Towards Integrated Collaboration: Managing Complexity with SF Style

Everything has a small beginning
Cicero

Mistakes are the portals of discovery
James Joyce

I’m going to start this story about saying something about myself and where I work. I think it is significant that I, the story-teller, present myself for the simple reason that I, together with choices I make of how the story is told, am an active agent in the story itself. My name is Jonas Wells. I am both English and Swedish, studied to be an anthropologist and I live and work in Sweden. My current occupation as coordinator/manager for the, then, newly-formed North Västmanland’s Coordination Agency began in January 2006. Prior to that I had, for several years, been working for the local Social Insurance Office, mostly dealing with clients and administering social insurance payments and coordinating rehabilitation processes with local employees and with the local Employment Office (with whom I collaborated very closely during my final years). I came into contact with Solutions Focus in 2002 and was part of an extensive training program in 2003. I took to Solutions Focus like fish to water and experimented with the questions in many situations.

When I applied for the job at North Västmanland’s Coordination Agency, I can’t say I had an idea about what exactly was required. I don’t think anybody really knew, at least locally. The formation of Coordination Agencies in Sweden was, at the time, a novelty, a consequence of a new legislation which permitted “financial coordination” between four autonomous public institutions in the field of rehabilitation: The Social Insurance Office, The Employment Office (both state-controlled but through two separate departments), The County Councils (21 in all in Sweden, they administer Primary and Secondary Health Care) and The Municipalities (290 in all, responsible for social welfare services). The aim of the legislation is to support coordinated rehabilitation processes for people with complex needs in order to strengthen work ability. The legislation itself has a long history, a very interesting one in fact, but I want to get on, in this paper, to what the authorities have done since 2005.

At the start of it all, it is important to stress that the authorities were relatively unknown to each other; at least in terms of meaningful relations between them and stable co-operation between professionals and leaders. But the financial resources, that the authorities had decided to give the Coordination Agency, were enough to generate interest. At first these resources were even a problem; we had too much of it! It was important to spend it. So my first action, in January 2006 was to do a tour of all the authorities, local leaders and civil servants. Solution Focus is what I (think I) know so that was where I started. I asked for past experiences, success stories, and small steps (ideas
that might work in collaboration). And the authorities came up with eight different short-term projects, ready for financing in the first six months.

**Joint training**

Right from the start, joint training in Solutions Focus was on the agenda, very much due to the positive experiences of the course I was a part of in 2003. Also joint seminars and workshops with Solution Focus as a common method or attitude, was something the authorities chose to learn, implement and train. From 2006 and onwards the number of joint trainings, together with the number of participants, have grown exponentially. Last year the Coordination Agency financed 14 different trainings/seminars/conferences/workshops with 470 participants from the authorities. These activities all had Solutions Focus as a common denominator, either in topic or in performance. When the authorities get together there is always a Solution Focus element, so much so it is, since a few years back, a signature element of the culture of collaboration in North Västmanland.

It’s important to note that this history of training and change in thinking, attitude and culture was not planned, but a constant process of grabbing the moment, being sensitive to needs and encouragement of self-organization. Culture itself is always emerging. Also this story is still under construction. Solution Focus does play a part, but it is not the star. Instead it is the organizations, the interplay of the decision-makers, managers and professionals together with the services users they serve that are the real agents of change – both for themselves and for the organizations that they serve and work with. The preferred direction for change is co-constructed, not planned. However, the Coordination Agency has been actively facilitating the given direction, mainly due to the joint finances and the coordinating, in-between role, I have played.

**From multiple projects to Coordination Teams**

In a complex world many things happen at once. Also, even small changes can have huge effects. In 2006, the Coordination Agency launched eight different projects. In the coming years more projects began (and ended), some quite big and frequently over-lapping in terms of methodology, organization and target groups. Sometime in 2008 many noticed a need to draw synergetic effects from the various projects, increasing the collaboration between them. However we learnt that evaluation was made more difficult, because of the increasing synergy, as we couldn’t really know what made a difference. This also weakened the strong emphasis the authorities make on traditional implementation, the incorporation of successful new work constellations and methodology in ordinary practice.

Most significantly, the authorities did learn that working in teams was beneficial for clients with multiple needs. They also learnt that coaching, providing a wide range of activities and close contacts worked, both with clients and with surrounding professionals. They also found Solution Focus very useful, both in the collaboration (focusing on resources and small steps) and in the interaction with the clients. In particular, they learnt that an active joint leadership helped them move forward in issues that earlier was often fraught with difficulties. Issues like implementation and making long-term adjustments to the authorities’ normal way of working was often a daunting exercise. The most difficult issue that the authorities wanted to tackle was how to form a stable team where three tiers of government and four (or more) different authorities could work together.
During the first half of 2010 a small, yet strategic task force was jointly created to formulate a plan, where the idea of traditional implementation was discarded in favour of a more flexible team organization which embraced uncertainty. In the face of uncertainty in the changing environments of every authority, together with macro-economic changes, changes in staff and internal design, the authorities had learnt that traditional implementation would most likely fail, if the organization for the team itself was not flexible enough to meet changing demands, whatever they may be. The idea was to create a stable frame, core financed through the Coordination Agency, but flexible in terms of design, activities and methodologies. This presupposed constant revision, an engaged leadership and coordinated support both with learning processes and with communication between the various levels of the authorities. The idea matured into the virtual organization of the Coordination Team. Three teams started in 2011; one for the Fagersta, Norberg and Skinnskatteberg region, one in Sala, and one for the region of Hallstahammar and Surahammar.

Integrated Collaboration – An Emergent Coordination Strategy

*Concerning the welfare state and integration of public services, the importance of integration lies in its capacity to relate to the demands of the environment and to meet people’s needs*

Elisabeth Willumsen, 2008

In 2006 the main focus was on projects and experimentation with design. Come 2011, the focus had changed to long-term organizing and continuous learning. In my own work, I had shifted focus from project management, to stories and narratives, the projection and communication of ideas. This was a profound shift. The Coordination Agency, together with the rising demand for joint training, openly took on the role as change agent, facilitating learning and innovation processes. Sweden’s first (and only) blog on coordination and collaboration in public services started in December 2010 is a success. It has become an arena, like the joint training sessions for the dissemination of ideas, feedback and the building of networks. One of the most useful ideas to emerge from these processes was the emergence of a meta-narrative around the term “integrated collaboration”. This picture, originally inspired from a dissertation on Coordination Agencies by social scientist Christian Ståhl, was adapted and filled with new and extended content:

![Diagram](image)

The picture signals how collaboration can be viewed both in a personal way, but also within its role in work environments or within strategic design. It signifies the way the idea of collaboration is
changing as a result of learning processes, intensified communication and the growth of networks and ideas. In the first circle, collaboration is seen as something marginal, outside of the core values in an organization. Short-term projects are an example of this way of thinking, especially in situations when we know long-term solutions are required. The second circle signals gradual change. Maybe one organization is taking the lead; maybe one professional in a work force is good with clients who have complex needs. The third circle is the desired state, a collaboration which is central, both in ethics and relation to the authorities’ normal work, especially where it is needed the most. Both the Coordination Agency itself and the Coordination Teams are examples of this organizational change, a new way of looking at collaboration. The arrow signifies direction and movement towards the desired state.

I don’t believe that this story is a story about shared values, nor is it a story about resistance. I believe it is a story of adaptation and the fostering of preconditions for change. The events that unfolded were neither predictable nor planned. There was no manual that anybody followed. Only in hindsight might it be conceived or portrayed in that way. Instead I have observed a healthy tension between shared values and differences, a momentum towards adaptation and emerging patterns and platforms where constructive conversations take place at a higher degree over time. There are processes of participant observation and adaptation where a critical mass of leaders, politicians and professionals have communicated and developed a favorable climate for learning and open reflection.

Solution Focus has been an active ingredient, framing joint activities and encouraging sharing of ideas and resources. The sheer volume of the exercises and the continuity over time has probably been very important. Also various leaders and professionals have played an important part, contributing to the emergent narrative fostered by, and through, the Coordination Agency. The improvement of communication between sectors and leaders has, for now, culminated in a real capacity to make better decisions on a systemic level. There is more efficient communication than before, facilitating a greater exchange of ideas, thereby improving the circumstances for innovation. Conversations have often led forward, often in unexpected ways. Prevalent has been, I can see, a history of grabbing the moment (when leaders recognize auspicious opportunities) and a history of seeing and acting on possibilities for change that are already, to some degree, present.

Through this story the Coordination Agency has not been neutral. It has been able to introduce new language, freed from entrenched power relations. Instead spaces have opened for new analysis, whole systems thinking and thinking from service user perspectives. New social relations have given rise to emerging new meanings. The Coordination Agency is a change agent choosing to amplify certain accounts and stories, particularly those which are deemed useful and/or empowering. This has been done systematically and with continuity over time, thereby influencing culture, to the point where a different culture of collaboration is now being observed and talked about. Solution Focus is useful in releasing this new energy in the system. But it is not enough. Preconditions for change have been radically amplified for the Coordination Agency has, in itself, circumstances (finances, support and decision capacity) which can initiate change and enable member organizations to take new constructive steps, together.
Conclusion

Solution-building is a continuing work project that may take uneven (nonlinear) forms that are not adequately appreciated within accounts of solution-focused brief therapy as movement from one language game to another. Taking the process as one where narratives emerge, are changed and transformed, are ‘tried out’, adapted, and even discarded provides us with a new view of this practice.

Gale Miller & Mark McKergow, 2012

Whatever solution-building is, it is still under construction. Miller & McKergow point to the benefits of widening the scope of understanding and conceptualizing solution-focused therapy, to see advantages of ideas from complexity theory and to Wittgensteinian language games (already started by de Shazer). Aligning solution-focused therapy with a complexity perspective highlights the fact that solution-focused interactions are embedded in environments of the client’s life. A consequence of this line of reasoning is a blurring of boundaries, between therapy conversations and non-therapy lives. It challenges us to see conversations not as isolated events caught in therapy conversations. They don’t begin and end in therapist-client interactions. Instead it is important to base any analysis of the interaction in the client’s experiences of life and client’s socio-cultural environment and the way significant change emerges in the client’s world. Maybe we should study less therapy conversations and more of how aspects of therapy experiences are used in managing non-therapy lives? It follows that there is room for more focus on the effects of solution-focused conversations outside of spaces where these conversations take place. This can be done by gathering stories, viewpoints and a variety of descriptions of change processes.

I believe Solution Focus cannot cause change, but it can facilitate it. The difference between Solution Focus in a clinical setting and in an organizational setting is that in the organizational setting solution-focused conversations are somehow done all the time. It’s integrated into the work fabric and it is not always clear who does what to whom, or to what extent. Many conversations have subtle elements of Solution Focus. Sometimes they can be overtly explicit if they want to be. This story has not, therefore, been about Solution Focus itself but change processes and emergent narratives in a multi-organizational setting. In this story the coordination agency goes through the change processes and actively takes part in the emergence of new narratives. It has been a story of a more profound interaction between leaders, professionals and service users, and also a story of steps towards a new type of a local and structured inter-organizational development. It is a story that ends, for now, in the emergence of something we are beginning to call integrated collaboration. And really, in all of this, the Coordination Agency is a relatively small organization. But it acts in the in-betweenness of nine public organizations, and in that role it has gained increasing influence. This paper has been the story of that gathering of momentum.

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