

Open innovation collaboration puts new demands on leadership

September 24 2013, by Caroline Örmgård

Anna Yström is now defending her thesis on how open innovation collaboration – the context in which different organisations meet and work together to create knowledge and innovation – can be led. For four years, she has closely studied SAFER, the vehicle and traffic safety centre where 25 organisations collaborate and conduct innovative activities. Anna argues that in work like this, another perspective on leadership and another way of enacting leadership than in traditional organisations are required. It also puts greater demands on everyone involved accepting the lack of clarity and the uncertainty that arises in these contexts.

Collaborating with others to find ideas and skills is becoming more and more popular among businesses and organisations, but in practice it's difficult to get [collaboration](#) to fully succeed. In her thesis, "Managerial Practices for Open Innovation Collaboration: Authoring the Spaces 'in-between'" Anna Yström has started out from a unique perspective by focusing on the collaboration between organisations itself instead of looking at the interests of an individual organisation.

"Many studies have been conducted from a firm-centric perspective, but as far as I know there is no previous research where open innovation collaboration has been studied for so long. Looking at the collaboration itself opens up paths for new understanding, and it's becoming clear that it requires another leadership than what we often think of in traditional organisations," Anna says.

Necessary tension between stability and chaos

Many tensions arise in collaboration where many different organisations must agree – for example between stability, structure, chaos and [uncertainty](#). Anna argues that in many aspects, uncertainty creates conditions for creativity and innovation, and does not necessarily need to be negative.

"When you find yourself in that kind of situation, the manager needs to work on creating an organisational context that offers sufficient stability. That way, the participants can accept a certain amount of uncertainty and take advantage of the various pathways that open up. Such an understanding gives the manager the opportunity to reflect on his or her actions, and this can push the collaboration forward in a well thought-out way," Anna states.

She tells that at SAFER have come a long way through building a SAFER identity that focuses on opportunities. There, they are dependent on individuals daring to take the initiative and going outside the established frameworks; this requires leadership that encourages them to do so.

Five examples of leadership practices

In her thesis, Anna introduces a concept based on how a manager in open innovation collaboration must always consider how situations that lead to stability or [chaos](#) should be managed. This management is facilitated through the examples of managerial practices that she has identified in her research.

"I have identified five examples of managerial practices. In other contexts these practices tend to be taken for granted or not to be seen as

especially important, but they are in an open innovation environment. It's an issue of identity-building, nurturing the spirit of collaboration, constantly working on the relationships with the various organisations, understanding and making use of political manoeuvres and creating meaning for yourself and others in the environment you find yourself in," Anna explains.

Wants to inspire discussion and learning

Now she hopes that her examples – of what leadership in collaboration of that type could look like and function – will encourage people and lay the foundation for discussion and learning. Above all, she believes that the results can inspire organisations and individuals involved in open innovation collaboration, and even those who are considering entering into it.

"Even if the results are primarily aimed at managers, I also think that other participants can get new insight into the challenges and opportunities that arise, and into why it is important to reflect on the manager that is required. It could otherwise lead to major frustration among everyone involved when you can't really get ahead," Anna argues.

After her defence, more research in the field awaits. Together with her colleague Susanne Ollila, Anna has started a research group called Managing In-Between. A couple of preparatory studies are in progress, and they hope these will result in new projects.

"We want to broaden the knowledge we've gotten through the studies at SAFER and make it more in-depth, since we believe that this type of collaboration for innovation, across organisational boundaries with many people in movement and new ways of working, will become more common – and this will put new demands on [leadership](#)," Anna says.

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