Critical leadership mindsets- a necessity in the development of a hybrid organization – exemplified by a public sector case study .

Please consider as a draft!

Rennemo, Ø. & Valstad, S.J.

Background and problem statements

During the last twenty years, we have in Norway experienced several public sector reforms. Various forms of inter-organizational partnerships intended to increase quality at a lower cost, have grown considerably in importance (Powell and Grodal 2005). Concepts like; network, governance, co-production and co-creation has been coined in order to grasp the many and complex relationships that are developed between municipalities and between municipalities and businesses. (Sørensen and Torfing 2005; Brandsen et al. 2009; Karre 2011; Battilana et al. 2012). Empirical research underlines the importance of networks, showing how inter-organizational relationships lead to various benefits with respect to information diffusion, resource sharing, access to specialized assets, and interorganizational learning (Powell and Grodal 2005).

Marques Ribeiro and Scapens (2011) points at an urgent need for increased knowledge of public organizations' role as coordinators in such networks. In short, the increase of relationships creates a complexity that calls for leadership competence. In this paper, we will present findings that underlines the benefits of critical leadership knowledge in order to successfully manage such situations.

In our research project, we explore challenges in the cooperation between two municipalities, Levanger and Verdal, in Nord-Trøndelag County (Mid-Norway), The Innherred Samkommune (ISK). More specifically, in this paper, we intend to examine the mind-sets of key players in top leadership positions in the newly constructed organization. From which theoretical leadership positions are they inspired in their thoughts and actions? More precisely, we intend to answer the following research question:

- In their role as municipality leaders, which mind-sets do they act upon and what are the consequences of this leadership behavior?
- How could critical leadership perspectives support actionable approaches in the ambition of structural change endeavors in the public sector?

Theoretical positions

To answer these statements, the paper draw on sensemaking theory (Weick 1995) and network theory (Callon and Latour 1981; Latour 1988; Callon 1991; Law 1992). Moreover, we follow arguments from critical theory (Barker 1997, 2001; Alvesson and Spicer 2003; Collinson 2011; Tourish 2013), pointing at leadership as collective and situated practices as opposed to functional understandings.

Collinson (2011) maintain that critical studies challenge hegemonic perspectives in the mainstream literature that tend to underestimate the complexity of leadership dynamics. According to him critical leadership studies have the potential to broaden understanding of leadership dynamics, developing new forms of analysis, as well as opening innovative lines of enquiry. Collinson further, draws on Lakomski, (2005) in underlining that this tradition invites us to rethink leadership as socially and discursively constructed and reject the positivist method, which underpins the mainstream paradigm. As a contrast to mainstream leadership theories, Collinson (2011) refers to Fairhurst and Grant (2010) who argues that critical perspectives are focused on the socially constructed and multiple discourses that tend to characterize leadership dynamics. Accordingly, the proponents of critical leadership thinking frequently draw on qualitative, interpretive and case study research methods that address the shifting possible constructions of leadership located within their complex (and often asymmetrical) conditions, processes and consequences.

Leadership is viewed as a dynamic, collective and community-based achievement. Arguing that leadership is 'intrinsically relational' and 'rooted in context or place', Ospina and Sorenson emphasize that a constructivist lens provides an opportunity to reveal 'the multiple sources of leadership, the multiple forms leadership may take, and the multiple places where it can be found' (2007, p. 189)

Power in organizations may be regarded as an inherent capacity located to essential elements or as an effect of a relational interplay. This distinction presented by Latour (1988) when distinguishing between power as a result of diffusion or an effect of translation. When understanding power from an actor-network position, the focus are directed towards two processes, translation processes and materialization processes (Callon 1991, Law 1992). Network strength, and from this perspective everything is a network, is dependent partly upon the outcome of translation chains where similar translations will strengthen the network (Callon 1991) and partly upon inscriptions in durable materials (Law 1992). Leaders can exercise power, control and influence in many ways: for example, by constructing strategies and visions, shaping structures and cultures, intensifying and monitoring work, providing rewards and

applying sanctions, and through hiring and firing. They can also exercise power by 'managing meaning' and defining situations in ways that suit their purposes (Smircich and Morgan, 1982). Still, seen from an actor-network perspective, their effort of influencing their organization will be the effect of translation and materialization processes and therefore difficult to predict.

According to Pondy (1978), organizations with access to several pictures of what new organizations might be, participates more actively in sensemaking processes than those with a more limited vocabulary. How many alternatives was introduced, and in what way were these alternatives conceptualized by the leaders in the establishment of the ISK? Sensemaking is a process of interpretation. And as Feldman (1989:19) underlines; "If organizational members are to understand and share a common sense of the mission of the organization, what it performs good or bad, what kind of problems it faces and how to solve these problems", you must direct sensemaking processes. Weick (1995) adds to this that there are more to sensemaking than interpretation; it is also about construction and authorization. Therefore, we might hypothesize that when the leaders of ISK negotiated about the new organization, it was not about discovering a new phenomenon just waiting to be discovered, but a construction of this new entity called Samkommune, and about giving their perspective authority. This way of reasoning is supported by Schön (1983) when he maintains that problems in the practical world must be constructed out of the material that are given, and which often are confusing, unpleasant and uncertain. We must establish a common understanding in a complex situation, and the definition of problems are a process where we through interaction gives names to what should be the focus of our actions. Establishing and managing new organizational structures requires therefore a change and alignment of people's mind-set.

The leader is a person who gives meaning or sense to what we experience, and what we see (Thayer, 1988). Not primarily through a description of how a situation looks like, but in telling what it could be. In our study, we examine how the leaders in ISK performed their roles as sense-givers.

Our case – Samkommunen

The requirements and the framework conditions for Norwegian municipalities have been significantly changed since they took shape through the Formannskapslovene[1] in 1837. The municipal administration level has been given new tasks, greater responsibility and more resources. The size of the municipalities has had consequences for the ability to provide

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[1] The original Law which regulates the structure and function of the municipalities in Norway

different welfare services. After the pressure on local government mergers reached a peak in the 1960s, it has been intensified in recent years.

Tension caused by increased demands and fewer resources have been solved in small municipalities by means of various organizational solutions, such as inter-municipal cooperation schemes and host community solutions. Late autumn 2003, the municipalities Verdal and Levanger adopted a new cooperation structure – Samkommunen. The Government accepted this new cooperation structure in January 2004 as a provisional experiment. The aim of the project was to provide better services to residents, to ensure more efficient use of public funds, to strengthen professional skills and to provide a more coherent platform for integration of regional objectives.

Our current Prime Minister, Erna Solberg, was at this time a Minister of Local Government with a clear focus on the demands put on the municipalities, and how these challenged the municipal governance system. Experimentation was therefore desirable, and the Samkommune provided a potential for creating new and valuable insights in alternative ways of interacting over established boundaries. She pointed out that the Samkommune could be considered complementary to existing structures. This suggests that the establishment of the Samkommune in her perspective was only a first step towards reducing the number of municipalities in Norway.

Both political and administrative leaders in the two municipalities emphasized in their enthusiasm that they with the Samkommune contributed to create management history; no one had previously done anything similar. It felt good to be institutional entrepreneurs and to be carrying a municipal reform.

Despite the potential for significant integration of several services in the ISK, also initially reflected in stated objectives, it came to account for only 15% of the total portfolio in the two municipalities. It became clear that the municipality would be understood as something in addition to two autonomous municipalities. The inhabitants of Verdal and Levanger should still relate to their "mother" municipality, and the employees should formally belong to these. Furthermore, it was a clear goal to focus on the organizational- and, to a lesser extent, the institutional development.

A joint municipal council exercised the political leadership of ISK. This had power to make decisions within defined areas. The ISK council received representatives from the municipal councils in the two municipalities. Furthermore, ISK had its own economy, was a separate legal entity and had its own administration. The mayors in the two municipalities alternated as the mayor of the Samkommune council in two-years intervals. In the same way

as ordinary municipal governments delegate's authority to the administrative managers in a municipality, the ISK council delegated the decision-making authority to the administrative head of the Samkommune.

In 2012, ISK as an institution was legally passed by the Norwegian parliament. A few years later, in 2015, the government decided to abolish the Samkommune.

Methods and analysis

Our data comes from document reviews, conversations with development officers in Samkommunen, observation of meetings in the strategic management team, but especially from a joint in-depth interview with the two current chef executives in the municipalities. In our analysis of data, we choose to distinguish between understandings that either have a substantive or relational anchorage and with the theoretical links given in the theory section above. A substantive mindset, anchors causality to persons and relationships identified by nouns. These are the nouns attributable to the basis of the actions and based on this understanding, causal effects are based on an instrumental or consequential argumentation (March and Olsen 1989, March 1995). A relational orientation turns these assumptions on the head, the causes lie in the relationships, in the space between the nouns or the rights. These will in turn be more temporary effects of the relative interaction. Historically, we can find such an orientation with the Greek philosopher Heraklit and early 20th century by science philosophers such as Whitehead (1929). Today, the position is strongly argued by Latour (1999). The position is found in both critical leadership theory in its emphasis on leadership as collective and situated practices (Collinson 2011), among actor network theorists underlining that "interaction is all that there is" (Law 1992: 380) and within new institutional theory, like Emirbayer when he argues for considering the social world as a result of "dynamic, continuous and procedural conditions" (Emirbayer 1997: 281). Below is this visible in our analysis model, where we have added some illustrative quotes from our data material.

Actor perspectives

Leadership behavior		Substantial thinking	Relational thinking
	In the start-up phase	A. The Samkommune would develop into something better, at least cheaper.	B. It was an experiment, we wanted to try something new, establish new relationships.
	In the operational phase	C. The legalization of the Samkommune made it something solid, almost like an object. A law is a strong way of controlling people's perception of a phenomenon.	D. The processes create dilemma all the time, for example, how should the responsibility for employees be taken care of
	In the winding up phase	E. We did not recruit new managers, we would save money. This created pressure on managers as these labor burdens grew considerably.	F. In the beginning, there was much more dynamics. We would have succeeded better if we had invested more in the process

Figur: Analytical model with illustrating quotes

In our inquiry we wanted to address the different mindsets of the Chief Executives and other key actors in the municipalities and how this understanding contributed and / or was a consequence of their leadership behavior. We also wanted to find an explanation of the short Samkommune history. These problem positions are extraordinarily interesting based on a statement from one of the Chief Executives: *"We cannot stop working together, we have been working for 12 years and we have succeeded in many ways, so we cannot stop working."*

The analysis below is conducted with reference to our two research questions and sorted according to the analysis model; i.e. in relation to the actors relational or substantial ways of thinking and acting. This is made with reference to the life-phase context; i.e. start-up, operational and winding up phase of the Samkommune history.

1. **In their role as municipality leaders, which mind-sets do they act upon and what are the consequences of this leadership behavior?**

In relation to the establishment phase of the municipality, we find considerable statements rooted in a strong desire to create something new and there are strong elements of relational understandings. As one of the Chief Executives emphasizes: *It was an experiment, we wanted to try something new, establish new relationships.* During this phase, they also sought inspiration for innovative municipal management abroad. However, this appears to have been an application for an organization recipe (Røvik 2007) and thus substantively anchored. Among other things, they looked to Sant Cugat City in Spain. The city won a European award (EPSA) for its innovative work in 2009, where the characteristics of the new management

culture should be: Innovation - Efficiency - and Transparency (Nebb 2010). The Sant Cugat model was referred to as a benchmarking model for ISK, but it does not seem to have been translated and anchored to any extent. According to one of the CE, the established political and administrative network could have had a great potential, which was not used and therefore weathered, partly because the concept was not understood as suggested. It seems like there was a pattern that governing bodies involving both politicians and administrators failed, but where the administrations collaborated there was an opportunity for success. In retrospect, the CE argued that these governing bodies could have evolved into political work-shops with open discussions and innovative ideas, but they did not, and the question is why?

Another structure created during the start-up phase was a strategic leadership group (SLG). This was a group under the CE level and is mentioned as important by both Chief Executives. The organizing of SLG was based on a relational thinking, where things should be developed in the emergence. *One of the successes was SLG, they were dedicated to their areas, had significant action and work across the organization. They were communicators that involved both municipalities and created a good basis for strategic decisions*. In the material, there is an enthusiasm for SLG from the CE group, and also SLG itself emphasizes the importance and necessity of their own role. In retrospect though, the CE's still point out that *the potential for SLG was not extracted… The strategic leadership group, the board of the Samkommune and the leaders have not been able to perform in accordance to their potential. … a vacuum in leadership arose. We did not formalize the leadership duties in the municipality, this may have been wrong. Patterns have emerged without having defined a structure. We established a system, without much thinking and without clear expectations.*

In both municipalities, in the start-up phase, it seems to have been high expectations and intentions to create something new and a large Samkommune, based on new and often relationally anchored and experimental ideas. Still, a relational and actionable repertoire was lacking in order to anchoring and strengthening the desired structures. Critical leadership theory (Barker 1997, Alvesson and Spicer 2012), has pointed out the functional dominance of the minds of leaders. We want to modify this somewhat, claiming that the two Chief Executives had relational ideas and reflexiveness, but lacked a relational action repertoire to assist in creating new organizational patterns. This is additionally reinforced when we look to the operational phase.

Moving to the operational phase, first looking at the CE's priorities, it appears that their management focus was directed at the work in and through the strategic leadership group. *Our involvement was mostly directed at SLG, and less towards the other leaders in the municipal*

community. Although they believe that the SLG team did not fully utilize their potential, it seems that they look at the structure as successful in several ways: *We have someone who constantly thinks about the development of the entire organization.* SLG was largely process and relational oriented. This way of working created some dilemma: *It is the processes that lead us, they are not ruled by leaders…The processes create dilemma all the time, for example, how and who should take responsibility for that the employees are taken care of.* The CE's have an understanding of SLG as a relational-oriented network, without very clearly defined boundaries. *The structure of SLG can be considered a network. SLG is a form of structure that supports social relations.* This perception of SLG as a network seen through relational lenses is also found when we interviewed SLG members and attended SLG meetings

There is a perception in the Samkommune about lack of leadership and poor utilization of the inherent potentials. This is one of the reasons we hear: *We did not recruit new managers, we would save money. This created pressure on the leaders as their workloads grew considerably.* At the same time structural challenges are mentioned: *We did not move the employees into a shared office. This was the reason we failed to succeed in some devices, we were unable to exploit the potential in some areas due to lack of management. In addition, some of the leaders who were put in some leadership roles were uninterested in being leaders and without sufficient competence. In some few areas where people moved physically together, this gave increased expertise and increased opportunities for the specialization that motivates employees.* Here we hear about actions that were performed. Without exception, these action strategies are rooted in a substantial thinking in which failures are attributed to single elements and clear relationships between cause and effect. Based on the same logic, external structural drivers also affect the development of the municipality. *In addition, external framework conditions, such as ICT, have played a role in the direction the development has taken.* And further: *The NAV reform affected our structure, but also physical frameworks such as space conditions created unwanted changes.* The Chief Executives (and especially the one who had been there since the start-up phase) show disappointment a number of times in the interview that they did not succeed better in the efforts of building a new organization. *The one with the least ambitions gets its will in a collaborative network.* Thus, the results of the cooperation efforts ended in a kind of smallest common multiple (of what they already knew), rather than succeeding in developing something bigger and innovative.

Our material gives a strong impression that the two Chief Executives were aware, and still are, that the Samkommune construction needed an open and relational strategy to succeed with the main ambitions. The two strategy coordinators in the municipalities and the members

of the strategic leadership group also emphasized this thinking. As can be seen from the quotes and in our material, the CE's give a strong impression that the cooperation provided for the success, needed the building of trust and openness in dialogues between the representatives of the two municipalities.

The CE's emphasize that they, as a team, worked in an atmosphere characterized by openness, and that this also manifested themselves in their way of exercising leadership. For example, they exchanged formal leadership after a two-year tour. *This way of working has been a great support to me, it requires trust and close communication. Having two CE's has been a resource in communicating with politicians*. Nevertheless, we hear that they are not satisfied with what they actually achieved in terms of structural possibilities; *we did not take advantage of the potential of having a Major from the neighboring municipality*. They were aware of the unpredictability and complexity created by the creation of the Samkommune but had no strategy to come around the obstacles. Again, the question is why?

We think this has something to do with the understanding of strength and power in the new organization.

2. How could critical leadership perspectives support actionable approaches in the ambition of structural change endeavor in the public sector?

In an early phase, the political perspective played an important role. The Samkommune was established with strong political leadership who worked together with the administration and the unions. This three-part cooperation created a solid political platform for the process to come. According to one of the administrative leaders, *the established political and administrative network could have had a great potential in order to build the new Samkommune but was not used and therefore weathered.* It seems like there was a pattern that governing bodies which involved both politicians and administrators failed, but where the administrations collaborated among themselves, there was an opportunity for success. In retrospect, the CE's argued, *that these governing bodies could have evolved into political work-shops with open discussions and innovative ideas, but they did not,* and our question is why?

It became clear that the two mother-municipalities had different reasons for establishing the Samkommune. *Municipality A wanted it to streamline its operations and avoid future mergers, while municipality B wanted it as a tool for efficiency, but also as a first step towards municipal mergers.* The differences in the political justification for the establishment and operation of the Samkommune have, in our opinion, contributed to an underlying tension in the

Samkommune, and to a considerable extent kept the administration from institutionalizing the municipality. This has limited the survival of the Samkommune. We could not see that the implications of the disagreement have been adequately illuminated and problematized during the process.

Another factor that complicated the start-up phase was that there was a change of leaders quite early in the history of the Samkommune. Two of the architects behind the Samkommune quit and were replaced by a new mayor and a new administrative leader, without this topic being seriously discussed. The fact that a change of the most central leaders and probably the most important bearers of the Samkommunes identity seems to have had major impact on the further development of the organization. Seen from the actor-network position, this affected the translation processes.

Having had two administrative leaders, has been a resource in communicating with politicians. But here too, we are told that they were not satisfied with what they actually achieved in terms of structural possibilities: *we did not optimize the advantage of the potential of having a mayor from the neighboring municipality.*

Our case underlines several leadership imperatives; it will be necessary for both political and administrative leadership that a collective translated and anchored picture with unified goals for the project, are able to develop. Without such a common platform, the process will be vulnerable to political processes, different forms of social control and asymmetric power relations. To conduct structural change without a common target image is demanding. One main conclusion is that there was room for organizational experimentation, but a ban on institutional entrepreneurship. They could develop an organization, but not a common we, which the actors could enjoy and be proud of. The experiment of establishing, operating and winding up the Samkommune thus also shows the importance of power. The administrations, with the leaders in charge (CE's), did a good job of integrating the work processes that were part of the limiting part of the municipalities involved in the Samkommune. The business became more efficient, the professional environments were bigger and the quality of the work higher. However, the project evolved under political disagreement as to whether the municipality could form the basis of a single municipality. The CE's did not have enough network power to challenge this politically imposed framework. They also did not see how they could get around the limitations the framework meant. Seen from a diffusion model of power (Latour 1988), the leaders of the Samkommune may have believed they had impact power on the organization, as the organizational chart assign to the managers. Seen from a translation model, power is nothing that can be taken for granted and located to individuals as substantial elements (Latour 1999).

This is also discussed in critical theory by Zoller and Fairhurst (2007) claiming that leadership to a large extent is equated with the managerial role itself, a logic that places a smokescreen over activities actually going on. Mainstream leadership theory, operating as an actor in the field, produces a kind of theoretical and methodological individualism (ibid.), leading to a position where we believe in the power of a black-boxed single person. The political leadership in the two mother-municipalities had different views of what the community was and what it could / should develop in the future. This implicit tension – and not time pressure or lack of task focus - explains the inability of the CE's management in the situation, the lack of success was caused by the fact that the originally defined start-up goals were actively pronounced undesirable. The political forces prevented the administrative management from pursuing these aspects in the development work.

Conluding remarks

In a colder economic climate, European governments strive to modernize and restructure public sector. These endeavors challenges governance models and leadership behavior. To understand some of the demands put on municipal leaders, we have chosen a case; the cooperation between two municipalities, Levanger and Verdal, in Nord-Trøndelag County (Mid-Norway) and their efforts to build an integrated new municipality – The Innherred Samkommune (ISK). More specifically, in this paper, we examined the mind-sets of key players in top leadership positions in the new organization. Asking from which theoretical leadership positions and mindsets they were inspired in their thoughts and actions? As a second question we addressed how critical leadership perspectives could support actionable approaches in the ambition of structural change endeavor in the public sector?

After imposing an analytical model on our data, we found that the key leaders in the Samkommune had access to both substantial and relational mindsets. However, there performance was context-dependent. Under pressure of managing new routines, structures and steering systems they seemed captured by a substantial mindset. This mindset also seemed to cause a strong organizational focus which prevented stimulation of values, institutionalization and organizational identity. It also appeared as if the substantial mindset was easier made actionable than the relational mindset.

Applying perspectives from critical leadership theory made us aware of the major implication of the goal conflict between the political leaders in the two municipalities. The

differences in the political justification for the establishment and operation of the Samkommune have, in our opinion, contributed to an underlying tension in the Samkommune, and to a considerable extent kept the administration from being able to institutionalizing the municipality. This has limited the survival of the Samkommune. We could not see that the implications of the disagreement have been adequately illuminated and problematized during the process.

To challenge this stalemate, the leader has to be translated into a position with network power, and from this position be able to infuse the organization with new knowledge. The CE's were powerless but could by having analyzed and directed the developmental process in accordance with relational logics achieved a more successful structural change. Such an approach would have to address the necessity of formulating and picturing a common institutional goal, and largely stimulated the integration of the political leadership in the process. The need for their increased participation would have become more obvious.

Changing governmental models and organizational structures in public sector requires leaders who understand the importance of sensemaking processes. Accepting differing logics among the key stakeholders, applying both substantial and relational thinking in managing the necessary dialogues, building arenas and forums for participation and discussion may seem a lot of work, but will contribute to organizational and institutional success.

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