

DEMOCRATISING TRANSFORMATION



SPURRING LEARNING AT PLANETARY SCALE – Lene Krogh Jeppesen / Danish National Centre for Public-Private Innovation

I'm going to start with some insights from our innovation barometer, which is the official statistics on public sector innovation. Based on it, we know that only four out of 10 innovations have been evaluated. However, the purpose for 8 out of 10 of these evaluations is to gather learning to improve the innovation. But only one in 5 of these evaluations have documented and communicated results to decision makers.

In Denmark, the Covid pandemic called for a new and strong collaboration between not only all three parts of the public sector, municipal, regional, and state level, but also the private sector. Avoiding the collapse of basic societal functions and the focus on avoiding deaths, had a combined driving power for focusing collaborations across all sectors. So when we dig into how the pandemic influenced Public Sector Innovation, one of the strong stories emerging is that the collaboration on a single issue with very complex consequences enables learning across silos, organisations and sectors.

Can we transform this into an approach that can be used in other crisis as well? We should look into it. One advice that we always give and receive from researchers is - that you shouldn't match complexities. So if you have a really complex experiment going on, you shouldn't have the same level of complexity in your evaluation. For the future ahead, we need to really experiment with the methodology as well as how to do this.

Maybe we need to look at what scales and how, and what doesn't. Instead of approaching it as a supertanker that we are focused on changing, we may look at it as this massive fleet of smaller boats that are all transforming and blossoming at the same time. Then we may focus our resources on what connects these boats, how they can share their new cores, and maybe better understand how these vessels transform as well. I don't think a bottom up approach will be enough. But rather than being paralyzed by looking at the supertanker that we're trying to change, a certain level of granularity could help to figure out how to make this entire fleet moving in new directions.

Looking at current crisis learning approaches, we're seeing a disconnect between the local and the national, international and global level - both on the civil servant and on the political side. Maybe we have paid too little attention to power when following the money. I mean following not only the money to fund specific activities or programmes but rather understanding all public funding also as money that funds learning. How can we better intertwine public funding with public learning?

For that, I would love to wave my magic wand, and then dismantle the most dysfunctional institutional traces of New Public Management. The whole core of New Public Management is this idea about having contracts about specific results. What was a good idea initially has turned into this insanity of Excel sheet management, just locking in a lot of resources at the moment and not helping in any way to steer or coordinate properly. To the point where it doesn't allow us a space to experiment and try new ways of working - which are necessary to unlock current path dependencies.

Imagine public institutions would have Curious George on their shoulders and ask a lot more questions, instead of assuming that everybody's always going to behave in the same way. All of us have to be willing to share what we're learning as well. Nobody has all the answers for the crisis ahead. So by showing a culture where we don't pretend to have all the answers when somebody asks us something, but extend an invitation to find them together, we can really accelerate things.