feedback culture as the foundation for continuous development. Each principle was paired with specific behaviours: what does it actually look like when we are living this, and what does it look like when we are not?

This grounding has shaped how they develop the department's culture and processes over time. Recent staff meetings have focused on feedback, not as a topic to discuss but as something to practice. With the department in the middle of transition to an activity-based workplace, real scenarios come up constantly: how do you give feedback to a colleague who keeps talking on the phone in a quiet zone? What do you say, and how do you say it in a way that strengthens rather than damages the relationship? These are the moments where abstract principles become real.

Mikael was also conscious that they needed to work on the transformation at different levels. This included both strengthening certain skills that were lacking among colleagues and, in parallel, doing things that would change their culture and processes in order to build more structural support for distributed leadership.

Facilitation as the core capability

When Mikael's team assessed what skills the department would need to strengthen to genuinely change how it operated, facilitation came up immediately. Not facilitation in the narrow sense of running structured workshops, but facilitation as a broad capacity to move groups through complexity, conflict, and change without relying on hierarchical authority to get things done.

They adopted a methodology called Whole Person Process Facilitation, which centres on bringing the full human being into change processes rather than just their professional role. Around 40 to 50 people across Umeå municipality have now been trained in this approach, run in collaboration with a neighboring municipality to spread the cost and build cross-organisational connections at the same time.

The result of this investment has been significant. In most organisations, the manager runs the staff meeting. In Mikael's department, people trained in facilitation now take responsibility for designing and leading these meetings, without the manager present in a facilitating role. The formal management point still exists on the agenda because it has to: legal responsibilities around workplace safety assessments and similar matters require a designated manager to be accountable. But the format and quality of the meeting itself is the responsibility of facilitators and participants.

This shift matters beyond the quality of the meetings. It is one of the clearest structural expressions of shared leadership available within the constraints of public sector governance. You cannot remove the manager's legal accountability, but you can redistribute the actual work of leading collective processes to people throughout the team and organisation. And when those people grow into that responsibility, something changes in how they understand their own role within the organisation.

Several of the early facilitators have since become genuinely expert practitioners, and some are now leading training sessions in service design and innovation methodology for others. Capability built in one place spreads to many other places.

Redistributing decision-making through structural changes

Alongside their work on culture and capability, Mikael's team made a series of structural changes designed to distribute decision-making throughout the department.

The budget process is the clearest example. Traditionally, a department head owns the budget, which includes managing budget allocations, approving invoices and costs, and reporting to leadership. Mikael's team redesigned the budget process from the ground up. All costs are now transparent and accessible to every member of the department through the financial reporting system, with the exception of individual salary information due to data protection requirements. Together, the team makes an initial budget plan and decides how to distribute resources between different projects and initiatives. Work groups or team members who want to draw on the operational budget submit a request with a priority rating. These are combined into a shared overview, and if the total exceeds available resources, the team works through the prioritization together rather than leaving it to the manager alone.

After each four-month period, everyone who has requested resources does a check: *Do I/we still need this? Has the need changed? Can anything be reallocated?* The budget becomes a living thing rather than a fixed annual constraint. It also becomes a vehicle for practising transparency and shared decision-making principles the team has committed to.

At the city level, a similar structural reform was introduced recently. Previously, central innovation funding was held in a pool that departments could apply for. This created a dynamic where the departments that did not receive funding felt no incentive to develop. In the new approach, 0.5 percent of each department's operational budget is directly distributed into innovation, with the requirement that it be used for development and innovation work done together with others. The largest departments receive tens of millions; smaller ones receive less. But the logic is the same: development capacity must be built throughout the organisation, not concentrated at the centre or isolated within departments; it must be exercised in collaboration across organisational boundaries.

Adapting HR processes from within

Not every structural change can be made from scratch. Many of the processes that govern how people are recruited, developed, and evaluated are embedded in municipal-wide HR systems that individual departments cannot simply replace. Mikael's approach has been to work within these constraints.

The annual development conversation is a good example. In Umeå, as in most public sector organisations, a formal performance and development talk is required by the HR process and must be held by the manager with every employee in their team. That cannot be changed at the department level. But what can be changed is how people prepare for it. Before the formal conversation, every team member now finds two colleagues and has a peer conversation: *What do you think I should be focusing on developing, and what have you noticed about where I am strong and where I have room to grow?* That input then feeds into the conversation with the manager, making it richer and reducing the dependency on a single person's necessarily partial perspective. The talk can also be more owned by the employee rather than the manager, who exercises self-leadership in that situation. Questions connected to self-leadership and shared leadership are integrated into the development conversation.

The team has also decoupled development conversations from the yearly salary review talk. When both topics live in the same conversation, the dynamics tend to collapse into something closer to a performance review, where self-advocacy and risk-aversion shape what people say. By separating more continuous development conversations from the annual salary review, the team creates a more honest space where genuine reflection can take place. Development is something that happens continuously within the team, as colleagues support each other through regular feedback sessions.

Recruitment has become a relationship-building tool. When recruiting and onboarding new people, questions related to self-leadership and shared leadership are part of the process. When new team members are onboarded, they are invited to talk about their personal values, passions, purpose and the impact they want to make through their work (using the Personal Canvas, the practice described in Chapter 2) with their colleagues, so they can get to know each other better.

Another practice called *Department buddy* has been introduced to deepen relationships, not only within the team but also with other departments. Each member of the strategic development unit nominates a partner department they take particular responsibility for getting to know–through periodic informal check-ins, the occasional leadership meeting attendance, and simple presence. The goal is not to be useful in every conversation, but rather to ensure you are not a stranger when collaboration is needed.

The co-leadership structure

As the department grew and Mikael's calendar filled with steering groups, working groups, and citywide responsibilities, a practical challenge emerged: the formal department head was increasingly unavailable for the kind of informal and relational leadership that makes a self-organising environment function. The solution has been a complementary structure. Mikael holds the formal role of Development Director, carrying external representation and formal accountability. Magnus and Vanja hold unit manager titles, but they function more as the relational anchors of the department. They are present in the kitchen in the mornings and accessible throughout the day, creating the conditions for informal conversation and peer support that the formal structure cannot fully provide. As Vanja has settled into the role over time, the balance has evolved. Mikael describes feeling more genuinely available himself now, as the weight is distributed differently.

The insight is that when one person carries all of the formal leadership, that person's calendar becomes the bottleneck for everything that requires leadership to happen. Distributing the informal dimensions of leadership to others does not dilute accountability; it creates the conditions for the work to flow.

What has changed and what remains difficult?

The moments that feel most meaningful are often small. A department meeting held entirely by the facilitation team, without the manager needing to drive it, and leaving people feeling it was one of the best meetings they had attended. Overhearing that colleagues are co-creating something, solving a problem on their own, without needing to route it upward. These are the signals that something has actually shifted.

There is also something revealing about the department's survey results. They are not uniformly better. In some dimensions, scores have gotten harder rather than easier. Mikael reads this as a positive sign: when people develop a stronger sense of agency and a more critical understanding of how the organisation works, they become more willing to name what is not functioning. That is not a failure of the work. It is evidence that people have moved from passive acceptance to active engagement.

The most persistent challenge is the boundary with the surrounding hierarchy. When team members act on the distributed authority they have been given and try to work across the wider organisation in ways that do not follow conventional channels, they sometimes encounter friction from directors and managers elsewhere, who experience this as undisciplined or disrespectful of the established order. Mikael is direct about the fact that this is still the hardest part: protecting a team that has learned to operate differently from a system that was not designed for it.

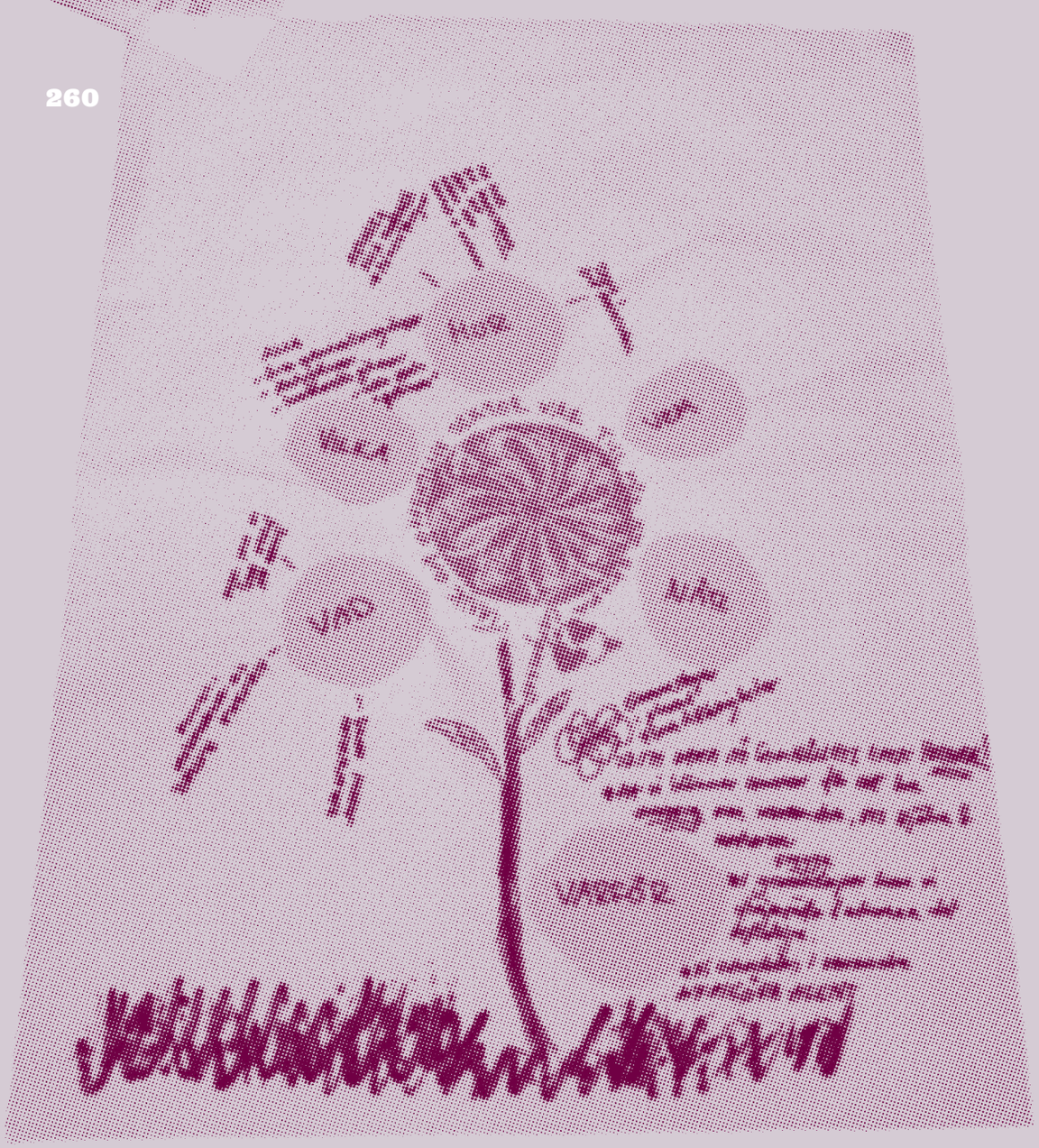
His approach has been pragmatic. Work most intensively with the parts of the organisation that are open. Do not waste energy trying to force entry into structures that are not ready. Build the relationships and the track record that will gradually shift what others believe is possible.

What are three things worth taking away from this journey?

The first thing Mikael says is that this is not a project. There is no completion date. The work is ongoing as things continue to move, change and develop, and treating it as a finite initiative is the surest way to undo whatever progress gets made.

The second is that the manager has to change personally. Not symbolically, not in terms of how they speak about leadership in meetings, but in actual behaviour: what they choose to decide, what they invite others to decide, where they step back. This is harder than it sounds, and Mikael describes still working on it every day, supported by the honest feedback of close colleagues.

The third is perhaps the most practical. Do not add the transformation on top of everything else. Embed it in what already exists: in how the budget is built, how meetings are run, how development conversations happen, how new people are brought in. If the only time people engage with these ideas is during a dedicated workshop, the ideas will stay in the workshop. The practices need to live in the actual work.



UPPSALA: a journey of transforming a municipality from within

This case is based on our work with the Development and innovation unit in the Uppsala municipality and an interview with Niklas Huss, who leads the unit.

Some transformations begin with a manifesto. This one began with an elevator and the word “hello”.

When Niklas joined the municipality, he noticed that people walked past each other in the corridors without making eye contact, let alone saying hello. The organisation had a written commitment to being welcoming and inclusive, but the day-to-day reality told a different story. Rather than launching a culture initiative with a name and a logo, he started riding the elevator and asking people how their day was going. The elevator was slow. Nobody could escape. Over weeks, something shifted. A colleague who had worked there for over thirty years and initially pushed back on the idea of building broader connections across teams later stood up in a group session and said: “There is a revolution happening on floor 7.” She had noticed the ripple effects, the changed tone, the small conversations multiplying outward. Her insight: through small steps, you can create enormous change.

Starting with changing the system

A large municipality is, by design, a rigid structure. Legal accountability, equal treatment, and democratic governance all require consistency and process. These are not flaws to be fixed; they are features. But the same structures that ensure fairness can make genuine adaptation nearly impossible. New challenges that cut across departments, problems that live in the spaces between organisational units, systemic issues that require collective ownership rather than individual mandate, all of these tend to get compressed into siloed responses that address symptoms without touching causes.

Niklas’s starting point was to understand complex challenges that the municipality was facing and the political goals related to them. He understood that he needed to connect his ambitions around systemic transformation with those challenges and strategic instruments politicians use to steer public administration. He linked several of the complex social challenges, like “rising insecurity”, “mental health pressures”, “involuntary loneliness”, and “growing disconnection”

under the ambition to strengthen social togetherness *(social gemenskap)* and resilience in the municipality. He succeeded in having this ambition set as a priority in the strategic documents defining the municipality's budget and goals, with the expectation that different departments would work together to achieve it. The ambition to work with different challenges was already there before him. What was missing was a mechanism to act on them collectively and through a more holistic and systemic lens.

He didn't start by proposing a transformation methodology. Instead of asking permission to work differently, he created the conditions under which working differently became the expected approach.

Building relationships before building programs

Once the mandate existed on paper, the next move was relational. Niklas began identifying and convening people from across the organisation who were already working on related challenges but were not collaborating. Strategic staff, sustainability coordinators, community development officers, communications leads, facilities managers, and directors of subsidiaries. People who shared an interest in the same systemic problems but whose work was separated by administrative boundaries.

He did not call these gatherings a "leadership development program". He called them opportunities to explore what they were each doing, finding unexpected synergies, and seeing the system from a wider vantage point. The aim was to shift how these individuals understood their role: not as representatives of their own unit or department, but as co-owners of a larger shared purpose–to make their municipality a thriving place to live in.

The facilitation methods mattered. In one early gathering, he brought a choreographer, commissioned through a national research institute, to lead participants through an experience of a particular neighbourhood that had lost its social infrastructure: a large secondary school with a local library and facilities for community events had

closed. The space had gone quiet. The community had fragmented. Participants were invited to move around this large abandoned facility and its neighbourhood in silence, to observe, to feel what was present and what was absent. They shared what they felt and noticed, first in pairs, then in the larger group. The room was filled with strong emotions. Everyone was touched. Roles and titles were temporarily set aside.

This is not the kind of activity that appears in traditional municipal meetings. But it served a specific function: it broke through the professional facades that normally govern interactions between people with different organisational titles and hierarchical positions. Vulnerability, a shared experience, and genuine curiosity became available in a way that a conventional workshop would not have unlocked. Several participants who met in those early sessions later chose to meet and explore new possibilities for working together around shared goals.

From culture to structure

Alongside the relational work of building a network between people from different parts of the municipality, Niklas was building new processes. He identified small pockets of possibilities–places where first experimental projects could be initiated to showcase how the city can work with systemic transformation and more collective forms of leadership. For example, in a residential neighborhood where the closure of the school and library had created visible social deterioration, as mentioned above. He would invite actors across the municipality who could contribute to such pilot projects. This was not a project with a fixed design, but a prototype with an explicit intention to engage participants in emergent processes of co-learning and adaptation. Citizens, local organisations, cultural entrepreneurs, and civil servants worked together to explore what the space could become. A participatory budgeting process was introduced so that residents could help direct how municipal resources were deployed in their own neighbourhood.

In parallel, he developed a new annual process designed to complement the existing budget cycle. The standard budget process tends to produce siloed plans because each unit plans for its own remit. The new process created space for cross-organisational futures work, where staff from different units could co-develop activities together before the plans were finalised. The aim was not to replace the existing system but to add a complementary stream that enabled collective design.

He also invested in developing skills needed in systemic transformation. Staff are trained in capabilities like facilitation, futures thinking, co-design methods, how to hold open processes with citizens, and how to prototype with them rather than plan. These competencies do not advertise their deeper purpose. They simply make people more effective at working together across boundaries.

And Niklas ran an explicit campaign to change the basic social texture of the organisation. The elevator experiment became a formal initiative, a "say hello" campaign, executed not through communications but through the facilities team, which had the physical reach and the logistics to make it real. Coffee was provided at elevator banks. Flyers were distributed. A LinkedIn post he wrote about the initiative was spread broadly and generated conversations across the sector. Small gestures, visible commitment, genuine follow-through.

The leading together structure in practice

Niklas operates with what might be described as a complementary leadership structure. He holds a formal position, but he does not lead this work alone, and he does not position himself as the expert bringing transformation to people. He works alongside others who carry different kinds of authority: political leaders who provide the mandate, administrative directors who provide organisational permission, facilitators and educators who develop specific capabilities, and community actors who bring local legitimacy.

He describes his role with a metaphor he has made official. His title, informally used but genuinely meant, is "human gardener". He plants, tends, connects, and waits. He does not harvest for himself. The logic underneath this metaphor is that, in a complex system, transformation cannot be installed; it must grow organically. The gardener's work is to create the conditions for growth, to protect what is fragile, to prune what is crowding out the light, and to trust that the organism knows something about what it needs.

This orientation also shapes how Niklas manages relationships with those who feel threatened by what is emerging. When the existing hierarchy becomes uncertain about what is happening–because things are moving in ways that were not pre-authorised, because people are collaborating in new patterns, because initiatives are gaining momentum outside of normal channels–his response is not to accelerate or to fight. He absorbs the concern. He connects the work back to the official strategy. He invites those who are resistant to participate rather than critique. And sometimes he simply protects the emerging work by not making it fully visible until it is strong enough to withstand scrutiny.

He is direct about the cost of this. Transformation of this kind is not like a smoothly managed project. It is a complex process, emotionally demanding, politically exposed, and often exhausting. He has developed personal self-leadership practices to sustain himself: annual solo retreats where he reflects on whether his inner compass is still calibrated, and engages in meditation, physical practice, and gardening in the literal sense. He does not present these as optional extras. They are part of his personal self-care infrastructure.

What does this journey suggest?

Niklas's approach offers a specific lesson for those operating inside large, established organisations. Resistance to new concepts is not always resistance to what the concepts represent. Sometimes it is resistance to the label, the jargon, the implicit critique of everything that came before. By not naming the transformation, by letting it grow through structural changes, new skills, relational investments, and small visible experiments, Niklas made it harder to argue against and easier to join.

The framework was never the point. The relationships were the point. The new processes were the point. The capabilities people built were the point. The shift in how people understood their own agency, their own mandate, their own role in the larger system, that was the point. A stronger local community and the well-being of citizens was the point.

By the time anyone might have thought to ask what this approach was called, it was already producing results that were difficult to dispute.

A journey about how HR can support leading together

Most transformation efforts fail not because the ideas are wrong, but because they never make it into the everyday systems that govern how an organisation actually operates. Job descriptions, recruitment, onboarding, performance and salary reviews, training and competence development, leadership profiles, forums and programs: these are where culture is either reinforced or quietly contradicted. This journey is about how a few HR strategists participating in our projects set out to close that gap.

Developing new language and shared frameworks

In several participating organisations, terms like self-leadership or trust-based leadership already existed in their strategic documents, business plans or policies. But rarely was it clear what these terms really meant and how they could be embodied in culture and ways of working. Very little had been done in practice. Some of the HR strategists began exploring how they could support transformation through small steps, attempting to build an infrastructure without waiting for a perfect mandate or a top-down directive.

One of the first challenges was definitional. For example, self-leadership means different things to different people, and when a concept means everything, it ends up meaning nothing in practice. Providing simple frameworks around key concepts, such as self-leadership, and anchoring them in existing research was one of the things the HR practitioners in our project did. For example, they defined self-leadership in three dimensions: self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-direction. This gave managers and employees a shared vocabulary–a way to talk about something that had previously been vague and easy to dismiss.

Making those definitions accessible and visible to employees and managers on the intranet was another step in this process. But posting content on the intranet changes almost nothing on its own. The real work, as some of the HR practitioners said, was getting in front of people.

They attended leadership meetings and forums across different departments and support functions. They led introductory sessions about basic terms that combined theory and practical exercises, with some of these sessions being in person, others remote, depending on how each part of the organisation operated. After addressing the management layer, similar conversations were brought to all-staff meetings, which required persistence. Not everyone was immediately enthusiastic. There was resistance, competing priorities, and the usual organisational inertia that greets anything that does not fit neatly into existing routines.

From self-leadership to leading together

One insight from this process that HR practitioners shared was that self-leadership cannot be treated purely as an individual matter, even though organisations often push for self-leadership, placing more pressure on individual responsibility. When people encounter the concept only in a lecture, course or article, it tends to stay abstract. When a team explores it together and figures out how team members can support each other in practising self-leadership, something different happens.

When people started reflecting on their own needs and working styles alongside their colleagues, they learned things about each other that had not come up before: someone's need for recovery time, someone else's preference for how to receive feedback. These disclosures built trust, and trust created the psychological safety that made further change possible.

An exercise that became particularly popular in one organisation is called *My Ideal Work Week*. Teams worked through questions about how they actually wanted to structure their work time, where they were losing energy, and how they were prioritising. What emerged was often surprising: people discovered that their colleagues had very different needs and rhythms, and that surfacing these differences was not destabilising but relieving. It gave teams permission to talk about how they worked, not just what they were working on. It supported them in co-creating shared agreements on how they could work better together.

Supporting teams in developing new ways of leading together

Another thing the HR practitioners in our projects tested was away from work limited by policies and standard HR processes, and towards more customised support for managers and teams. When teams struggled, the HR practitioners offered to facilitate workshops on topics that could help improve team dynamics and nudged members to practise more shared leadership–without necessarily labelling it as such. For example, they might focus on discussing shared values and purpose, exploring the team's experience of psychological safety and ways to improve it, or agreeing on how to work better together and share responsibilities for team rituals and meetings.

Similar support was provided by some of the internal development units in participating organisations. In one organisation, where the development unit participated in our project, some of the developers who work with different teams in their organisation began integrating methods they'd learned from our project into their own work with teams. In this way, practices that support shared leadership were spread to different parts of the organisation.

Development programs for managers and employees

One HR practitioner developed a structured programme for the managers on creating conditions for self-leadership, which was designed and delivered in partnership with an external provider. The programme runs over seven to eight months and combines formal learning with peer learning groups and ongoing network sessions. Around 60 managers have already completed it. Multiple participants have described it as having changed not only how they lead their teams, but how they approach their own lives. The goal is that every manager will go through this programme eventually. To sustain the learning, an alumni structure with two gatherings per year was developed, keeping the cohort connected and continuing the conversation over time. The logic is simple: a single training experience fades; a community of practice does not.

In another organisation, a few facilitators from the development unit developed a *Leadership program for non-managers*, spreading the idea that leadership is a shared practice that needs to be distributed across the organisation rather than limited to formal management. In this way, they tried to integrate knowledge and methods from our project with their existing methods for leadership development and disseminate them across the organisation. The programme was so popular among employees that they ended up making it a more regular training programme.

The challenge with such training programmes is that they cost money and time. The economic and time pressure on short-term deliveries can often prevent managers and employees from accessing relevant training. This is a structural constraint that needs to be worked around. One way to solve this is to use internal staff to deliver such training programmes rather than hiring more expensive external consultants. In our projects, we saw that especially development and innovation units had colleagues with strong facilitation skills who were the first to go out to organisation and support individuals and teams with

training and competence development. Sometimes it is possible to find alternative forums for learning, such as self-organised study circles. To run those, HR or development functions can provide initial support and train ambassadors, which in turn then help spread knowledge by initiating such study circles. They can be run as extended lunch conversations to make them more easily accessible to colleagues who feel pressured by time.

Bringing collective leadership and a wider systemic transformation to senior roles

From supporting individuals and teams with strengthening their self and shared leadership skills, some HR practitioners found ways to advance the larger topic of systemic transformation and the distributed leadership needed to support it among top management. In one organisation, the senior management team began discussing transformational leadership after being exposed to guest speakers at their annual leadership forums facilitated by HR. Evaluations showed a measurable shift in awareness: managers who had been exposed to the concepts once returned a year later, noticeably more prepared to engage with them.

Afterwards, transformational leadership was integrated into shorter and more regular monthly leadership sessions as a theme, inviting internal and external speakers to highlight different aspects of leading during transformation. Not every manager arrives convinced. In early sessions, some participants were visibly dismissive of what they were hearing, regarding it as another management trend. Changing how people understand leadership requires repeated exposure over time, as well as concrete examples demonstrating the difference it makes, and enough time for skepticism to give way to genuine curiosity.

Rebuilding HR processes from the inside

The point HR practitioners have been raising in our project is that lasting change requires making changes to the systems themselves, not just the programming around them. HR processes–the ones that govern how people are recruited, welcomed, developed, and evaluated–encode assumptions about how organisations work. If those processes are built on mechanistic top-down principles that remain unchanged, they will undo whatever the training and workshops are trying to build.

In recruitment, some organisations from our projects are rethinking what they need to look for in new employees and how interviews should be structured. This is so that the candidates who understand and can operate in more participatory environments and self-managed teams are more likely to be identified and selected. In onboarding, some organisations have integrated practices related to self-leadership and shared leadership, or built transformation thinking into how both new employees and new managers are introduced to the organisation.

The performance conversation process is also under examination in some places. The traditional structure relies heavily on manager-to-employee feedback, which reflects a hierarchical assumption: the person above you knows best what you have achieved and what you should develop. This is worth questioning, as the colleagues who work alongside each other daily often have richer insight into each other's contributions than a manager who is responsible for many people and further removed from the day-to-day work. Moving towards more collective feedback practices–where peers give each other input regularly rather than waiting for a formal annual conversation–would change not just the format but the underlying relationship between accountability and leadership.

Transforming the HR function

Some HR practitioners in our projects acknowledge that supporting systemic transformation from hierarchies towards more participation and collective forms of leadership demands changes in how we understand HR as a support function. The traditional HR role is oriented towards top-down policy and standardisation of HR processes, often delivering finished answers on how things should be done. In a global world where the public sector must operate in a fast-paced, complex, and ever-changing environment, the role of HR is evolving. HR needs to learn how to hold space for tough questions and conversations, build systems that support reflection and experimentation, facilitate collective processes adjusted to specific needs and contexts, and build networks of people across organisational boundaries rather than only supporting vertical relationships within them.

The capabilities HR practitioners in our projects consider most important for them to develop in the future are facilitation, organisational design thinking oriented towards systemic logic rather than hierarchy, and a learning mindset that treats failure as information rather than as something to be avoided. People analytics and the use of AI tools are also crucial. These technologies will increasingly help HR understand both the bigger picture of the whole organisation within its larger ecosystem and the specific needs of individuals and teams.

To those considering taking a similar path, the HR professionals in our projects offer this advice: Start small. Pilot things. Do not wait for perfect conditions or full organisational buy-in before beginning. Lobby upward without giving up when you meet resistance, because resistance is a normal part of introducing anything genuinely new. Find colleagues and mentors who can help you carry the weight of the work and make sense of what you are learning. Accept that the change you are working towards will not happen overnight. Sustaining the effort requires recognising and celebrating even small progress made along the way. The goal is working towards an organisation that has developed the capacity to function well while change is the normal condition, not something that occasionally disrupts a stable baseline. Building that capacity is ultimately what HR is for, they advise.

6.4 From working with changes within existing organisations to developing distributed leadership across ecosystems

Depending on your role, decision-making power and ambition, as well as the organisational conditions, maturity and interest of your colleagues, you will determine the best way to begin your transformation journey. It might begin with a smaller initiative in your own team where you can most easily prototype practices for self- and shared leadership. Perhaps you are part of top management or working with innovation, development or HR issues, and you can have a more ambitious plan. No matter how small or big you will start, we hope this book has provided you with some knowledge, concrete practices and tips based on experiences of others who have already been on this journey.

As mentioned several times in this book, we have seen that rather than starting big from scratch, it might be smarter to find smaller pockets of possibility where there is a need, curiosity and engagement. While supporting organisations on their transformation journeys from hierarchical structures towards greater participation and leading together we have observed that there were two main directions these transformations would take.

On the one hand, when working with transformation within existing teams and departments, the pilot teams we worked with began to increase trust and psychological safety, and build culture, skills and processes that supported transformation towards more self-managed teams. When first success stories surfaced within existing teams, interest from other parts of the organisations followed naturally. Support functions such as HR or development and innovation were used by several participating organisations to disseminate knowledge and methods to other interested areas.

On the other hand, in organisations that either reached higher maturity levels in the first pilot teams (like in the case of Lidingö municipality) or where the development and innovation function got the

mandate to drive transformation (like in Umeå and Uppsala municipalities), a more systemic approach was developed where self and distributed leadership were not only developed within existing teams but rather spread in their wider ecosystems, connecting different parts of their organisations with external stakeholders, including citizens. The latter required that transformation agents invest their energy in building new networks and relationships among different actors, bringing them together around complex societal challenges that demanded greater collaboration across the ecosystem. For example, in Lidingö, efforts focused on the challenge of sustainable and preventive elderly care; in Umeå, around the challenge of increased youth criminality and decreased security among youth; and in Uppsala, around the need for stronger social togetherness and resilience in local communities. All participating organisations that managed to work with systemic transformation–from hierarchies to participation and distributed leadership–in their ecosystems also invested significant energy in anchoring the need for systemic transformation with politicians and top management. This helped create not only bottom-up engagement among colleagues, citizens and external actors, but also helped link transformation to overall policy, strategy and prioritised goals on organisational level.

They worked to create safe spaces for experimentation, such as internal innovation hubs where transformation agents from different parts of their organisation could gather, learn, and try out new things together. In this explorative, co-creation process, these organisations dared to use creative methods inspired by design and artistic practices to engage participants in a more holistic way.

In all the three cases mentioned above, work with systemic transformation was also connected to new legislation and policy at national level. For example, it was connected to the Swedish social services law (*socialtjänstlag* *). This law requires Swedish municipalities and regions to transform the social services system from a reactive to a preventive system based on strong collaboration between actors in the ecosystem, adopting a broader and more holistic perspective. Complex societal challenges, like increased mental health issues (whether among the youth or elderly), cannot be solved within isolated municipal departments.

*riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/socialtjanstlag-2025400_sfs-2025-400/

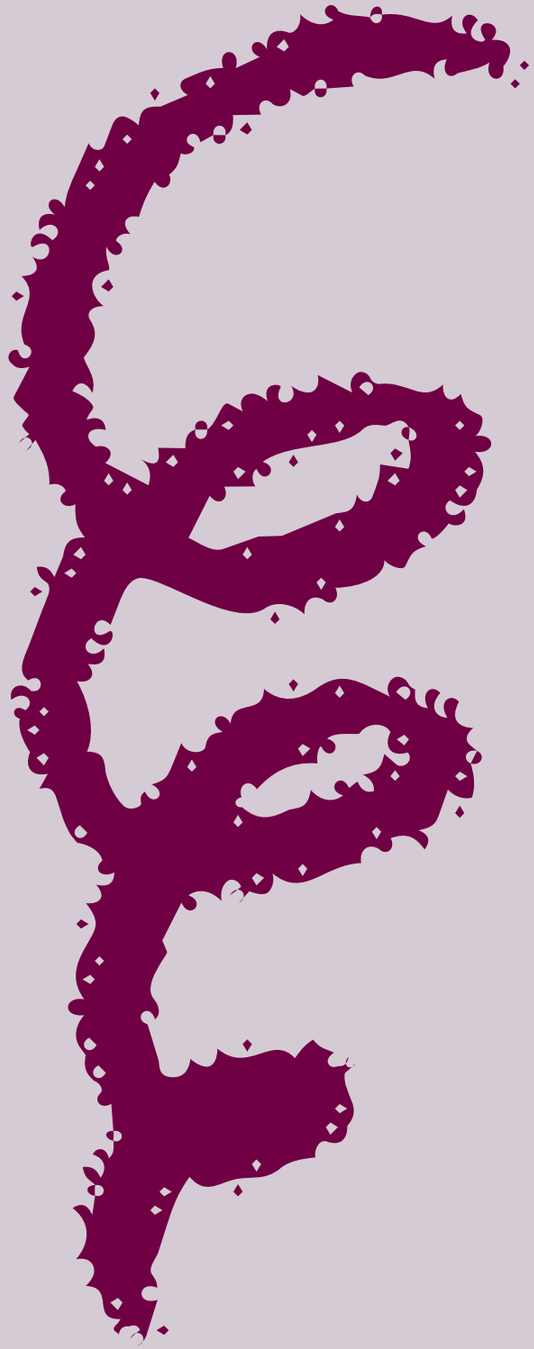
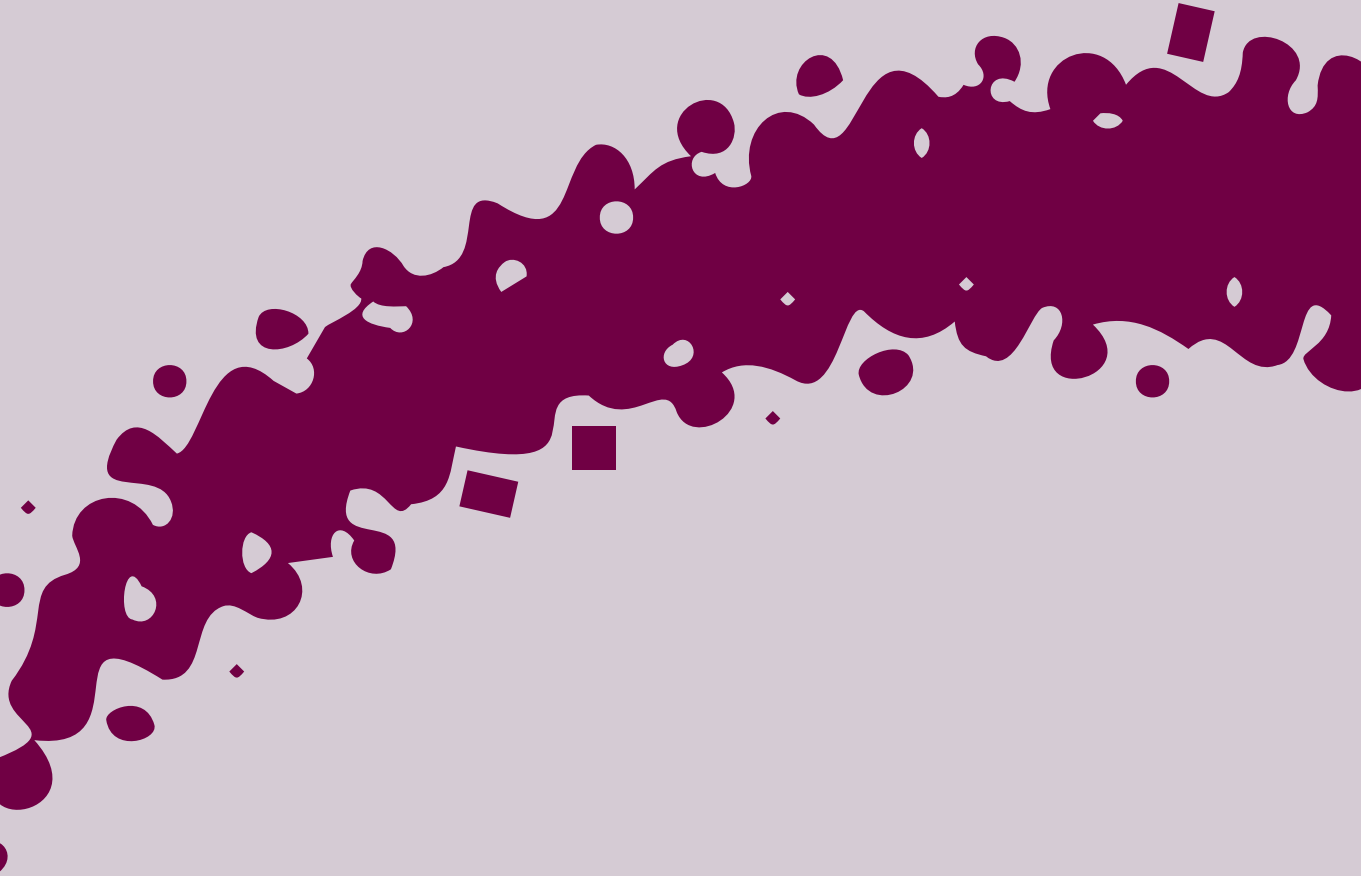
6.5 Questions for reflection

1. What is your personal motivation for working with transformation towards greater participation and more collective forms of leadership in your team, organisation, or in the wider ecosystem?
2. Why does your team, organisation, or the wider ecosystem need this transformation?
3. What could the benefits of this transformation be for your team, organisation and/or the wider ecosystem, including end users?
4. Where and how could you and your colleagues initiate this transformation journey?
5. Which teams or parts of the organisation would be interested and benefit most from stronger collaboration and collective forms of leadership? Where could significant results be produced in a rather short time?
6. Is there a complex challenge your organisation is facing that would benefit from stronger participation, collaboration and shared leadership? What is it?
7. Who from top management could support the transformation and help you anchor it within top management (and with politicians if needed)?
8. How could strengthened participation, collaboration and distributed leadership support the organisation's overall strategy and goals, or help solve challenges your organisation is facing today?
9. In what ways could it be possible to create interest and raise general awareness and knowledge about systemic transformation towards more participation, collaboration and distributed leadership in your organisation?

10. Who could be your allies in helping you raise general awareness and knowledge?
11. What are your key strengths and challenges as a transformation agent? How can you use your strengths, and who could you engage to help you navigate your weaknesses or challenges in this journey?
12. How does your current office space support and/or hinder collaboration, co-creation and shared leadership?
13. If your workplace lacks spaces for co-creation, are there minor interventions you could implement in the office, or other pockets of possibilities you can identify, to create enabling spaces for co-creation?
14. What might the key obstacles in your transformation journey be, and how could you work around them?
15. Which other organisation(s) or communities could you learn more from about systemic transformation towards participation, co-creation and collective forms of leadership?

6.6 Conclusions

In this chapter, we introduced basic principles and tips to consider when designing your own journey as a facilitator of systemic transformation within your team or organisation- towards increased participation, co-creation and collective forms of leadership-in order to better navigate complexity. We shared several case studies from participating organisations to provide concrete examples that can hopefully inspire your own journey. We also investigated challenges that other organisations and experts have experienced and offered suggestions on how to work around them.

This entire book has been a journey in which you were invited to explore what systemic transformation-from hierarchies towards increased participation, co-creation and leading together-entails, along with its benefits and challenges. We examined how the individual, cultural, and structural levels are all key building blocks to keep in mind simultaneously throughout the transformation process. At the beginning of the book, we explored the importance of self-leadership on an individual level and how to create collective conditions that support self-leadership development in organisations. We explained why self-leadership must be complemented by a strong culture of trust, safety, inclusion, learning and mutual support to enable collective forms of leadership. After addressing the need for a supportive culture to lead together, we focused on the changes in roles and competency development required for both managers and employees in this transformation journey. Lastly, we introduced participatory processes and structures that can support shared leadership.

We hope you now feel inspired and empowered to jump in and initiate your own experiment in practising more self and shared leadership in your workplace. We wish you the best of luck on this journey! Please don't hesitate to get in touch if you need help. We will continue to hold space for individuals, teams and organisations who are on the shared journey of systemic transformation towards leading together.