The inner learning process: How to become innovative in a public organization?

THE STORY ABOUT INNOVATION PLATFORM KIRUNA

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Digital tour
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What motivates me in my research?

• Change processes over time and zooming in on what is going on in relationships between people and between organizations.

• How we navigate and handle tensions and paradoxes when working with change and development

• Interface between society and industry and cross-sector collaboration
City transformation was the Municipality of Kiruna’s motivation to develop their own innovation platform in 2016.

Focus: Building an external network of relationships with actors from research institutions, business industry, and investment firms to bring in new knowledge and competence.

IP Kiruna with the expertise of RISE and LTU developed seven innovation cases that addressed different technological needs of the city transformation.

Difficult to arouse interest and commitment among employees with the municipality of Kiruna.

Photo credit: Fredric Alm
What insights can we learn from Phase I of IP Kiruna

• Innovation doesn’t necessarily need to be technological in nature.

• Innovation and development are not separate from but need to be connected to the needs of employees in their everyday and build on their existing competences and practical knowledge.

• Relationships facilitate innovation.
YEARS 2020-2022: PHASE II of IP Kiruna
To develop the innovative competence of employees to learn about innovation together

SHIFT IN FOCUS

• Realization that to strengthen the municipality's ability to innovate, the project’s focus needed to be on the development of the internal public organization

• The focus for IP Kiruna: Building and strengthening the innovative competence of employees
  • Courage
  • Uncertainty tolerance
  • Collaborative skills
  • Ability to take responsibility
  • Ability to take initiative
  • Creativity
Our innovation group

- A core group of 6 employees representing different administrations and subsidiaries of the municipality.
- 1 project manager and 1 project coordinator from Kiruna Sustainability Center
- 2 process leaders from RISE
- 3 researchers from LTU
- 1 following researcher from UU
- 15-18 percent of employees' work time is dedicated to working with innovation and building their innovative competence.
- Since January 2020, we continue to meet for workshops, monthly meetings, and weekly meetings

Employees who have become ambassadors of innovation at the Municipality of Kiruna and Tekniska Verken
## YEAR 2020: Getting beneath the surface

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Learning about design thinking</th>
<th>• A creative and human-centered problem-solving approach</th>
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<td>Cultivating a dynamic mindset</td>
<td>• You believe your intelligence and talents can be developed over time rather than believing you're not good at something.</td>
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| Developing relationships to build a team | • Sharing their knowledge and perspectives  
• Relating to the challenges of others  
• Blurring organizational boundaries  
• Fostering cooperation, trust, and open communication |

### November - December 2020: Bureaucracy and innovation collide
Employees were thriving within the group dynamic and learning about new methods and approaches but were struggling to translate and integrate those new methods and approaches with their daily work within the municipality.
What I have observed when studying innovation in public organizations

Capable, competent, intellectual, creative human beings working within the structures (control systems, routines, regulations, mandates) of a bureaucracy.

INTRODUCE INNOVATION

These structures sometimes make employees feel boxed in because the structures do not always clearly align with development and innovation.
The practical problem for the participants and my research question became:

*How do employees experience and navigate the tension between bureaucracy and development to become more innovative in a public organization?*
What we can learn from YEAR 2020

Tensions between different competences are normal and important.

• There was a clash between different competencies in the group which created an either/or thinking - No one could yet fully relate to and appreciate each other’s respective experiences and perspectives.

• The tension between innovation and bureaucracy can create feelings of reluctance, confusion, and even resistance where employees feel unqualified to work with innovation.

• The employees' existing experiences and competencies need to be valued in parallel and connected with the work of developing their innovative competencies, not separated from them.
YEAR 2021: Realizing the capacity within to act

CHALLENGE
They did not yet trust in their innovative competence to act and influence their circumstances.

ENTER: EFFECTUATION!
Brought the employees back to themselves through reflecting on three core questions to personalize innovation.

BECOMING INNOVATION AMBASSADORS
The Kiruna model emerges
What we can learn from YEAR 2021

• Working with **effectuation became a method that personalized innovation** which showed how innovation needs to be adapted to who you are, your competences, and what is meaningful to you, otherwise there is no commitment and motivation.

• Employees were starting **to see that innovation and bureaucracy were not at odds with each other but can be interconnected.**

• Employees realized they were guardians of the problems and challenges they encountered in their daily work and **that they could influence the bureaucratic structures and develop the public organization.**
YEAR 2022: Committing and Contributing

A shift in mindset where employees were changing within

- Working with innovation allowed them
  - To see themselves in another way
  - To see their competences in another way
  - To see that change and innovation were in small improvements in collaboration with others

- A both/and perspective gradually developed in employees where they bridged and began to integrate their new innovative competence with how they did their work in a bureaucratic environment
  - "Regardless of the fact that we have a lot of laws and regulations, how you handle laws and regulations, you can always find nuances within them without going outside the law" (City planning strategist)
  - "A challenge is how do we help children to become innovative? How do we give them the opportunity to think in new ways, and think their own thoughts, and come up with ideas" (Principal of preschools)
What we can learn from YEAR 2022

Learning to accept a both/and perspective + personalizing innovation = self-transformational experience (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002)

- Employees were able to accept the interconnectedness between a bureaucratic logic and development logic because they were the ones defining what innovation personally meant for them and the work that they do.

Both/and perspective enables complex thinking (Raisch, Hargrave, & Van de Ven, 2018)

- “...learning and creativity, fosters flexibility and resilience, and unleashes human potential” (Smith and Lewis, 2011)
- Questioning organizational assumptions and current practices
- Proactively unlearning organizational processes
- Self-reflection: “Is my decision/action moving us in the direction of this culture change, or away from it?”
What is this innovation process about and what can we learn?

“As practitioners developed their innovative competence, they experienced a shift in mindset that allows them to go from solely bureaucratic structures to accepting the differences and interconnectedness between bureaucracy and innovation.”
-- F. Scott Fitzgerald in The Crack-Up (1936)

- As practitioners developed their innovative competence, they experienced a shift in mindset that allows them to go from solely bureaucratic structures to accepting the differences and interconnectedness between bureaucracy and innovation.

- This inner learning process led to the realization that you cannot affect change outside yourself without first changing on the inside. It is by consistently doing things in a new way that things around us change.

Illustration by Carina Kero Esberg
The value of becoming innovative in a bureaucracy

The story of IP Kiruna is evidence that when employees become innovative in a bureaucratic organization, they create space beyond the bureaucratic structures where they use to their own practical knowledge, critical thinking, empathy, and creativity to influence the structures and discern what the situation needs.
Thank you so much for listening and being here!

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Scope out our innovation team at Kiruna Sustainability Center
https://kiruna.se/ksc/startsida/innovationslek.html

Here you can find our Kiruna model with methods and tools and ideas of how to work with innovation in your public organization.