Good Suggestion – But No! Innovation as the Struggle Between Different Roles and Perceptions in a Municipal Organisation

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Abstract

Collaboration has been increasingly recognised as a key for enhancing capacity, effectiveness, and spurring innovation in the public sector. The purpose of this paper is to study empirically how different perceptions and roles within an organisation handle a proposal from strategic management related to engaging a large municipality in collaboration with social entrepreneurs. The primary focus of attention is middle managers, as they stand out as a central counterpart to the administrative and political leadership. The data collection included in-depth interviews, observation and documents. An abductive analysis that combined empirical findings with theoretical insights showed that middle managers controlled positional and professional power bases, enabling them to block the formal lines of authority. The paper contributes to view innovation as a part of the struggle between different roles and perceptions within an organisation and to an explanation for the outcome resulting from different power bases.

Keywords: Diffusion and implementing innovation strategies, Collaborative innovation, Internal power relations, Middle managers, Case study.

1 Introduction

Collaboration across sectors and organisations, and between relevant and affected actors, has been recognised as key to enhancing capacity and spurring innovation in the public sector (Hartley et al., 2013; Torfing, 2016, 2019). Some studies, for example Yström & Agogué (2020), demonstrate and explain challenges faced by organisations and individuals as they engage in collaborative innovation. Unrealistic expectations of one another, unclear boundaries, and the motives and mandates of the actors are among the challenges discussed. The main impression concerning collaborative innovation in the public sector is, however, that the literature is largely conceptual and has a bias in the sense that the dominant focus has been on outlining the advantages of this innovation model, rather than empirically investigating the nitty-gritty of the practical process involved (Røhnebæk, 2020; Wegrich, 2019). Specifically, there is a need for empirical research and theoretical approaches that enable analysis of tensions, dilemmas (Røhnebæk, 2021) and how power relations influence collaborative practices (Yström & Agogué, 2020). This paper contributes to advancing this neglected aspect of innovation by examining the process of diffusing and implementing the strategy of collaborating with social entrepreneurs in a large municipal organisation. The process will be considered as part of the struggle between different management

roles and perceptions in an organisation. The study focuses on the aspects of their role that give middle managers the power to prevent the diffusion of the strategy of collaborative innovation within an organisation.

Theories concerning collaborative innovation in the public sector often take for granted that actors or actor groups within the same units share an identical legal foundation and represent the same goals. According to Torfing (2016), internal competition is claimed to be limited because there is joint political and administrative leadership at the top, and all employees are committed to producing public value and achieving the overall political goals[1]. This means that, when the top-level management of a formal organisation has adopted an innovation strategy, it is expected to be implemented. In this literature, the public actor is often seen as a unified actor, represented by the top level. However, at the heart of any public innovation is the tension about who judges public value and on what basis (Hartley, 2015).

Based on the collaborative innovation perspective, collaboration with external third parties is crucial for innovation (Hartley et al., 2013; Jones & Hooper, 2017). Public sector middle managers is also crucial for innovation, especially in the process of implementing innovation strategies, yet there is little acknowledgment of the role they play (Jones & Hooper, 2017, p. 493). Floyd & Wooldridge (1994) saw the intermediate position as a privileged location for change agency, where middle managers can assist senior managers in formulating concrete strategic initiatives and play an important role in disseminating strategic alternatives. In a public sector context, De Metz et al., (2020) show that middle managers play an important role related to "making sense" of strategies received from political and senior managers, and then communicating the strategies to their subordinates through their own interpretations. In a study by Jones & Hooper (2017:492), middle managers in the public sector were identified as key officials in implementing strategy, and central to the "innovation ecosystem". However, these studies do not show how different roles and perceptions within the public organisation can prevent the diffusion of innovation strategies initiated by top management. Hence the purpose of this study is to explore: *How do the middle managers influence, and what role do they play when an innovation strategy is attempted to be spread in a municipal organisation?*

This study adds new empirical knowledge to show how perceptions and roles at different management levels can lead to tensions that prevent the diffusion and thereby the implementation of collaborative innovation in the public sector. The public sector concentrates on the provision and delivery of services to improve the lives of the citizens of a country. The management processes followed in the attempt to innovate public services are important. Understanding these processes, and uncovering opportunities for improved leadership practice, cannot be ignored (De Metz et al., 2020).

An innovation comprises several elements; it starts with an invention or new idea, and then a decision must be made about whether or not to implement it. Following that, the innovation must be disseminated to the groups or areas for which it is intended. Without implementation, no innovation takes place (Fuglsang, 2010). In this study, this is related to exploring how the strategy of social entrepreneurship collaboration, initiated by the top-level management, was diffused through the middle managers. To that end, this study applies concepts from the "diffusion of innovation" theory to which Rogers (2003) has been a well-known contributor. He aimed to explain how, over time, an idea is diffused through a social system.

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1. [1] Public value consists of both what the public values and what adds value to the public sphere (Benington and Moore, 2011).

2 Theory – What counts for the diffusion of innovation in the public sector?

This theory section starts with an account of Rodgers' diffusion theory. Concepts from this theory will be used as an entrance to analyse how middle managers filter and respond to the strategy of collaborating with social entrepreneurs. This raises the question of power because, according to diffusion theory, it is the perceptions and needs of potential adopters that determine whether an idea is implemented. By connecting the concepts of relative advantage and compatibility to the theory of power, it becomes possible to analyze the role and influence of middle managers in a diffusion process. Hence, these theory elements constitute the theoretical framework of the study.

Diffusion, as stated by Rogers (2003, s. 5), is "the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among members of a social system". Even though Rogers is claimed to focus on the innovation itself, implicitly assuming it is an entity (Hartley, 2016), he also refers to the spread of abstract ideas and concepts, technical information, and actual practices within a social system (Greenhalgh et al., 2008). An innovation idea that is increasingly discussed politically and in the research literature, is how collaboration between public organisations and social entrepreneurs[2] can contribute to the production of new and innovative welfare services. In several countries, including Norway, collaborations between social entrepreneurs and public-sector organisations are increasingly included in political discussions about the need for restructuring and innovation (Ingstad & Loga, 2016). The public sector is governed by democratically elected politicians. When they have made a decision, implementation is not necessarily a certainty. Formally, politicians have the decisive right and the power to introduce innovations, but they are not political sovereigns with unlimited power and responsibility. It requires both resources and dedicated actors to implement an innovation (Rønning & Knutagard, 2015). Bason (2018) claimed that middle managers often wield enormous power to halt the decision-making process. Because they manage downwards to their staff, upwards to their own boss, and outwards to colleagues and external contacts, they can drive or limit innovation in each of these directions (Bason, 2018). How middle managers may command an advantageous structural position was explained by Freeman (1977) with reference to the concept of betweenness centrality. Freeman's point is that people with contact upwards in the system who simultaneously make direct contact with players further downwards or outwards in the system are in central "between" positions. If actors above or below middle managers want to contact each other in a formal organisation, the communication has to pass through the middle managers, which gives them the possibility of breaking contacts among other actors in order to extract "service charges" or prevent contacts. Decisions must be based on discourse or negotiation. These processes may be characterised by asymmetric power relations because different actors bring different resources to the table, and some resources may take precedence over others (Røiseland & Vabo, 2016). The perceptions that influence middle managers' assessments can be elucidated through Rogers's (2003) model of diffusion.

2.1 Relative advantage and compatibility

Rogers' (2003) model emphasises that it is the potential adopter's perceptions of the innovation's attributes in terms of its relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability that most strongly affect the variance in adoption rates between innovations. This paper pays particular attention to relative advantage and compatibility to illustrate how the roles and

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2. Social entrepreneurs have a clear social commitment and act primarily on the basis of what serves the social purpose of the organisation. At the same time, they must find a mode of operation that enables a stable income in order to realise the social purpose (Brøgger, 2017).

perceptions of middle managers can conflict with innovation strategies that deal with collaboration with external actors.

Relative advantage is the degree to which an innovation is perceived as better than the idea it replaces (Rogers, 2003, p. 15). Innovations with a clear, unambiguous advantage are more easily adopted and implemented (Greenhalgh et al., 2008). The relative advantage can be measured in different ways, depending on what matters most to the adopter; this might be prestige, economy, working conditions (Rønning, 2014), efficiency, and so on. If potential users perceive no relative advantage from the innovation, they will not generally consider it further (Greenhalgh et al., 2008). The greater the expected advantage is, the more rapid the rate of adoption will be (Rogers, 2003); however, relative advantage alone does not guarantee widespread adoption (Fitzgerald et al., 2002). According to (Ferlie et al., 2001):

> Even so-called evidence-based innovations undergo a lengthy period of negotiations among potential adopters, during which their meanings are discussed, contested, and reframed. Questions about whether the costs related to making the change are worth the relative benefits offered by the new program are relevant. The discourse can increase or decrease the innovation's perceived relative advantage. (p. 37)

Compatibility refers to "the degree to which an innovation is perceived as being consistent with the existing values, past experiences, and needs of potential adopters" (Rogers, 2003, p. 15). Innovations that are compatible with the intended adopters' values, norms and perceived needs are more readily adopted. As Rogers (2003, p. 255) noted, "the innovation may be 'new wine', but it is poured into 'old bottles' (the clients' existing perceptions)". Compatibility with organisational or professional norms, values and ways of working is an additional determinant of successful assimilation (Ferlie et al., 2001).

In Rogers' model, innovations will be diffused; it is only a question of time. As with the chemical process from which the metaphor is taken, the diffusion of ideas or practices is an essentially passive process; however, some innovations are never adopted, while others are subsequently abandoned (Greenhalgh et al., 2008; Hartley, 2015). One reason might be key actors with power to stop the innovation process. This can happen in several ways. For actors in a diffusion process (i.e. middle managers), their evaluation of the relative advantage and compatibility of an innovation will influence their attitude. The outcome of the decision-making process will depend on the strength of the actors' power bases. It is thus appropriate to mention positional power based on their betweenness position.

2.2 Positional power

Positional power can be defined by Robert Dahl's (1957) widely quoted phrase, "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do". Dahl's definition is relevant to the extent that it underlines that power is not necessarily restricted to formal positions and authority (Magnussen, 2016). For their part, middle managers are in a position where they are formally charged with generating performance within the units for which they are responsible. Since decisions in bureaucracies must flow down through the organisational hierarchy, middle managers are able to stop further diffusion of an innovation (Bason, 2018). This means that holding a middle-manager position involves a mandate to make decisions on behalf of others, which includes formal power connected to a hierarchical position (Rønning & Lesjø, 2015). These actors do not work in a vacuum; power is also embedded in structures and rules in society in favour of certain competences and capacities (Rønning & Knutagard, 2015). This leads to the mention of the power of knowledge.

2.3 Power of knowledge

Segments of today's public administration system are comprised of highly qualified people who are employed to make decisions based on analyses and professional assessments. Professionals are trained to analyse and view a problem in special ways, and what is determined to be the most appropriate solution is defined within the framework of the profession (Zeitler, 2016). When they assess the compatibility of an innovation, they do so based on prior understanding, by extension of their theoretical knowledge acquired through specialised education (Hansen, 2010). Social entrepreneurship, by contrast, is about solving social problems in new ways (Brøgger, 2017). Dees (2017, p. 27) suggested that social entrepreneurs play the role of change agents by adopting a mission to create and sustain social value; by recognising and relentlessly pursuing new opportunities to serve that mission; by engaging in a process of continuous innovation, adaptation and learning; and by acting boldly without being limited by resources currently in hand. Such a definition means that, by involving social entrepreneurship activity, the potential rewards are not only education and professional experience, but also curiosity and the freedom to explore new ideas and solutions (Zeitler, 2016). In contrast, specialised education programmes that characterise professionals mean that they possess relevant knowledge that is not disputed by others in the organisation. Their knowledge base allows these professionals to speak and act with authority, which gives them a "knowledge monopoly" (Moos, 2008, p. 10). Having a monopoly on knowledge that others need forms the power base and reputation of professionals (Abbott, 1988). According to Currie and Procter (2005), the middle managers' capacity for discretion is limited by professional arguments. Their study shows that, specifically, within a professional bureaucracy in public services, middle managers' strategic contribution is inhibited by the power of the professional operating core of the organisation and by centralised government policy, with financial parsimony having a particularly visible effect. Their findings provide an expectation that conflicting and ambiguous expectations from key stakeholders will hinder the middle managers' role and contribution to processes of change.

3 Context

The case presented is from a large Norwegian municipality. The municipality is centrally located in south-eastern Norway in a highly populated area, and known for its success at innovation, measured by the fact that the municipality has received the Norwegian municipal sector's innovation award. The prize is awarded annually to a municipality that has taken new paths, inspired innovation and found new solutions. The administrative leadership had acknowledged the necessity of encouraging internal services to collaborate with external actors in order to address welfare challenges. The top-level management made a decision about assessing how the idea of collaboration with social entrepreneurs could contribute to rethinking and innovation in services. The initiative was introduced by the political leadership and based on strategy and management plans. Middle managers were invited to meet the entrepreneurs and assess whether the new solutions could be incorporated into the existing framework of the service. Middle managers consist of a diverse group of managers responsible for people and deliveries at different levels in an organisation (Wooldridge et al., 2008). Here, the term "middle managers" will be used to describe managers at one or multiple levels under the top level of management, who link the activities of vertically related groups and are responsible for at least one sub-functional workflow, but not that of the organisation as a whole (Pugh et al., 1968). Within the case municipality, the middle managers were employed by virtue of their professional expertise, meaning that they held the professional

responsibility for a group in the organisation. Due to the size of the municipality, they managed major service areas.

To facilitate efficient collaborative processes with social entrepreneurs, the administrative management signed a partnership agreement with a network operator[3]. The expertise held by the network operator was meant to help standardise the process. As a result of this agreement, the municipality met relevant entrepreneurs and was obliged to work with three to five specific social entrepreneurs. An annual amount of NOK 2 million was budgeted directly for the test projects. The entrepreneurs selected focused on the youth and childhood sector. The middle managers involved worked in the same sector.

The administrative management initiated a meeting at which social entrepreneurs introduced themselves to middle managers. An excerpt from the municipal master plan determined which social entrepreneurs were invited; hereafter, this meeting will be referred to as the "2017 spring meeting". The meeting initiated a process aimed at finding partners and establishing collaborative relationships between the services and the social entrepreneurs. Middle managers with professional competence were invited to assess ideas from the entrepreneurs and to specify which of these ideas were worth further investigation, based on the goals and problems within the services.

Several researchers believe that innovation barriers can be limited through specific forms of leadership (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Torfing, 2016). The municipality for the present study was selected because the organisation had a reputation for being innovative. The innovation attempt, namely the collaboration between the municipality and social entrepreneurs, emerged as a most-likely critical case (Flyvbjerg, 2006) based on the following rationale: If collaboration between the municipality and social entrepreneurs does not succeed here, it will most likely not succeed elsewhere with the same theoretically appropriate preconditions. Collaboration between the municipality and social entrepreneurs was rooted within the management (both politically and administratively); resources were earmarked; and a contract for assistance from a network operator with knowledge about and experience with social entrepreneurs was created. The conditions seemed close to optimal, but something hindered the implementation, and this became the "puzzle" (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012) for this study.

4   Methodological and empirical approach

The present study is designed as a case study. The case is the struggle between different perceptions and the middle-management perspective of its own role and influence in the diffusion process. The benefits of conducting a case study lie in its capacity to investigate a phenomenon in depth in its real-world context, and the investigator's opportunity to use a variety of data-collection methods (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The strengths of this case study are that the researcher has followed a process for a long period and has developed a data collection that includes documents, observations and interviews; the latter two constituting the main portion. In addition, the paper is part of a larger study of the factors that promote and, by contrast, prevent collaboration between social entrepreneurs and a municipality, and this has led to an in-depth contextual awareness and a nuanced understanding of the middle-manager role.

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3. The network operator invests in social entrepreneurs and gives them access to capital, expertise and networks. The company is also involved in developing social entrepreneurship in Norway and promoting the field (Ingstad and Loga, 2016).

4.1 Data collection

Data collection took place between October 2017 and December 2019. Documents were used to acquire an overview of the background for the management's reasons for implementing the use of social entrepreneurs in municipal operations. The archival materials consist of the municipality's internal notes, strategy documents and meeting minutes, mail correspondence between informants in the municipality and the network operator, and the collaboration agreement. The observation data consists of two internal meetings in the municipality and three workshops which the network operator and social entrepreneurs also attended. The theme of these was connected to the planning and, later, to the evaluation of the collaboration between the municipality and the entrepreneurs. Here, I was concerned about how the organisation responded to the ideas which the social entrepreneurs represented and how the relationship between actors influenced the process. This data material indicated that middle managers played an important role in the diffusion of innovation and pointed to tensions and unforeseen occurrences that amounted to pieces in "the puzzling-out process".

Interviews with all the middle managers who attended the "2017 spring meeting", as well as the municipal director, were conducted during 2019[4]. A semi-structured interview guide with three main categories: experience, influence and role, was used to minimise the interviewer's influence on the interview. At the same time, subjectivity plays a role in the study, as it is how the middle managers experience their influence and role this study seeks to uncover. In the results section, the quotes are labelled with numbers 1-6 to show how often and when individual informant statements are used. All quotes are translated by me.

4.2 Thematic analysis

Abductive reasoning is used for the study, in the sense that the analysis is based on empirical facts without rejecting theoretical presuppositions (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). The framework for the initial study was collaborative innovation, and the primary objective of data collection was to examine how the idea of collaboration with social entrepreneurs is diffused in a municipality[5].

The process of analysis consisted of reading and rereading the data material and involved a back-and-forth movement between the whole and the parts of the text. I started by analysing observation notes and documents. The study's focus on middle managers, their role and their influence was driven by the data itself, i.e. inductively in this first analysis round. Data from semi-structured interviews was then collected. The aim of the interviews was an extended understanding of the role of middle managers, their experiences and their sense of influence. I read through the interview material and highlighted all quotes dealing with the middle managers' arguments for and against collaborative innovation. One argument for (1) good suggestion and two against: (2) does not align with our needs; and (3) lack of professional support, led to the data material being organised under these three main themes. The last part of the analysis is to be perceived as deductive by checking from a theoretical to an empirical level (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). In this phase, quotes marked as counterarguments were divided into different categories for whether the argument was about a lack of compatibility or a lack of relative advantage, or something else. This approach complemented the research question by allowing the diffusion of the innovation's

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4. In addition, employees at several levels in the municipality, as well as employees of the network operator and social entrepreneurs, attended a total of 24 interviews; these interviews provided a comprehensive understanding of the context in which the process is included, but have no direct relevance for this paper.

5. Collaborative innovation has been launched as a strategy for innovation in the public sector that emphasises the productive and creative meeting between different actors from different professions, organisations and sectors, and does not presuppose that a particular actor or sector plays a crucial key role (Torfing, 2019).

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attributes to be integral to the process of thematic analysis, while at the same time allowing themes to emerge directly from the data using inductive coding (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This part of the analysis resulted in the subheadings under which the results are structured.

5 Results

5.1 Good suggestion . . .

The middle managers talked about the municipality's innovative culture, where they wanted to be the first and the best at identifying new solutions and focusing on exploring opportunities. All the informants reported a positive attitude towards the initiative introduced by the top-level management to test collaboration with social entrepreneurs with regard to service production. Because they were aware that they could not know what initiatives or changes might lead to successful innovation, they talked about going into the process with an open mind. External actors could help to identify needs that internal staff were too closely involved with the daily problems of service production to be able to see clearly. The following statements may serve as examples:

It is important that we know what social entrepreneurs have to offer. We may get some ideas when we see what they have [...] someone needs to help the services to know what is happening out there. You have to have access to it; otherwise, you just continue in the same track. (Informant 4)

We depend on individuals and groups who take the initiative to improve practice. I think it's important that they get some leeway, and it's important that we listen to them. It is a responsibility we must take as a municipality. If we are going to bring in social entrepreneurs, somebody has to go ahead, and I think it's a good initiative. (Informant 2)

In other words, the middle managers seemed to have a positive attitude towards the proposal made by the municipal management. However, this does not mean that they wanted to diffuse social entrepreneurship collaboration to their own service areas. At the same time, they talked about feeling the constant pressure to test new solutions, which came with being part of a forward-thinking and innovative municipality. All the requests and change initiatives being applied to the services made the middle managers consider it their role to filter and keep track of which projects were initiated; otherwise, the employees in the service could not perform their actual core tasks.

Employees in the innovation unit announced that the municipality would consider the possibility of piloting three of the entrepreneurs' suggested programmes presented at the "2017 spring meeting," and reported to the network operator that they would check with the middle managers with regard to how the projects could be advanced. However, several counterarguments appeared, and the process path forward became complex.

5.2 . . . but no!

Doesn't provide relative advantages

The middle managers considered it their duty to provide a professional assessment of the proposals presented at the 2017 spring meeting. From the middle-management perspective, the starting point was described as lacking the obvious, stated needs of the services. Rather, it seemed that the municipality had, centrally, entered a collaboration with a network operator that concerned testing different variants of services from social entrepreneurs. An informant talked about a feeling of being encouraged, from the administrative management's side, to choose at least one social

entrepreneur to work with, in order to gain experience with a test project. The informant explained it this way:

I got the impression that we ought to work with social entrepreneurs, here are a few to choose from, and then [I] had to choose the one we believed the most in, out of the five standing there [. . .]. But the necessity is then definitely that we do this because we must try something. (Informant 3)

From this starting point, the informant selected one entrepreneur whose project was relevant for testing at the primary-school level. The entrepreneur responded well to the schools' focus on the "early years". The solution was not fully developed or ready for implementation, but the idea was that a "collaborative process" would help the municipality develop a solution that aligned with their needs. After a four-month trial period, the project's steering committee decided not to continue the collaboration; resource scarcity was highlighted as the main reason for ending the collaboration: "It is primarily about capacity/resources; we have several priorities/commitments at the same time and therefore cannot take responsibility for a further development." (Informant 3 via e-mail)

Upon further investigation, it turned out that the reasons the process was stopped were more complex. During an evaluation meeting, the order of the processes was a central theme. It was agreed among the informants that a need for the service had to be identified before social entrepreneurs could be invited to come up with solutions. One informant said:

I felt that what the social entrepreneurs offered might not meet our needs. We have learned the same thing that applies to all other things: If we are to do something new, it must meet a need we are aware of. (Informant 2)

Another commented, "We have measures in our municipality that take care of the students in a good way, so we can say something about which measures we do not need" (Informant 6). A third described the process this way:

There is an extreme amount of time and work involved [...], but we may have known all along that this is something we will not continue with. We simply need to know our need to a much greater extent before we go in and say that we should work with social entrepreneurs. (Informant 3)

These statements indicate that the proposals were not considered to provide relative advantages, since they did not address perceived needs within the services. The remarks also point out that the order in which a collaboration is managed in an establishment phase is particularly important. Even though middle managers described the process as instructive, the number of such time-consuming collaborative processes that over-extended organisations operating at their full capacity can undertake is limited, because daily operations consume much of their time.

To emphasise the significance of perceived needs for the process, it is worth mentioning that, in addition, the municipal director pointed to a lack of understanding regarding a crisis as an important explanation for why the collaborations were discontinued. He put it this way:

I think the people, the municipality, politicians and, as far as the inhabitants and others, [they] have been satisfied with the way the municipality has conducted its business, while the collaborations have not been well enough rooted in the individual business area. This means that the municipal head of school, the municipal head of nursing and care, and so on, did not, to a great enough extent, help to find the right needs. [. . .] When it came to the point when a decision had to be made, it was simply not rooted and various contradictions came up. (Informant 1)

Not compatible with how we work

Shortly after the "2017 spring meeting", the representative of the daycare sector stated that, although they were always in need of language-development programmes, they did not believe that the entrepreneur's solution was the right one for them (Informant 4). Another middle manager explained that the top-level management could not know how the proposed solution aligned with the daycare needs, and said, "They think they know it because it looks nice, but we who are educators know what the rationale is and how we want language development to happen" (Informant 2).

The rationale was based on professional scepticism about the knowledge on which the social entrepreneur based the solution. The educators did not see the solution as research-oriented; the explanation was that the proposal was ". . . not research-based at all. It uses none of the usual approaches to how reading development occurs" (Informant 2).

The middle managers representing kindergartens and primary schools reported that they immediately agreed that the proposal was not grounded in their pedagogical principles, and therefore, they responded with a blanket refusal based on a professional justification. The informants said that they experienced a high degree of co-determination. When kindergarten and primary school representatives agreed, no one pushed back and questioned their professional justification.

Due to the middle managers' responsibilities, they wanted partners representing evidence-based research institutions. During a meeting, middle managers agreed that social entrepreneurship initiatives should be appreciated, but since they [middle managers in the municipality] were committed to research-based work, it was perceived as a difficult contradiction. The social entrepreneurs' lack of traditional research support was cited as a decisive reason why the middle managers did not want to implement the ideas. Middle managers with professional responsibility for vulnerable groups stated that they could not take the risk of testing solutions without professional support. An informant described it this way:

I probably had stronger opinions when I stepped out of the process than when I went into the process that there are some areas that are not suitable for social entrepreneurship. [. . .] They [vulnerable children] are extremely vulnerable, and then the offer we provide and the help we give, we must know that it works. (Informant 5)

Lack of professional support meant that the new proposals were not quality assured and thereby constituted a risk, the middle managers argued. The same informant explained that, in order to provide professional and quality-assured services to vulnerable groups, employees in the municipality depended on using national quality-assured solutions. This informant added:

You need to know what you're doing. It must be professionally grounded and quality assured. A part of the discussion in the child welfare field was about whether this was nationally quality assured or not. And it is clear that it is not. (Informant 5)

The middle managers noted that, in any large organisation, there are many different perspectives to problems and more than one "right" solution. However, conversations during the process contributed to an understanding of their assessments that prevented the services from going further into the diffusion process. A middle manager also stated that her decision-making power as a leader allowed her to make decisions without being required to do something for which she could not vouch.

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6 Discussion

The empirical analysis revealed a diffusion process that was halted by middle managers. The middle managers perceived and argued that: (1) the presented ideas did not address the needs in their part of the organisation; (2) the social entrepreneurs lacked the professional understanding that is applied in their branch of the organisation; and (3) their responsibility for vulnerable groups made it critical for them to use accepted and proven methods. In summary, these arguments made it impossible for the middle managers to support the idea of collaborating with the social entrepreneurs. These arguments can be related to the middle managers' power base. How these arguments are connected to positional power or a professional power base forms the basis for the discussion.

6.1 Do not address needs in our part of the organisation

The top-level management (political and administrative) has the formal authority to implement innovations (Rønning & Knutagard, 2015), but in large organisations there is often a considerable distance from the strategic management of the process to the recipient of the service. Leaders at the top will not have the same sense of need with regard to service delivery as employees further down in the organisation will have. Therefore, in large organisations, middle managers function as important coordinating links (Rønning, 2007). The middle managers' position provided them with information about needs in the services. None of the top-level managers contested their assessment. The municipal director described a municipality where politicians, residents and others expressed satisfaction with how the municipality met its responsibilities, and this view was unlikely to trigger a need for change. It was natural to defend current working methods, as proposals for collaboration and innovation can be perceived as implicit criticism of current solutions. Nevertheless, the middle managers agreed to consider collaboration with social entrepreneurs to acquire new ideas. All the requests they received as part of a pronounced innovative municipality were highlighted as a challenge. With day-to-day operations as their most important task and with scarce resources, they described a need to filter the proposals. Without declared needs and based on the experience that the municipality delivers services in a satisfactory manner, there is reason to believe that any relative benefit offered by a new solution must be considered significant to be worth the costs and potential risks of making a change. Collaborating with social entrepreneurs was thus viewed as a drain on resources. The middle managers controlled information that leaders at the top level of the municipality studied did not question. The power that came with being in a mid-level leadership position made it possible to reject proposals that, from their perspective, failed to provide relative advantages (Rogers, 2003).

6.2 Lack of professional understanding

In addition to formal power being connected to hierarchical positions, power is also embedded in societal structures that favour certain values and competences (Rønning & Knutagard, 2015). Even though, formally, top-level management has power over the levels below, these leaders depend on the professional knowledge and competence of those below them in the organisation. The middle managers were committed to research-based work. The municipal management requested new ways of thinking through entrepreneurship collaboration, but since the entrepreneur's ideas did not align with the accepted professional understanding applied in the municipality, they did not seem compatible with the middle managers' norms and ways of working (Greenhalgh et al., 2008). This can be seen as a conflict between the innovation strategy and how the middle managers perceived their role in the organisation. The middle managers represented knowledge for which

they had a monopoly (Moos, 2008), which gave them a power base (Abbott, 1988) and veto power (Moos, 2008).

6.3 Responsibility for vulnerable users

The middle-leadership positions in this case also entailed responsibility for vulnerable children. Middle managers, as responsible leaders, must consider the compatibility of new ideas based not only on professional understanding and knowledge, but also on what provides relative benefits for goal achievement. Social entrepreneurship is about doing new things in new ways (Brøgger, 2017), but considered from the middle managers' perspective, it was too risky to implement non-quality-assured solutions for use with vulnerable groups. The middle managers were both formally and professionally responsible for these groups, and top-level management thereby found it difficult to oppose their arguments.

It is likely that the three main arguments changed the strategic management's view of whether it was appropriate to continue collaborating with social entrepreneurs. This illustrates a struggle of perceptions and roles within the municipality, not only between the top- and the middle-management levels, but also between the value of solving tasks in new ways and the value of acting based on traditional professional competence. An established and pervasive perception in the municipal system can be said to be that decisions based on professional assessments dominate the view of what is perceived as correct decisions and, thus, represent an institutionalised value. Power related to being a professional leader, and power related to the structural role of being responsible for delivering appropriate services to the population, enabled the middle managers to influence the organisation's preferences in a way that led to no questions being raised about whether to implement the ideas proposed by the social entrepreneur. Refraining from implementing the concepts appeared to be the appropriate decision. As part of – and administrators of – a professional network, combined with knowledge and responsibility down the line, middle managers link together professional and administrative staff. Their role constituted the link between the professional network and the administrative system in the municipality. By being the outer edge that established the centre between each of these networks, middle managers achieved what Freeman (1977) referred to as betweenness centrality.

Basically, inequality and actors who represent different ways of thinking promote innovation (Hartley et al., 2013; Torfing, 2019). The middle managers reasoned and acted on professional knowledge, while the social entrepreneurs sought new opportunities for coping with social challenges. The middle managers' established position and professional understanding represented the status quo, and they did not express any desire for dramatic changes. According to Currie and Procter (2005), middle managers' exercise of discretion is limited by professionals. In my case, the professional was head of a professional unit, and this strengthened their power base. Based on the analysis, there is reason to believe that this kind of collaboration would be easier to implement if the social entrepreneurs had the same professional background and the same perspectives and thought processes as middle managers with decision-making authority. However, if these actors had represented a similar mindset, the organisation would probably not benefit from the resistance that divergent thinking represents. The result might be that innovative capacity resulting from proposing new ways of thinking about and approaching social problems would be blocked. This is clearly a dilemma. In certain circumstances, multi-actor engagement characterised by different approaches, experience and knowledge can lead to somewhat productive discussions and innovation (Hartley, et al., 2013), but in this case the innovation strategy was blocked and brought to a halt.

7   Conclusion

The collaborative initiatives examined in this paper represent top-down initiatives; they have been initiated and framed by the municipality on the basis of strategic and political ambitions. That the process was initiated and managed from above proved to be a challenge to the diffusion of innovation and appeared to account for its failure.

In discussion and promotion of collaborative innovation, the public-sector organisation is often treated as a unified actor (Hartley et al. 2013, Torfing 2016, 2019). Firstly, this paper contributes to the discussion of public and collaborative innovation by pinpointing internal conflicts of different roles end perceptions within the public-sector organisation. These conflicts can impede and stop innovative activities and collaboration with external actors. Secondly, the paper brings to the fore the voices of public-sector middle managers who are faced with strategies for implementing collaborative innovation. The research identifies how their roles and power affect the realisation of political and top-level management-initiated wishes for this innovation approach. The results of this study align with those of Bason (2018), who found that, although power is concentrated at the top of the career ladder, innovation power rests, to a high degree, in the middle levels of advancement. Thirdly, the paper discusses the role of middle managers when they have a monopoly on professional competence within their field in an organisation. Without a defined crisis within their field, they can repress and hinder heterogeneity and innovation. The results have implications for policy and practice. For example, politicians and top-level managers may promote collaborative innovation by giving middle managers "a seat at the table" in devising this form of innovation strategy. Inviting middle managers early in the process can contribute to a common understanding among managers at different levels of which professional assessments and perceived needs should be used as a basis for innovation ideas and strategies.

The aim of conducting a case study was not generalisation, but through an illustrative, in-depth case, to increase the understanding and knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006) of how different perceptions and roles at different management levels within public-sector organisations can influence the diffusion of innovative solutions. Despite these findings, there are limitations associated with the study. Firstly, it is based on one municipality, and the positions of middle managers may vary. Secondly, the middle managers in this study worked within the youth and childhood sector, and differences between sectors may exist. Thirdly, the middle managers' self-reporting of their role in the diffusion process is an important component of the data; they may have overstated their own involvement while downplaying the contributions of others. This bias is considered a limitation, since the viewpoints of the top-level management were known and the outcome favoured the perspectives and opinions of the middle managers. Despite these limitations, the results of this study provide insights into the avenues through which middle managers can influence innovation in municipal services. There is reason to claim that the study's contributions, which deal with the relationship between professional competence and position in a hierarchical organisation, are central mechanisms that will also be relevant for other organisations and studies of them. The results present an opportunity for further research into different organisations' areas, to identify how middle managers could influence diffusion in different settings and in different municipalities.

Acknowledgement

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