

Managers' support for Workplace Innovation in the public sector: Wedged between expectations and conditions

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Abstract

Over the past few years, public policy interventions have been initiated to promote public sector innovation. These top-down initiatives have been aimed at generating bottom-up movement, and first-line managers are believed to play an important role in this transformation. However, little is known about the challenges first-line managers face in their role as agents of change. This article provides unique insights into the expectations and conditions that first-line managers face when innovation support is implemented in municipalities. The article draws on 23 interviews with participants from three Swedish cases where innovation support has been implemented in the municipal context. These three cases of innovation support are examples of conscious efforts to systematise innovation work that also affect the first-line managers in the organisation. The findings reveal that a multitude of expectations pointing towards an exploration logic are placed on first-line managers to lead, dare and support in connection with employee-driven innovation, but the conditions under which they operate point towards an exploitation logic. The managers find themselves wedged between high expectations and a lack of mandate, resources and organisational support for workplace innovation in the public sector context.

Key words: innovation support, public sector, municipalities, first-line manager, workplace innovation, employee-driven innovation

Introduction

The public sector is facing increasing demands due to changes in demography, technology and climate, while at the same time dealing with insufficient resources as well as multiple and sometimes competing objectives (Christensen et al., 2020; Wihlman et al., 2016). To meet these demands, innovation and an increase in innovation capacity have been suggested as ways in which public sector organisations can readjust and make the necessary changes (Albury, 2005). Public innovations are expected to be new and efficient solutions that provide high quality service aligned with citizen needs while using tax funds wisely (Hartley, 2005). Investments in innovation are also expected to promote the public sector as an attractive place to work (Nählinder, 2013) and to enhance employees' career satisfaction (Wipulanusat et al., 2018).

Innovation in the public sector can take several forms, ranging from new services and new ways of providing these to citizens, to adapting internal processes or challenging organisational structures by establishing cross-departmental collaboration (Bloch & Bugge, 2013). In order to develop and implement the innovations, the capacity to lead and organise fruitful innovation processes is key. Several state-funded initiatives have hence been initiated globally in recent years to reinforce public sector institutions' organising for innovation. Countries like the USA and Australia are investing in increasing public sector innovation, and many European countries have established national innovation strategies (Kesselring et al., 2014; Kibowski et al., 2019; Näringsdepartementet, 2012; Prus et al., 2017). In Sweden, a national innovation strategy was established in 2012 and in 2014 the Swedish government commissioned the Swedish Innovation Agency (Vinnova) to "improve decision-makers' ability to conduct innovation work in the public sector" (Näringsdepartementet, 2014). Since then, Vinnova has funded several policy initiatives and national innovation programmes aimed at furthering public sector innovation, focusing on everything from procurement and innovation management to how to collaborate towards Agenda 2030 (Engstrom, 2019). In 2019, as many as two thirds of all municipalities and regions and half of all the state administrative authorities in Sweden had taken part in projects funded by Vinnova's national innovation programmes (Engstrom, 2019).

As the innovation policy initiative ends up in public sector organisations, the first-line manager's role as a "change agent" comes into play (Balogun, 2003; Huy, 2002; Rønningstad, 2018). While hierarchies have been increasingly flattened over the years, power and responsibility have become more distributed, leaving first-line managers with more operational assignments (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Høystrup, 2012; Rønningstad, 2018). This affects change processes that take time and require a persistent focus and systematic effort. Research shows that first-line managers have been tasked with driving a multitude of changes in the public sector, from equality and environmental initiatives to discrimination and digitalisation (Christensen et al., 2020). The first-line managers become the link between what politicians and senior executives decide and what staff do (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020; Halvarsson Lundkvist & Gustavsson, 2018). Their influence significantly impacts what

happens at the workplace level, and recent research shows that they play an equally central role in promoting innovation practices (Wallo et al., 2013; Wihlman, 2014).

As first-line managers are present in day-to-day operations, they are uniquely suited to follow up, inquire and encourage employees to engage in innovative practice (Beaudan, 2006; Rønningstad, 2018). They are closest to the employees who harness innovative potential, and they also have the power to create an environment that promotes innovation in the public sector (Høystrup, 2012; Wihlman et al., 2016).

Even though many nationwide initiatives have been launched to support innovation in municipalities, regions and state administrative authorities, there are few studies on innovation management and practices in a public sector context (Gallouj & Zanfei, 2013) and very few studies have focused on how managers handle the changes in these contexts and under what conditions they can promote innovation.

Therefore, this article explores the expectations and conditions that first-line managers face when innovation support is implemented in municipalities. The empirical material draws on three cases of innovation support that was implemented in Swedish municipalities and includes 23 interviews with participants from these three cases. To support innovation organisational arrangements and activities to support employees' innovation work were developed, and special innovation support roles were established. In this paper, the term innovation support refers to these conscious efforts to systematise and support innovation work.

The following section introduces the theoretical concepts of workplace innovation (WPI) and employee-driven innovation (EDI), which provide a lens through which to analyse workplace innovations and managers' roles in promoting innovation work (in particular employee-driven innovation in the workplace), and the conditions that managers face when implementing workplace innovation. The subsequent section provides a description of the method. Thereafter, the findings are presented. Finally, the findings are discussed, some conclusions are drawn, and practical implications are suggested.

The concepts of WPI and EDI

In the early 1990s, the field of innovation studies saw a progressive shift from how to produce and patent tangible products to how to increase intangible knowledge-based capital through innovative practices (Pot et al., 2021). Around that time, the two closely related concepts of workplace innovation (WPI) and employee-driven innovation (EDI) gained momentum.

The growing interest in WPI and EDI reflects growing policy concerns about how to support innovation in the workplace environment. Even though the two concepts are similar, some variations can be identified in terms of origin and focus. These similarities and variations will be highlighted in this section.

Most research articles within the field of WPI are linked to the area of business and management, and are found in journals dealing with human resource management (HRM), innovation management, entrepreneurship and organisational development (Kibowski et al., 2019; Prus et al., 2017; Weerakoon & McMurray, 2021). Articles on EDI, on the other hand, are more closely connected with the academic fields of public administration, innovation in public services and workplace learning (Ellström, 2010; Evans et al., 2011; Høyrup, 2012). Despite these ancestral differences, there is nothing inherent in the WPI concept that would make it unfit for use in public sector contexts. In the 2021 Handbook of Workplace Innovation, the editors recognise this absence and declare that one of the aims of the book is to strengthen WPI-related research in a public sector context (Weerakoon & McMurray, 2021). Besides being used in different disciplines, there is also evidence that the two concepts may stem from geographically separate roots. The concept of WPI has seen its widest spread in Europe, the USA and Australia, while the concept of EDI seems to have mostly been used in Nordic countries such as Norway and Denmark (Pot et al., 2021; Weerakoon & McMurray, 2021).

Still, there are noticeable resemblances between the two concepts. Both WPI and EDI focus on the workplace and the context in which the innovation work is to take place. In contrast to how mainstream innovation management literature zooms in on the innovation itself and the innovation process, WPI and EDI add the perspectives of who should be involved, where innovation should take place and which organisational conditions will support innovation at every organisational level (Pot et al., 2021; Totterdill, 2015; Totterdill & Exton, 2017). EDI researchers emphasise innovation as a social process and the importance of collaboration between employees and managers (Sundbo, 2003); WPI researchers seem to agree, but also add a more systemic approach (Pot et al., 2016). For example, the emphasis on employee involvement in strategic decision-making and how to build representative partnership structures between management, employees and trade unions have no apparent analogy in the EDI literature.

While both concepts emphasise the need for systematic approaches to innovation and its strategic importance, EDI literature also includes more informal, unofficial and even accidental forms of innovation (Price et al., 2012) that seem to lack equivalence within WPI. Furthermore, EDI literature has historically focused less on profitable high-tech innovations and more on the development of service and organisational innovations, something that is likely due to the concept's close connection to public sector practices. By contrast, economic motives form a central line of argument for WPI, even if other incentives exist (Oeij et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, both the WPI and the EDI concepts rest on the axiom that organisations striving to innovate need to view employees at every level as a resource for innovative ideas, and to use this untapped well of creative potential. In this way, the previously predominant focus on R&D structures as the *only* or primary source of innovation is shifted and expanded, although

there is a slight nuance between the two concepts (cf. Jensen et al., 2007). WPI seems to include both employee-driven and R&D-driven innovation, while EDI literature does not appear to concern itself with the R&D source of innovation. Perhaps this is because EDI emerged as a response to the prevailing view of innovation as a tech-heavy R&D practice (Høystrup, 2012). Even though the concept of WPI – which includes R&D modes of innovation – is used as a theoretical model in this article, it should be noted that R&D innovation will not be the focus of the article.

Notably, the definition of EDI seems less far-reaching and all-inclusive compared to definitions of WPI, and Høystrup's definition of EDI as "originating from interaction of employees, who are not assigned to this task" (Høystrup, 2012, p. 8) narrows the scope of EDI even further.

However, researchers within both WPI and EDI recognise that the biggest untapped potential for growth lies in the opportunity to engage "worker-level" employees in innovative practices (Høystrup, 2012; Pot et al., 2021; Smith, 2017). Regardless of whether they are shopfloor workers in the manufacturing sector or caregivers in a social service setting, these employees represent the great masses and possess valuable know-how since they are the ones closest to the customer or product that would benefit from improvement. Creating a bottom-up movement where these front-line workers participate in and drive innovation initiatives is the goal of WPI and EDI practices (Høystrup, 2012; Totterdill & Exton, 2017). But how does one encourage such bottom-up practices?

As seen in the introduction to this article many public policy interventions have been initiated to promote public sector innovation, and the private sector includes successful examples of how managers and top-level CEOs have managed to push innovation practices and reach company-wide permeation (Totterdill & Exton, 2017). These top-down initiatives have been aimed at generating a bottom-up movement, but the mechanics of this development from top-down push to bottom-up practice are less known. Managers are believed to play a major role in this process (Saari et al., 2015). For top-down ambitions to trickle down, spread and become sustainable practices, the manager's role as a change agent cannot be understated. Managers working closely with front-line workers need to translate extrinsic arguments from the top into intrinsic motivation to act (Oeij et al., 2021). They also need to show how innovation work is relevant and related to everyday operations, especially if innovation initiatives are carried out in a parallel part of the organisation. Furthermore, the modus by which top-down initiatives are imposed on lower managerial levels is also likely to affect the outcome, where a participatory, dialogic and systematic approach has been proven effective (Crosby et al., 2017; Nählinder & Fogelberg Eriksson, 2017; Totterdill & Exton, 2017).

The manager's role in supporting innovation

Managers have an important role in the implementation of workplace innovation and employee-driven innovation. They play an important part in creating a climate that is

conducive to innovation by providing both practical guidance and socio-emotional support (Amabile et al., 2004; Jansen et al., 2009).

Recognising the difference between task-related “hands-on” support and relational “hands-off” support can be helpful in understanding the interplay between employees, managers and innovation practice (Torfing, 2012). Hands-on managerial support can be given by providing employees with ample time for working with innovation in their otherwise busy schedules (Totterdill, 2015). Without the systematic provision of what Nohria and Gulati (1997) call “slack”, innovative activities are unlikely to happen. However, the manager can also provide support by showing interest, and by being involved and available for consultation (Echebiri & Amundsen, 2021; Hansen et al., 2017). Hands-off support, on the other hand, is signified by socio-emotional support as well as employee autonomy and empowerment through manager trust. The fundamental idea behind the hands-off approach is that autonomy boosts motivation and empowered employees are more willing to own and solve problems presented in their work (Cheong et al., 2019; Echebiri & Amundsen, 2021). Socio-emotional support has been proven to be important, since engaging in creative work and sharing innovative ideas can be rewarding but can also put the innovator in a vulnerable position. Change suggestions entail questioning old ways and habits, and hence risk being met with indifference or resistance (Amabile et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2012). Furthermore, success is never guaranteed when venturing into uncharted territory. Nevertheless, an intrinsic motivation to be creative and disclose ideas is needed if innovation is to take place at all (Amabile & Khair, 2008; Scott & Bruce, 1994; Tierney et al., 1999).

Naturally, the research on managerial behaviour and innovation leads to the discussion on whether there are innovation management “best practices”, and some authors have described leadership styles such as “empowering leadership” as being superior to more directive-based forms (Echebiri & Amundsen, 2021). Besides the argument that prescriptive one-size-fits-all directives may be deceptively oversimplified, some authors have also shown that the type of managerial support that is needed may vary throughout the innovation process (Mumford et al., 2002; Rosing et al., 2011). Smith et al. (2012) argue that autonomy is mostly needed during the ideation phase, whereas Amundsen et al. (2014) suggest that relational support is crucial in the early phases while assistance in resource allocation is important towards the later stages.

Organisational conditions for managers’ support for innovation

It is clear that managerial support is crucial in order for employee-driven innovation to take place. However, favourable organisational conditions are necessary if managers are to provide this support. The most basic condition for the successful diffusion of innovative practices is to define the organisational incentive for innovation at executive level: the why, what, who and how of innovation (Nählinder & Fogelberg Eriksson, 2017). This motivation, if communicated well, will aid managers in creating acceptance and support among staff, and will prevent divergence at an operational level (Kotter, 2009). However, grand strategic visions

are not enough. Previous research has shown that for first-line managers to embrace the organisational motives and recognise the link between innovation and organisational goals, they need to take part in the formulation of such motives (Ellström, 2010). Depending on what the incentives are, the implementation may also look very different. If the intention is to cut costs, the organisation may have to clarify whether expenditure related to the innovative practice is allowed. If the intention is to enhance the quality of working life, it may be hard to balance that with cutting costs.

Defining the “what” of innovation also sets an essential direction for managers’ subsequent actions, for example whether radical innovations or smaller incremental changes are called for (Moore, 2005). When defining the “how” of innovation, the roles of managers vis-à-vis innovation need to be clarified (Rosing et al., 2011). Managers will play a significant part in turning strategy into operation, but executive decisions shape the space of their operational reality such as which resources will be available when supporting innovative practices. It needs to be decided whether innovative practices should be integrated into everyday operations or conducted by a parallel organisational unit. Basically, who owns the question of innovation? As multiple studies have shown, innovation risks becoming an orphaned policy rather than a fruitful practice if this question is left unanswered (Nählinder & Fogelberg Eriksson, 2017). Furthermore, managers often need support, for example training, to develop their roles to lead for innovation (cf. Gustavsson, 2009; Halvarsson Lundkvist & Gustavsson, 2018).

The type of support operational managers get from senior management will also influence the outcome. There is a difference between symbolic support for innovation as a legitimate objective and constructive support for innovation in action. Previous studies show that the emphasis has been on providing the former rather than the latter during past transformations towards innovation (Wihlman et al., 2016).

Establishing a policy without thoroughly supporting the practice at a workplace level creates a policy-practice gap. The operational reality of tight budgets and constant demands inevitably reinforces managers’ short-term perspectives, while more strategic goals, such as innovation, may have to be relinquished to stay afloat. In a 2016 study, Wihlman et al. (2016) note how middle managers are affected by this division:

“Senior management admitted that there were contradictory messages; innovation was necessary, but short-term goals, primarily financial ones, were even more important. No actions were mentioned as taken in order to solve these conflicts” (Wihlman et al., 2016, p. 53)

Other studies report similar findings, where middle managers had to make innovation a subordinate objective while senior managers ranked the organisation’s ability to innovate as high (Engstrom, 2019).

This identified gap between the ambition to work with innovation and what actually happens can also be conceptualised as the division between the logic of production and the logic of development (Ellström, 2010), or – as March (1991) calls it – the difference between exploit and explore. The exploitation or production logic is characterised by the reproduction of current work practices where stability, standardisation and predictability are valued. Conversely, the exploration or developmental logic is based on the idea that innovation, exploration and developmental learning (Ellström, 2010), or expansive learning (Engeström & Sannino, 2010), is needed for organisational growth and development (Ellström, 2010; March, 1991).

The manager is hence expected to both lead for exploit and explore and to strike a balance between the two. This has proven to be an arduous task (Rosing et al., 2011). A recent study shows that fewer than one in five managers in the public sector consider their organisation to be supportive of explorative behaviour (Engstrom, 2019). Even though such resistance can be seen in both the private and the public sector, there is reason to believe that there are aspects inherent in public sector organisations that exacerbate the issue (Mulgan, 2007). Managers in the public sector operate in an environment characterised by risk aversion, bureaucracy and silo structures where budgets are set by politicians and responsibilities are regulated by law (Borins, 2001). Incentive structures are built to motivate managers to stay on budget and hit performance targets, both connected to the exploitation logic, while incentive structures to promote exploration seem to be lacking. The fear of wasting state funds has resulted in risk aversion, making it hard to advocate for testing ideas and experimental approaches as opposed to more traditional ways of devising extensive investigations before making decisions (Torfing, 2012). Furthermore, innovations in the public sector should not just lead to increased efficiency, effectiveness or profit, as in the private sector, but should also support organisational transparency and democratic values such as the opportunity for citizen influence and co-determination (Nählinder, 2013).

The underlying argumentation in this article is that leading innovation by balancing simultaneous demands for explore and exploit is hard, and that doing so in a public sector context may be even more difficult. However, changing the operational reality for managers in this context starts with building knowledge and awareness of the conditions under which they operate.

Method

This study uses a multiple case study design to study three cases of innovation support. The cases were selected from a Swedish national programme for establishing innovation support in municipalities, which was funded by Vinnova, Sweden's innovation agency, between 2016 and 2019. Twelve innovation support set-ups were launched within this programme, of which three cases were strategically selected for this study. Three selection criteria were used to obtain variation in the sample. The first selection criterion concerned the support strategy employed in the innovation support set-up. Descriptions of support strategy were obtained

from the grant applications. The second selection criterion was based on whether the innovation support provided assistance to specific departments or all units within the participating municipalities. The third selection criterion was based on whether the innovation support served multiple municipalities or just one. All sites established specific innovation roles, hereafter referred to as innovation coaches, as part of the support set-up.

In innovation support case A, an educational strategy was adopted to support innovation work. Here, the innovation support served one municipality and all its departments. Two innovation coaches employed at the municipal management office designed and gave courses that discussed the value of innovation and taught service design methodology. They also created educational material and equipped conference rooms with furniture and material to support creative collaboration. The courses that were given varied in length and participants were invited to practice acquired skills between sessions. The innovation coaches explained that the intention was to educate as many employees as possible to reach a “tipping point” when the innovative way of working would become mainstream and spread throughout the entire organisation. They also emphasised that part of the strategy was to advance the notion that ideas did not have to be big or revolutionary to be valuable.

In innovation support case B, a coaching strategy was selected to systematise innovation work. Two innovation coaches employed at the municipal management office provided coaching to employees who had innovative ideas. The coaching sessions would start off with an initial meeting where the coach and the employee together assessed the idea’s value and feasibility. During subsequent meetings the employee and the coach would collaborate to trim and refine the idea to enable small scale testing. During the final stages, the idea would be prototyped and presented to managers. Besides providing coaching, the innovation coaches also gave short courses teaching service design methodology. Just like in case A, the innovation support served one municipality and all its departments.

The innovation support case C mainly served three municipalities, and only social services department within these municipalities. The set-up efforts at innovation support case C were initially focused on setting up a digital suggestion box on the local municipal networks. A project manager and representatives from the social service departments at three municipalities as well as a representative from the association of local authorities collaborated to form this digital solution. Employees at the social service departments were welcome to send in their innovative ideas but very few ideas came in. This caused the project group to switch strategy half-way through the project. The shift meant that the project manager and one other coach started giving courses and providing coaching instead. The courses varied in length and covered subjects such as service design methodology and change management.

Participants

A total of 23 interviews were conducted with participants with various roles in the three cases. The participants who took part in the interviews were innovation coaches who worked within the innovation support set-up, executives who were responsible for the innovation support set-up, first-line managers who were in some way affected by the innovation support, and employees who had come into contact with the innovation support. The distribution of the interviewees between the three cases is presented in Table 1.

Case A (n=8) Training approach	Case B (n=9) Coaching approach	Case C (n=6) Mixing approach – both training and coaching
Two innovation coaches One executive manager Two first-line managers Three employees	Two innovation coaches One executive manager Four first-line managers Two employees	Two innovation coaches One project group member One first-line manager Two employees

Table 1 Participating interviewees from the three cases.

As shown in Table 1, eight participants were interviewed in case A, nine in case B and six in case C. The participants in case C are fewer than in the other cases due to difficulties in recruiting participants under the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Data collection

A total of 23 interviews were conducted, of which six were held face-to-face and the other 17 via telephone or video conferencing when Covid-19 recommendations limited the opportunities for face-to-face interviews.

Before the interviews, an information leaflet describing the study, the confidentiality standards employed and the participants' freedom to withdraw from participation at any time was sent out by email to all participants. The contents of this leaflet were also reiterated before each interview, and permission to record the interview was requested. The first author of this article conducted all the interviews, which lasted an average of 90 minutes. A semi-structured interview guide was used, which included themes and questions regarding innovation support, management and innovation, innovation processes and lessons learned. The participants were generally asked the same questions, but in the interviews with first-line managers and executive managers a few more questions were added. The first-line managers were asked to elaborate further on what enabled and hindered them in supporting innovation, and the executives were asked about financial aspects of the innovation support operations.

Data analysis

After the data collection process had been completed, all interviews were transcribed verbatim. The interviews with employees, innovation coaches and executives within the innovation support set-ups were then carefully analysed to locate all passages where the respondents talked about first-line managers' work with innovation. All these statements were then analysed further, and it became clear that in many of the accounts the respondents talked about various *expectations* they had in terms of what first-line managers should do to support innovation within the work unit they were responsible for.

Next, all transcripts of the interviews with first-line managers were analysed to identify any passages where they mentioned expectations that they felt from others regarding innovation work and expectations that they placed on themselves. The analysis showed that the responses from first-line managers also included an abundance of examples of expectations, just as the analysis of the other interviews had shown. At this point, all statements regarding expectations from all respondents were coded through a qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2014), resulting in three categories of expectations placed on the first-line managers when innovation support was implemented, which related to leading, daring and supporting.

The analysis had so far made it apparent that the first-line managers operated under a multitude of expectations placed on them by others and by themselves. In the next step of the content analysis, coding was carried out to identify whether the first-line managers themselves thought that they had the necessary conditions to live up to these expectations. To gain a deeper understanding of this, the interview transcripts were reread and analysed again to identify statements about how they perceived their conditions for supporting innovation. The conditions found in this step of the analysis were presented by the first-line managers as either fulfilled and favourable or lacking and therefore prohibiting their work with innovation. The conditions originating from the municipal organisation and governance were divided into three broad categories: the *mandate* and the *resources* the first-line managers were given, and a category of how *organisational aspects* affected their ability to meet the expectations to facilitate innovation. Other conditions related to the *workplace* within the department which affected the first-line managers' opportunities to facilitate innovation.

For the purposes of readability, first-line managers will hereafter predominantly be referred to as "managers" to avoid excessive wording or abbreviations. The executive managers included in the study will be referred to as "executive managers".

Findings

This section outlines the findings and is divided into two main parts: one describing the expectations placed on first-line managers to support innovation and the other outlining the conditions under which they did so. Quotations have been added for illustrative purposes and enumerated to display case association (A/B/C).

Expectations placed on first-line managers to lead, dare and support innovation work

All respondents, regardless of their role, articulated a multitude of expectations placed on first-line managers' work that could be attributed to the innovation work in the municipal context. The managers themselves clearly expressed how these expectations were evident and affected their work. Managers, innovation coaches and employees described how they expected managers to work in certain ways to support innovation, and three broad categories of expectations emerged. The first-line managers were expected to *lead* the innovation initiative, *dare* to make room for innovation and actively *support* employees in their innovative endeavours.

LEAD the innovation initiative

First-line managers were expected to lead the innovation work within their department. The expectation to lead innovation work came from themselves, and also from innovation coaches and employees. The managers were therefore given or took on a significant role in driving innovation work forward. Leading innovation work meant that the managers were the front figures in the process of promoting innovations within the municipality. Nevertheless, first-line managers expressed that the expectation to lead could be difficult to meet if they did not have a sustainable impact on the innovation work.

"I think that if the managers cannot become carriers of this, of innovation and, and that way of thinking, then I do not think you get impact all the way out either... I do not actually think so" -A1

Communicating the new directions and conveying the value of working with innovations were expected from managers in order to explain WHAT and WHY innovations were important to implement in their department. The managers emphasised that the message when introducing innovation support was that an innovation did not have to be a revolutionary change; it could be a fairly small change. The managers had to manage expectations by defining innovation for their organisation:

"I think, when it comes to expectations, I think the most important thing is that you try to realise, and I always try to communicate this to my employees and also talk to my boss, that an innovation does not have to be something digital, technical... it does not have to be something grand. It can be a fairly small change that makes a very big difference [...] I think, if you realise this and feel safe with it, then this is not so... overwhelming" -A1

"When everybody talks about innovation, it gets a little too... it gets a little too big sometimes. It's kind of like 'Yes, now we're going to create a blockbuster [...] that you can scale up and turn into a product.' But I think innovation means doing things in a different way. Which means we streamline, increase quality" -C2

Leading the innovation work called for more than just spreading an approachable definition of what an innovation could be. In addition, first-line managers were also expected to advance the discussion about innovation with politicians to promote the importance of innovation work within the organisation. The managers were seen to be best suited to furthering arguments about why innovation is a good investment, even though the return on investment may be delayed rather than immediate.

DARE to make room for innovation

First-line managers were also expected to assume a certain attitude to facilitate innovation. Certain words, such as "dare", "trust" and "courage", were used very frequently by all respondents when talking about the expectations placed on managers in relation to innovation. In other words, the managers themselves – as well as innovation coaches and employees – expected managers to have a certain personal quality, a daring attitude that would allow them to act in ways that were believed to facilitate innovation. The managers were expected to "dare to let go of control", "dare to allow", "dare to fail", "dare to change" and "dare to stand up for this [innovation] to be done", to name just a few examples. Some even talked about the need for a certain type of personality, as one manager said while talking about adopting ways of working with innovation:

"It also takes a certain personality I think to be able to work with, with certain methods fully [...] many of these methods require you to let go of control... I have no problem with that... at all, but if you have, then it's pretty tough I think" -A1

First-line managers were also expected to have an overall positive attitude towards change. Managers and coaches alike talked about the need for a progressive "mindset" associated with the courage to promote development. One innovation coach expressed the connection between innovation support and the courage to change as:

"This [the innovation support] is an offer, there is something good here that is rigged and ready to use, and then it comes down to, what kind of a boss are you? Are you a manager mainly concerned with supervising or mainly concerned with development? How do you see your mission?" -A2

Furthermore, managers were expected to show courage in the implementation phase of the innovation process. Despite the uncertainty of outcomes, they were expected to take a leap of faith and decide to implement the innovative ideas and, as one employee put it, to "take the hit" if after implementation and follow-up the innovation did not work out as intended.

“Because the fear of getting it wrong holds people back and that means you are not creative at all, you are afraid of being criticised for something, or you are afraid of being ridiculed. I think it is one of those things that the boss needs to take care of [...] if there is a hit, then the boss needs to take it or soften it” -C1

Moreover, managers were expected not only to have the courage to make the decision to implement and to take the hit if they failed, but also to be daring enough to push the ideas into implementation throughout the organisation. One manager said:

“And then when you see that this will be a good idea, you should dare to implement it fully throughout the organisation so that you get that return on investment – so that you can benefit from the results and benefit from the good ideas [...] it should not just be a nice presentation material that you can show and write about in your business plans, or just a paper product” -B1

SUPPORT employees in their innovative endeavours

First-line managers were also expected to facilitate innovation in daily operations by providing active hands-on support to employees throughout the innovation process. Hence, leading by promoting the WHY and the WHAT of innovation was not enough; they were also expected to be involved in the HOW.

As the biggest hurdle was described as a lack of time, managers were expected to help employees prioritise and make time in their schedules to work with innovation. Talking about this, one manager said:

“It [innovation work] is done during working hours, so we try to keep it like that of course [...] and you may have to prioritise time for that. Then I have to make sure that the employee has the space in their work schedule to work with that as well” -B2

Several participants pointed out that making time for innovation was especially important in municipal departments with heavily regulated core missions, such as health and social care, where time and resources were viewed as particularly scarce.

As well as providing first-hand assistance with making time for innovation, first-line managers were also expected to be actively engaged in the innovation processes by expressing expectations and an active interest throughout their employee's innovation journeys. Managers and employees also felt that it was important for managers not to “kill the energy” by bluntly stating that ideas would not work, instead suggesting that ideas could be “parked” for later. Others considered the manager to play an important part in keeping innovative initiatives real, representing realism throughout the process.

Managers, coaches and employees all expressed how they expected first-line managers to make time and resources available for all employees to take part in the activities and training offered by the innovation support.

Managers also articulated the anticipation they felt with regard to using the resources, courses and materials provided by the innovation support in their daily work, as well as attending management courses. One manager said:

"There is great material, easy to use... it's just about opening, coming to the page, opening this page... going to these management training sessions that they offer now, innovation training for managers, and attending it with the attitude 'Yes, this is what I'll do when I get back to my workplace'" -A1

Finally, all respondents agreed that every innovation journey in this context must start with a dialogue between the employee and the first-line manager, and that clear managerial support is of the utmost importance for employee-driven innovation.

The sections above have outlined several expectations placed on the managers, all pointing in the same direction: first-line managers are considered to be absolutely crucial in this context in terms of whether or not the innovation initiative will succeed. But are they given the opportunity to do so?

Conditions for first-line managers to lead, dare and support innovation work

As shown above, a multitude of expectations were placed on managers, by themselves and by others, to further the innovation work within the municipalities. However, the managers also talked about *conditions* that they felt were particularly important for meeting the expectations to lead innovation, to dare to make room for innovation work, and to support employees in their innovation work. The conditions were presented by managers as either fulfilled and enabling or lacking and therefore constraining. Certain conditions originated from the municipal organisation, and governance trickled down and tended to spread across to their unit in terms of enabling or constraining. The conditions originating from the municipal organisation and governance were divided into three broad categories: the *mandate* and the *resources* the managers were given, and how *organisational structures* affected their ability to meet the expectations to facilitate innovation. A fourth category was formed containing conditions relating to the *workplace* that also affected the first-line managers' opportunities to facilitate innovation.

Conditions related to mandate

Having the mandate to work with innovation was described by managers as being essential. The mandate could either be made explicit by being incorporated into job descriptions and

managerial assignments, or could come in the form of directives and decisions from senior management and/or the manager's direct manager.

"What facilitates things is that there is a will and a... what shall we say, a directive from above that municipal management and politics have said that we should work with this... we should be innovative and we need to find other ways to manage welfare. Without the clear directive, there is no room for ideas" -B3

However, not all managers saw this type of support from their superiors, instead experiencing this explicit support from upper management as lacking:

"There is a need for clearer decisions from our decision-makers that this is what we should work with" -B1

Apart from support from upper management, explicit support from immediate management was also seen as essential. When talking about this, one first-line manager expressed how support from the innovation coaching team was beneficial, but that the mandate from her immediate manager played a critical role when working with innovation:

"It's hard when you have a boss who says that I shouldn't work with these things. The innovation support does not have the mandate to decide what... they do not control my calendar, so to speak, my boss does" -B1

Even though most managers talked about the need for an *explicit* mandate from management, some also argued that more subtle expressions of support from upper management could give a sense of legitimacy for innovation work within the organisation and that this greatly benefitted them in their own support for innovation.

Conditions related to resources

Managers also expressed how access to resources (and a lack thereof) strongly affected their ability to facilitate innovation. This involved both access to resources to run their organisation and access to resources for innovation work. Naturally, many managers emphasised the impact various money-saving demands had on their ability to run their operations and their ability to support innovation work. In recognising how his budget would have to suffice for both everyday operations and innovative practices, one manager said:

"It's also about keeping to a budget, and like staying within that framework, so it can sometimes seem a bit diametrical, that you have to use both new and developmental ways of thinking, but at the same time you have to stay within your framework" -B4

The managers recognised that both daily operations and innovative initiatives were competing for the same resources, people, time and money – a paradox that was not easily resolved.

When it came to resources, all the interviewed managers did however seem to agree on one thing: The innovation support they had been provided with was as a valuable resource in their otherwise meagre reality. They recognised how the innovation support had provided valuable resources in terms of knowledge through training, attitude changes among employees, idea coaching, enthusiasm and high-quality published material about how to work with innovation.

“These people are very good, they are small bundles of energy, who add a lot of positive things for... for us too, and so... and so we get this hands-on help. It's like... they help us make it happen, I would say, it's like, they help us take it from start to finish” -B3

Conditions related to organisational structures

Some managers argued that certain aspects of how the municipality was organised imposed unfavourable conditions for facilitating innovation. One of these conditioning factors was the silo structure employed at all the municipal sites. Even though some municipalities actively worked with cross-silo initiatives, the silos seemed to prevent the innovation work from becoming truly user-centred.

“You are clear about what your mission is: ‘This is what I will do, this is what we have limited ourselves to, this is what we have the means to manage.’ [...] But the person who comes to us needs something that is a hybrid. This will always be a challenge for our users, they will never fit into the silos we create 100%” -B3

Since participants defined user-centricity as one of the core components of innovation, this organisational reality represented clear constraints. Furthermore, the municipal budget process was also described as something that could hinder collaboration since it did not support cross-silo initiatives and sharing costs.

Clearly, parts of how the municipality was organised had not kept pace with the innovation initiative. Another organisational aspect that seemed to be lagging was the municipal support functions that were not structured to support innovation work. When talking about this, one manager stressed the importance of working with innovation throughout the entire organisation and not just within one department to enable municipal support functions to adapt to the new ways of working:

“You can't make the journey only within social services and then not... because in that case social services will not receive support from the necessary support functions at municipal level to make this journey” -C2

In addition to the constraints that originated from the organisational context of the municipality, the public sector's mission seemed to form an external and institutional framework that created boundaries for innovation work. Talking about a failed attempt to implement an innovation, one manager said:

“But it’s like nobody’s... nobody’s fault in any way, it’s in the public sector, it’s all about waiting for decisions and resources, and there are many people involved so it’s not... like when you have your own idea, you can’t just start your own business, as it were” -B4

Laws and regulations in the public sector also made it difficult to be innovative in the institutional context, and a manager within social services described how an idea had to be examined through multiple gatekeeping instances and judged against various laws and regulations:

“We are governed by a lot of laws... and guidelines... I would say that this is probably our... Achilles heel in fact... that, it can hinder us in development a lot of the time. [...] There are so many instances” -A1

Evidently, how the municipality was organised posed a multitude of unfavourable conditions for the managers to facilitate innovation.

Workplace-related conditions

When asked about enabling and constraining conditions for supporting innovation work, the managers mostly talked about municipal organisation, mandates from upper management and resources. However, some also expressed how the operational reality within the department where they worked affected their opportunity to facilitate innovation. The value of employee enthusiasm for innovation was expressed by one manager who said:

“What makes things easier for me is that I have employees who are with me, they love to work in this way and want to be involved and influence and drive and... and change” -A1

Having colleagues who shared their ambition to further the innovation initiative was also described as important, and when talking about her colleagues one manager said:

“We have a good management team. Because we all share these basic ideas, that we want... we want to find new ways” -B3

Conversely, management colleagues who did not share that same ambition had an inhibiting effect. In her frustration, one manager expressed:

“What makes it difficult for me, is that [...] many of my colleagues, management colleagues, are not where I am, they actually think someone else should do this job” -A1

Evidently, managers had different views on whether innovation was actually included in their assignment, and since there were no clear incentives or consequences for not getting involved, the participation came to depend on personal interest in innovation.

Discussion

The three cases of innovation support described in this article are examples of how to organise for innovation in municipal workplaces to initiate workplace innovations. The three cases chose different strategies for supporting innovation, one with a focus on training in methodology, another focusing on coaching aspiring innovators, and the third electing for a mix between the two. Despite variations in strategy, all three cases shared the same goal of engaging employees in innovative practices by creating a bottom-up movement where these front-line workers would participate in and drive innovation initiatives (Høytrup, 2012). The findings in this article support the previous research on the role of first-line managers as translators or “change agents” of top-down innovation policy initiatives to bottom-up movements (Saari et al., 2015), and provide unique examples of innovation management and its challenges in a public sector context.

Besides sharing the same goal, the three cases of implemented innovation support also shared the inherent qualities of introducing an explorative culture in a public sector context that is traditionally known for its exploitation logic. Regardless of the chosen support strategy, the innovation support encouraged employees to explore and find new ways of solving problems in their everyday work. With this shift, managers were required to meet expectations to create the right conditions for such innovative practices (Hansen et al., 2017). This implies that managers were consistently expected to act as front figures and active drivers of workplace innovation (Totterdill & Exton, 2017) and were assigned a crucial role in supporting employee-driven innovation (Høytrup, 2012). The expectations that managers should *lead* the innovation initiative, *dare* to make room for innovation and *support* employees in their innovative endeavours all point towards this exploration logic and the manager's ability to foster explorative behaviours among their staff. In other words, the introduction of innovation support resulted in expectations being placed on first-line managers to support a more explorative logic. This made the difficulty of balancing exploration and exploitation particularly noticeable.

Conditions in this organisational context were, however, built around an exploitation logic with a focus on managing organisational goals and keeping to budgets. The managers operated in an environment characterised by risk aversion, bureaucracy and silo structures, where budgets were set by politicians and responsibilities were regulated by law (Borins, 2001). Incentive structures motivated managers to stay on budget and hit performance targets, both connected to the exploitation logic, while incentive structures to promote an exploration logic seemed to be lacking. The fear of wasting state funds has historically resulted in risk aversion, making it hard to advocate for trying out ideas and experimental approaches as opposed to more traditional ways of devising extensive investigations before making decisions (Mulgan, 2007).

The fact that there had been very little focus on the external motivators and incentives for managers to work with innovation points to the entire investment resting on the basic assumption that individual managers in these municipalities would choose to take the responsibility to support workplace innovation, and also that they would have a strong inner

drive to work with innovation. But is this a valid assumption? Those who research work life motivation agree that when external motivators are lacking, three factors may spark internal motivation: autonomy to act, knowledge and a sense of purpose (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

The autonomy to act can come from both resources and mandates through executive directives that grant managers legitimacy. However, since it was not externally mandated that leading innovation was part of the managerial task, the initiative relied heavily on the managers' own interest and internal drive to engage in innovative practices. The findings of this article show that managers emphasised the value of autonomy, but that they also attested to the fact that this organisational condition was often lacking. In terms of knowledge, the innovation support seemed to have contributed to increased knowledge about innovation, mainly in connection with how employees could use different techniques to work with innovation.

When it came to why innovation is important, the innovation support contributed a global perspective on why innovation is important for the public sector, with arguments based on challenges due to changes in demography, technology and climate. However, this did not seem to have been enough for managers to create acceptance and to support staff and prevent divergence at the operational level (Kotter, 2009). Instead, managers seemed to have difficulties with defining why innovation was important for their own department, but also translating the incentives to innovate into more practice-based tangible items. Furthermore, the first-line managers were not invited to participate collectively in the formulation of motives that linked innovation to organisational goals, which could have facilitated their roles in the innovation initiative (Ellström, 2010).

The message conveyed by the municipal organisation can hence be seen as contradictory (Wihlman et al., 2016). It was said that innovation is important for long-term development and dealing with future challenges, while managers were offered little aid in supporting innovation. Managers were left to strike a balance between exploitation and exploration logics (Ellström, 2010; March, 1991), or – in other words – between delivering today and delivering tomorrow.

Conclusions

This article provides unique insights into the expectations and conditions that first-line managers face when innovation support is implemented in municipalities. Managers play an important role in translating top-down innovation policy initiatives into bottom-up movements, and this study shows the challenges faced by first-line managers in municipalities during such a transition. An imbalance is created by growing expectations to engage in exploratory practices on the one hand and contextual conditions based on an exploitation logic on the other hand. A lack of explicit instruction on how to handle this imbalance puts pressure on managers as individuals to find their own way to *lead* the innovation initiative, to *dare* to make room for innovation, and to *support* employees in their innovative endeavours.

In order not to leave managers wedged between expectations and conditions when public organisations implement innovation support, our study points to the importance of aligning managers' roles to support workplace innovation with adequate conditions in terms of autonomy, incentives, knowledge and resources. With these types of supportive conditions, managers are better equipped to take on the role of innovation leaders and to succeed in being the link between policy and practice when innovation support functions are introduced. A lack of such conditions will risk leading to increased pressure on managers as individuals, resulting in a policy-practice gap and hence weak realisation of intended outcomes.

Therefore, a practical implication of this study is that it is important for public organisations that implement innovation support to analyse and prepare the existing organisational context for this (Nählinder & Fogelberg Eriksson, 2017). Innovation support could prove more viable when it is more clearly connected to or embedded in existing processes, as well as support and steering structures. More importantly, however, organisational innovation may be needed to allow for processes and structures to fully support managers and to integrate the innovation support for achieving workplace innovation. One such example is the widespread use of measuring in public sector organisations. How managerial responsibilities relate to measurements for "delivering today" may be clear, but "delivering tomorrow" is more diffuse and therefore difficult to measure and hard for managers to prioritise. If measuring is important in an organisation looking to innovate, this needs to be addressed by developing how to measure goal fulfilment for learning and innovation.

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