

Exploring barriers and facilitators to knowledge transfer and learning processes through a cross-departmental collaborative project in a municipal organization

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore barriers and facilitators for knowledge transfer and learning processes by examining a cross-departmental collaborative project in the municipal organization. It is based on a R&D collaboration between University West and a Swedish municipality.

Design/methodology/approach – To explore the barriers and facilitators, the data collection was made through observation of the project implementation process, as well as 20 interviews with public servants and external actors. To conduct a systematic qualitative-oriented content analysis, the article constructs and applies a theoretical analytical framework consisting of different factors influencing knowledge transfer and learning processes within a municipal organizational setting.

Findings – This study explores the facilitators and barriers to knowledge transfer and learning processes, specifically focusing on strategic communication, individual roles, common goals, time pressure, group learning, trust and relationships and absorptive capability. Lack of communication affected the group learning process, while the close relation between time pressure, group learning and trust in colleagues is also pointed out as crucial areas. Trust developed through dialogue efforts helped overcome project fatigue. Coaching with a human rights-based approach improved organizational absorptive capabilities.

Originality/value – The study gives important insights into organizational learning within a municipality in Sweden for the successful implementation of collaborative projects. Knowledge must be transferred for the organization to learn to develop and tackle future challenges and its complex responsibilities. The theoretical



analytical framework provided in this article has proven to be effective and is therefore transferable to other organizations in both the public and private sectors.

Keywords Organizational learning, Knowledge transfer, Learning processes, Cross-departmental collaborative project, Municipal organization

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In contemporary Swedish society, municipalities face a wide variety of challenges in providing support and fulfilling the needs of their citizens, especially those who are socially and economically vulnerable. The complexity of these challenges requires strategic knowledge development, in which collaboration within the municipality on the departmental level and with several actors in society is essential. An increasing range of responsibilities placed upon the municipalities stress the need to collaborate and be effective without sacrificing quality in providing services.

Collaborative work presents many organizational challenges and opportunities within municipalities (Erlingsson, Isaksson, & Persson, 2021; Linköpings Universitet, 2022). A common way to create more resources for municipalities is through project-based work. A project can be seen as a process in which activities are put in place to fulfil needs or reach certain goals. Projects can be externally or internally funded, and they are often linked to the organization's vision and long-term goals. Project-based work is usually limited in time and resources; however, it can pave the way for new ideas and approaches to acquire knowledge and experience for the organization. Furthermore, projects consist of temporary working groups, usually mixing employees from different areas, which means that projects are well suited for studies of collaborative learning (Tonnquist, 2021).

Furthermore, each organization has its own prerequisites when it comes to learning capabilities depending on a variety of factors such as goals, resources and size. Local public organizations such as municipalities face organizational and managerial challenges within and between departments because of multiple factors, including limited budgets and time availability.

Thus, studying how a local municipal organization develops and implements a project within its collaborative organizational structure gives important insights into how an organization learns and incorporates new knowledge into its structure. This process, where learning occurs through knowledge transfer, can be hindered or facilitated by different internal and external factors within an organization. These factors influence projects' strategies, implementation and outcomes. As such, this article aims to explore barriers and facilitators to organizational learning and knowledge transfer in a collaborative municipal project.

This article provides an empirical study of a midsized municipality in Sweden (between 50 and 200,000 inhabitants [Sveriges Kommuner och Regioner (SKR), 2023]). In May 2021, the municipality initiated a cross-departmental collaborative project (CDCP) that aimed to increase social inclusion, create equal opportunities and improve the lives of the citizens, especially those who live in vulnerable areas characterized by comparatively low socio-economic status and high unemployment rates. The CDCP aimed to promote cross-departmental collaboration and increase citizens' inclusion by creating a platform for citizen dialogue. The objective was to integrate citizen dialogue into the organization as a tool for increasing social inclusion, as well as normalize and facilitate collaboration as a way of working within the municipality. The CDCP was externally funded by the *Delegation against segregation*, organized through the municipality. It was part of the work of two already existing municipal groups with a focus on crime prevention and social inclusion, but

it also provided the opportunity for a new working group consisting of representatives from the majority of the municipality's administrations.

To fulfil the aim, this research used observations to follow the project's implementation and integration within the municipality. Interviews were also conducted with internal and external project participants to acquire a deeper understanding of the opportunities and challenges of the project. How those challenges and opportunities can be understood as barriers and facilitators for organizational learning is the analytical objective of this article, examined through theoretically grounded factors that influence knowledge transfer and organizational learning.

Knowledge transfer and learning processes within an organization

Organizational learning

The phenomenon of organizational learning can be understood in various ways. Previous research divided it into three sub-processes: creating, retaining and transferring knowledge. Viewing knowledge as a result of learning indicates that knowledge is created when organizations learn from experiences (Argote, 2011). Örtenblad (2018) argues that the concept of organizational learning lacks a common definition in the literature, resulting in inherent complexity and the existence of multiple definitions. Thus, Örtenblad (2018) contends that the definition of organizational learning must have "some kind of organizational aspect [...] related to the learning" (Örtenblad, 2018).

The organizational aspect can take different forms, where the organization can be a facilitator for learning taking place during work tasks on an individual level and not through specialized courses. Learning can also occur at the organizational level, where the organization itself is a learning unit. Organizational learning can also be viewed as a process in which organizations are dependent on learning for survival, where knowledge must be continuously updated. In this sense, individuals within the organization are to continuously develop new skills and learn from each other, providing flexibility within the organization (Örtenblad, 2018). In this article, we combine this into an understanding of organizational learning where we focus on the transfer of knowledge within the organization. While acknowledging that the creation and retaining of knowledge are inherently difficult to sharply distinguish from knowledge transfer and that all three aspects affect each other, we are here especially interested in how knowledge is spread within an organization and the learning processes that are involved in this.

By knowledge transfer, we mean the spreading of information, ideas, theories, methods and practical models between different parts of the organization, in this case the organization around the project in question. This is a multidirectional flow, although there are discrepancies between the more central and more peripheral participants. Learning processes refer to the processes where transferred knowledge becomes internalized, and thereby usable, in the organization and for the individual project participants.

Facilitators and barriers to knowledge transfer and learning processes

Many factors can be considered facilitators or barriers to knowledge transfer and learning processes. In this section, we identify seven of them, which are then summarized in an analytical framework. These factors are of general character in relation to any organization, but especially relevant in relation to project efforts, not least when organized within a municipal context such as the one actualized in this article.

The first factor is systematic communication. Because any transfer of knowledge includes ambiguity when it comes to how the knowledge gained should be used in practice, effort and clarity must be put into the communication as to how knowledge is gained and how it should be applied (Szulanski, 1996). Established functional communication channels are also an important facilitator of the transfer of knowledge because they make it possible

for work colleagues to communicate faster and have wider access to a bigger network within the organization (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005; Luthra, 2017).

The second factor is individual roles. Work tasks and how to execute them must be clear to each individual and group for them to be able to identify relevant knowledge they possess and apply it to their tasks. Thus, it is important to create a shared understanding of the tasks and roles within a project (Argote & Fahrenkopf, 2016; Granberg, 2004; Sandberg & Targama, 2013). This is established through continuous communication and functional communicative tools, as pointed out above.

The third factor is common goals. As Inkpen & Tsang (2005) stress, having clear common goals within the organization and how those goals should be achieved is particularly important. Usually, organizations tend to have overarching goals but lack clear goals at the group level. Management and leadership carry the responsibility of making sure there is a mutual understanding of the goals set and how they are to be achieved both on the individual level and the group level (Goswami & Agrawal, 2020).

The fourth factor is time pressure. As Ajmal & Koskinen (2008) argue, project-based work is often characterized by limited time and resources, where project participants usually have other tasks simultaneously. This means that project participants are often pressured by deadlines and stress, creating limitations regarding reflection on what is learned. This is a barrier to learning, while having time to reflect on learned knowledge is important and a strong facilitator of knowledge transfer (Antonacopoulou, 2016).

The fifth factor is group learning. As Argote (2013a) argues, individuals are effective as information carriers because they can restructure the information and knowledge they have and apply it in different contexts. This makes individuals both receivers and transferers of knowledge, making learning a two-way street. Therefore, learning is to be understood as a mutual process taking place in a group setting (Allix, 2011). Group learning includes generating, sharing, evaluating and combining knowledge and can be enhanced through multiple factors, such as individuals possessing different types of knowledge, small-sized groups, having a supervisor present and the precondition that the group is not overwhelmed with the workload. It is also vital that the group receive the information and training needed to execute their tasks (Argote, 2013b, Argote & Fahrenkopf, 2016). Having smaller groups or subgroups within the organization also facilitates knowledge transfer; however, communication links must be established between to ensure that knowledge is gained and transferred (Fang, Lee, & Schilling, 2010).

The sixth factor is trust and relationships. The quality of the relationship between different individuals working together, as well as conflicts, is crucial to knowledge transfer and learning (Szulanski, 1996). Belief in colleagues' competence and trust in that they will do their tasks and work toward a common goal are of special importance (Newell & Swan, 2000). This is connected to trust in work colleagues when it comes to feeling safe to share ideas and opinions (Argote, 2013b). Furthermore, motivation, as well as active openness to share one's knowledge with others, is essential because it creates the possibility for organizational trust (Quigley, Tesluk, Locke, & Bartol, 2007; Sankowska, 2013).

The seventh factor is absorptive capability. The ability of a group or an individual to absorb new knowledge depends on the knowledge that the group or the individuals already have (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Stelmaszczyk, 2023). Completely new knowledge can be harder to learn, thus affecting the learning process. This means that each group or individual has different capabilities to learn and absorb new knowledge. Organizations with high absorptive capability recognize the value of developing, assimilating and incorporating new knowledge into the organization. Furthermore, education and skill development enhance the absorptive capability within an organization allowing for the capacity to use and recognize valuable and relevant external knowledge (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Stelmaszczyk, 2023).

Analytical framework

The facilitators and barriers to knowledge transfer and learning processes presented above are summarized in the following table (see [Table 1](#)). This analytical framework is constructed for the purpose of systematically analyzing the data to lay bare the challenges and opportunities the municipal CDCP faced.

Specified aim and research questions

This article aims to explore barriers and facilitators to learning processes and knowledge transfer within the municipal organization, using a case study of one Swedish midsized municipality's CDCP. By applying key theoretical concepts in a developed analytical framework, the article analyzes the challenges and opportunities the public servants faced in the project in relation to different factors influencing learning processes and knowledge transfer. More specifically, this article aims to answer the following questions:

- Q1. What challenges and opportunities do public servants identify in relation to the CDCP?
- Q2. How can such challenges and opportunities be understood as barriers or facilitators to learning processes and knowledge transfer within the municipality?

Methods of collecting and analyzing empirical data*Research design: a single case study of the cross-departmental collaborative project*

To analyze barriers and facilitators to learning processes and knowledge transfer, this article investigates the CDCP as its case study. This design allows for an in-depth analysis of the organizational structure by following the CDCP ([Nilmanat & Kurniawan, 2021](#); [Connelly, 2014](#)). The CDCP is essentially weaved into the cooperative organizational structure in the municipality. This means that studying the CDCP includes studying the organizational structure at the municipality by default, which allows us to explore the barriers and facilitators to the learning processes and knowledge transfer within the organization in accordance with the analytical framework provided above.

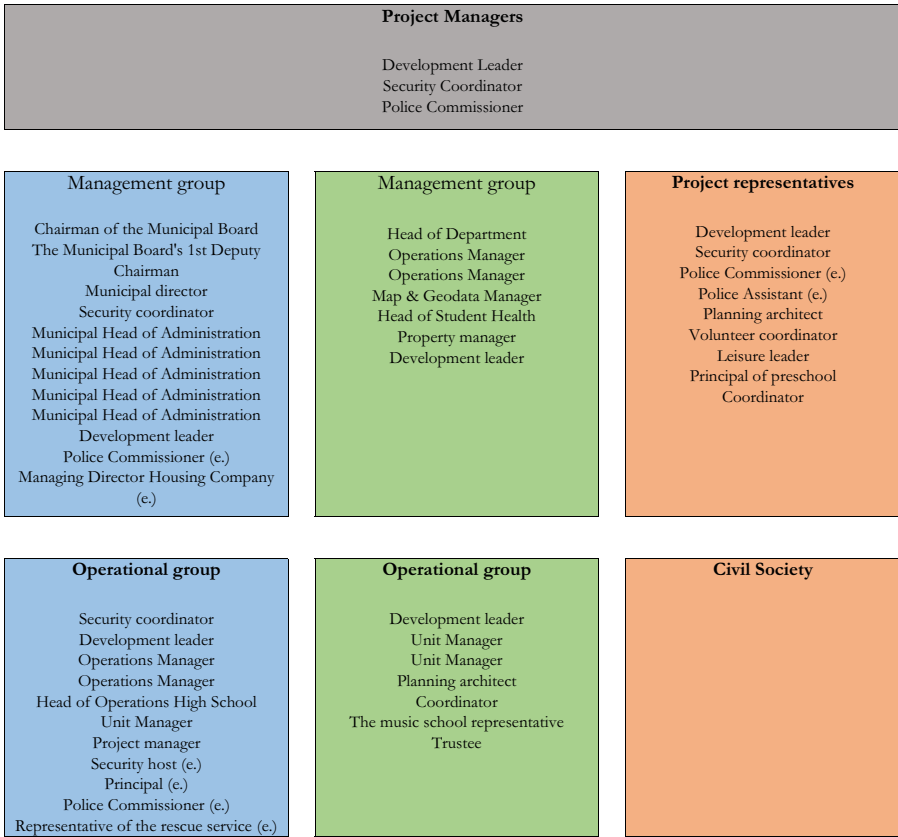
The collaborative organizational structure at the municipality is divided into two main divisions specializing in different areas (see [Figure 1](#)). The first division is specialized in issues concerning social inclusion, with the vision to make the municipality sustainable in all parts of life (shown in green below). The second division specialized in security and crime prevention issues within the municipality to increase safety and decrease crime (shown in blue below). Each division is divided into two groups: one management group and one operative group. The management groups are focused on strategic steering, while the operative groups work with strategy implementation, follow up and reporting back to the managers. These four working groups are cross-departmental, where representatives from each department in the municipality are assigned to sit in these different groups depending on their work position. These groups already existed before the project started and were considered a good foundation for starting the project. The work within the groups was related to the purpose of the project and already had worked out routines that would make it easier for the project to start.

The municipality has five different departments specializing in education, social services, environmental issues, culture and city development. Additionally, the municipal board's administrative department is primarily responsible for managing the collaborative project and has the general responsibility to lead municipal activities and work toward the municipality's long-term strategic development plans. The CDCP has been included in the

Categories	Systematic communication	Individual roles	Common goals	Time pressure	Group learning	Trust and relationships	Absorptive capability
Barriers	Lack of communication and communicative tools Ambiguity in how to apply knowledge in practice	Difficulty in identifying individual roles and how tasks are to be conducted	Lack of mutual understanding of goals and vision and how to reach them	Lack for time Stress and deadlines pressure	Disconnected group members Big sized groups Group members overwhelmed with work tasks Lack of availability of information or training required Lack of communication within and between groups	Conflict between colleagues and lack of trust Stressful work environment	Limited capability to learn, absorb new knowledge and develop new skills through, i.e. education
Facilitators	Established functional communication channels Easy access to skills within the organization	Clear work role and project role Understanding work tasks and how to execute them	Clear common goals and vision and how to reach them	Time to reflect on learned knowledge	Group shared understanding Variation in knowledge within the group Small groups or subgroups with communication links Group supervisor/group leader Group members are not overwhelmed with work tasks/workload Training and information availability	A positive view of colleagues Trust in colleagues' competence and ability to perform tasks Safe work environment	The organization value developing, assimilating and incorporating new knowledge through, i.e. education

Source: Authors' own work developed from Ajmal & Koskinen (2008), Allix (2011), Antonacopoulou (2016), Argote (2013a), Argote & Fahrenkopf (2016), Cohen & Levinthal (1990), Fang et al. (2010), Goswami & Agrawal (2020), Inkpen & Tsang (2005), Luthra (2017), Granberg (2004), Quigley et al. (2007), Sandberg & Targama (1998), Sankowska, 2013, Stelmasczyk (2023) and Szulanski (1996)

Table 1.
Analytical framework



Notes: The blue boxes represent the already existing working group for crime prevention. The green boxes represent the already existing working groups for social inclusion. Within the boxes are the titles of the representatives, they come from different municipal departments (unless marked with “e.” which indicates that they are external actors). To ensure anonymity, we have chosen not to write which department they belong to. Titles mentioned more than once in one box come from different departments. The orange group is the newly created group responsible for citizen dialogue, project representatives are those who got 20% funding to participate in the project. The box with citizens is left blank since each meeting consisted of different people. It was open for all from the selected focus area to participate

Source: Authors’ own work

Figure 1.
Project structure

already existing cross-departmental working groups; however, it has further created one cross-departmental group specializing in citizen dialogue working toward one of the projects’ main aims (shown in orange below). This group consists of representatives from the different departments in the municipality with the task of organizing and executing citizen dialogue. Additionally, the collaborative project has focused the work on one geographical area in the municipality. Furthermore, some of the resources from the project

funding were allocated toward external coaching in human rights-based approaches dedicated to increasing knowledge within the organization concerning how to approach citizen dialogue from a human rights-based perspective. Moreover, external actors are involved in the collaborative project, including the police, the municipal housing company, the regional emergency services and the school association.

Prior to the CDCP, the municipality issued a citizen promise aiming to increase the involvement of the local community, increase cooperation with the police, involve citizens, decrease crime and increase safety. The citizen promise has been incorporated into the collaborative cross-departmental project thus involving not only the municipality but also the police and external actors. The complexity of this CDCP presents an interesting case study because the project incorporates the organization's internal structure and provides additional resources for the organization to involve citizens as well as external actors.

Methods of collecting data: interviews and observations

The methods of collecting data used in this article are observations of the project implementation process between September 2021 and January 2022, as well as interviews with public servants who participated in the project. The observations contributed to mapping out the project implementation process, where all meetings concerning the collaboration project were observed and documented. This aided in creating a timeline of how the project was organized and carried out internally, as well as how management executed the project and how they worked toward the goals the CDCP set out to reach. According to the authors' guidelines, the observations were primarily made by a postgraduate student employee who conducted a research internship at the municipality documenting the project meetings. The student participated in five meetings with the crime prevention group, four meetings with the social inclusion group, four citizen dialogue meetings and four coaching meetings. In addition, the student sat in on 15 weekly meetings with project managers and project participants. The observations were recorded on a computer and contained the agenda, what was said and by whom.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with project participants to create a narrative regarding the experience of being a part of the project, as well as explore the challenges the collaborative project has faced and its opportunities for improvement. The interviews were done in Swedish by the authors of this article. The interviews took place digitally at a fixed time. They were recorded and then transcribed in Swedish by each interviewer; the citations in this article have been translated from Swedish to English by the authors. The questions asked were about the representatives' understanding of the project, their role in the project and how the collaboration worked. It also included views on communication and reflections on the project so far, as well as wishes going forward. Because semi-structured interviews were conducted, the participants were able to speak freely while adhering to the themes of the interview and keeping to the topic (Galletta, 2013).

As the project is collaborative and cross-departmental, the choice of interview participants was important. The representatives who were interviewed were selected by the research group at the university along with the project owner. As mentioned earlier, the CDCP is organized into several working groups. As such, at least one project participant from each department was interviewed, as well as at least one representative from each working group (see Table 2), making the choice of sample representative. All of the external project participants were also interviewed. 20 interviews were carried out between November 2021 and December 2021. The following persons were interviewed.

Because the project was cross-departmental, it included many public servants who participated, all of whom were not interviewed. As such, the observations of the project's

No. of project participant	Role	Gender	Group
Project participant 1	Municipal Head of Administration	Female	CP MG
Project participant 2	Municipal Head of Administration	Male	CP MG
Project participant 3	The Music School Representative	Female	SI OG
Project participant 4	Planning Architect	Male	SI OG
Project participant 5	Unit Manager	Female	CP OG
Project participant 6	Principal	Female	CP OG
Project participant 7	Operations Manager	Female	SI MG
Project participant 8	Municipal Head of Administration	Female	CP MG
Project participant 9	Police Commissioner	Male	PM
Project participant 10	Development Leader	Female	PM
Project participant 11	Municipal Director	Female	CP MG
Project participant 12	Chairman of the Municipal Board	Male	CP MG
Project participant 13	Managing Director Housing Company	Male	CP MG
Project participant 14	Security Coordinator	Male	PM
Project participant 15	Police Assistant	Female	PR
Project participant 16	Operations Manager	Male	CP OG
Project participant 17	Municipal Head of Administration	Male	CP MG
Project participant 18	Municipal Head of Administration	Female	CP MG
Project participant 19	Unit Manager	Male	SI OG
Project participant 20	Leisure Leader	Female	PR

Notes: PM = project managers; CP MG = crime prevention management group; CP OG = crime prevention operational group; SI MG = social inclusion management group; SI OG = social inclusion management group; PR = project representatives

Source: Authors' own work

Table 2.
Project participants

process and the monthly meetings of all the working groups provided a large amount of data that included the perspective of those that were not interviewed. Furthermore, informed consent was provided, and no sensitive personal information was collected from the participants.

Methods of analyzing the data: qualitative content analysis

The qualitative content analysis (QCA) method is used to systematically analyze the data. This paper uses the theoretical framework presented above, which means that the data is analyzed deductively through a QCA-directed approach. This approach allows the use of a coding system that is directly connected to the categories in the theoretical framework. This can be considered a deductive category application, prior codes, or closed coding (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This means setting up predetermined codes that are linked to all the different categories in the theoretical framework. The QCA method provides for inter-coder reliability because the research uses set categories to analyze the data, which elevates the reliability aspect of the research and increases transparency (Mayring, 2000). This method was selected because it would help us make more precise and focused analyses, while looking for specific patterns or themes that support or contradict the theoretical framework.

Based on the theoretical framework, the following codes were assigned to each category and then applied systematically in the analysis:

- B-SC = Barrier-Systematic communication;
- F-SC = Facilitator-Systematic communication;
- B-IR = Barrier-Individual roles;
- F-IR = Facilitator-Individual roles;

B-CG = Barrier-Common goals;
F-CG = Facilitator-Common goals;
B-TP = Barrier-Time pressure;
F-TP = Facilitator-Time pressure;
B-GL = Barrier-Group learning;
F-GL = Facilitator-Group learning;
B-TR = Barrier-Trust and relationships;
F-TR = Facilitator-Trust and relationships;
B-AC = Barrier-Absorptive capability; and
F-AC = Facilitator-Absorptive capability.

Additionally, a deductive approach can also be seen as limiting because it does not open up new insights or perspectives. The deductive approach only enables validation or contradiction of the theoretical framework. Hence an inductive approach was taken in relation to the observational data, offering a more flexible interpretation of the collected material. However, the observed material was mostly used to understand the structure of the project, the goals and the work done during the research period.

Results and analysis

As previously mentioned, the analysis is based on the theoretical framework of barriers and facilitators to knowledge transfer and learning processes, where the data is analyzed using the concepts categorized in [Table 1](#). All quotes come from the interviews, while the descriptions of working methods, atmosphere and the project come from the observations, as well as the interviews. The analysis is divided into three parts. The first concerns systematic communication, individual roles and common goals; the second concerns time pressure, group learning, trust and relationships; and the last one concerns absorptive capability.

Systematic communication, individual roles and common goals

One of the biggest barriers that was both observed following the project implementation process and discussed by project participants is the lack of systematic communication throughout the CDCP. Many project participants point out that the structure of the project was not communicated clearly, which made it difficult to understand how the project was organized. This further contributed to misunderstandings of the project participants' roles in the project as well as their departments' responsibilities in the CDCP:

What is my role? What is the role of my department in this? How shall we collaborate with others? That's what I think has made many hesitant [...] (Project participant 19).

Most project participants feel uncertain about their role in the CDCP and therefore have difficulty seeing how their department can contribute to the project; this was discussed during both observed meetings and in interviews. The ambiguity regarding individual roles and understanding the context of where they work is a barrier to knowledge transfer and learning processes. Because the participants do not understand their roles in the project or their department's roles, it is, in accordance with previous literature, difficult for them to know which knowledge is relevant to use and share ([Granberg, 2004](#); [Sandberg & Targama, 2013](#); [Argote & Fahrenkopf, 2016](#)).

Through observations, it has become clear that the structure of the CDCP is complex, with multiple departments, external actors and working groups all working together simultaneously. In relation to the analytical framework, systematic communication within

and between the departments is needed for the implementation of CDCP and for reaching its goals, as well as for facilitating knowledge transfer and organizational learning (Szulanski, 1996; Luthra, 2017). However, such a communication structure was missing. Several project participants did not report back to their department about the CDCP. They describe a lack of communication between different department representatives outside the project working groups:

There I am alone, I have no one to continuously report to [...] there is no communication between departments and the project working groups (Project participant 3).

As Szulanski (1996) and Luthra (2017) point out, a lack of systematic communication is a barrier to the transfer of knowledge because it does not make it possible for work colleagues to communicate and have access to each other's knowledge, which serves to hinder the transfer of knowledge and subsequently the learning process within the organization. Project participants are also critical of the project management because there have been no continuous updates on how the project is going. This is further linked to the lack of systematic communication:

It's more exciting to get continuous feedback because I think that [...] I expect to get some information on how the project is going (Project participant 8).

If we could have gotten a little deeper information from the beginning about what this is. What is expected? Early [...] How much staff do we need and how do we need to think? (Project participant 18).

Most project participants stress the importance of having clear information from the beginning as well as continuous updates on the process of the project. This affects how they understand the project and how they work toward the common goal of the CDCP.

In addition to the challenges mentioned earlier, a project participant also emphasizes that the division of the working groups between the strategic and operational levels made the process slower. The project participant believes that it is difficult for those at different levels in the organization to understand each other, which can lead to the work taking longer:

I can see a difficulty, it has a lot to do with, what should I say, when you work in different areas/ [...] If you are in an organization that is operationally oriented or strategically oriented. It is not always that those worlds meet, with obviousness, which means that it can be a bit dangerous in time before you move forward– (Project participant 19).

The fact that the strategic and operational levels work in different ways and speak different languages is not only an obstacle to cooperation but also an obstacle to the transfer of knowledge and the learning processes. This difficulty in finding each other at work can be linked to the lack of common goals between the strategic level and the operational level (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005; Goswami & Agrawal, 2020).

In relation to the analytical framework and more specifically Inkpen & Tsang (2005), the responsibility to communicate and make sure that participants simultaneously work toward the common goals falls on the project managers, which in this case they failed to deliver on. Because communication is lacking on several fronts, this becomes a barrier to understanding common goals by project participants as well as how to reach them, which subsequently affects knowledge transfer between department participants as well as the learning process from each other. Because the CDCP is divided into cross-departmental groups, which are subgroups within the organization, it can be argued that the structure of the organization is built in a way that could facilitate knowledge transfer and learning; however, communication between those groups is severely lacking, as displayed by project

participants, which according to the theory instead becomes a barrier to knowledge transfer and learning within the organization (Fang et al., 2010; Argote, 2013b).

Time pressure, group learning, trust and relationships

A challenge that is expressed by project participants is frustration and project fatigue because of the high workload:

It's yet another project [...] one has quite a high workload already, so I feel like it's [...] tough to be part of one more project (Project participant 2).

This frustration concerning project-based work that public servants express creates a stressful environment, which affects their relationship between colleagues and subsequently also affects the attitude toward the project as well as that of other project participants. This can be considered a barrier to knowledge transfer because one needs to be willing and engaged to share knowledge with others and, as such, learn from them (Newell & Swan, 2000; Sankowska, 2013). The project fatigue and high workload that participants express are clear indicators of this. High workload can, furthermore, according to Argote (2013b), hinder group learning, where learning is a mutual process taking place, in this case at a group level, and when this process is hindered, it creates a barrier to creating shared understanding on the group level. Even the project managers express worry about project participants' attitudes toward the project. Project management finds it difficult to implement a project that faces criticism when the purpose of the project is to complement and develop the regular work:

The attitude is everything from [...] I feel there is such a pessimism [...] there is a huge engagement, but that they say from the municipality's side, "why should we do this?", it kills enthusiasm – (Project participant 10).

This speaks of the trust and relations between colleagues where the work environment is affected by different views on the CDCP, and management feels that it is difficult to handle this aspect while trying to implement the CDCP. Based on Newell & Swan (2000), this situation could affect knowledge transfer and learning processes because trust affects the will to use the knowledge one has as well as the will to learn from others.

However, despite the many challenges and criticisms that CDCP faced, several project participants are still appreciative of what the project tried to achieve and its aim:

I think it's great and everyone is very positive and expectant, must I say. And yes, now maybe something good will happen out of this, so it feels very good – (Project participant 20).

Just as a lack of trust is a barrier, a positive attitude toward other colleagues and belief in colleagues' competence facilitate knowledge transfer and learning processes (Newell & Swan, 2000). Trust in colleagues, as well as a positive attitude toward collaboration with other departments, promotes learning and cooperation:

[...] To cooperate across departmental boundaries is very important and we all learn all the time. We should just continue with it [...] – (Project participant 2).

Because the partners have worked together prior to the CDCP, it has contributed to trust between them and could arguably enhance group learning in the working groups. Following Argote (2013b), their outlook regarding cooperation facilitates knowledge transfer. Several participants point out that the work environment in their respective working groups is open, where everyone participates in discussions and feels free to voice their opinions:

I think we have an open dialogue [...] Everyone can speak and talk openly and honestly (Project participant 18).

This indicates good relations between project participants, which can be an important factor in creating an environment where participants feel safe to express themselves, and engage in discussions, and, as such, share their knowledge and enhance the learning process (Newell & Swan, 2000; Sankowska, 2013). However, one participant points out that power structures are always at play in an organizational structure, which can be translated into some opinions carrying more weight than others:

It can depend on power structures, position in the organization or how one expresses themselves. There are always different structures that make someone have more power. Someone has more status, someone is more articulate and so on, so you never get away from it completely – (Project participant 4).

Power structures within an organization can arguably affect the transfer of knowledge and learning processes, especially because they create an environment where not all opinions are of the same worth. This affects the willingness of project participants to engage in discussions (Newell & Swan, 2000). However, because most of the project participants that were interviewed stated that they felt included, this can then be argued to be a facilitator.

Another major challenge in the project that is discussed by project participants is that one department refused to participate in the CDCP. This created a challenge to the idea of collaboration in the municipality. According to the project participants, this department had difficulty seeing its role in the CDCP and argued that they did not have sufficient resources to appoint a representative to the dialogue group. As mentioned earlier, the CDCP has funded a dialogue group, where each department would send a representative who can work 20% of their full-time hours in the dialogue group:

Then it turned out that the department did not think they could release any representative, because they apparently had fewer people and less responsibility than anyone else [...] Now I'm a little discourteous, but that's how it was – (Project participant 5).

The lack of participation from this department is mentioned by both the project participants and the project management as a challenge, and they perceive it as an obstacle to cooperation and collaboration within the municipal organization:

The lack of participation of one department is really a disaster, I think it is. I do not understand why. I have not received any clear explanation other than that there are so many groups already. I do not think that it is enough, it is not a sufficient explanation – (Project participant 10).

Because this department refused to cooperate with the CDCP, this led to conflicts within the organization and with the project leaders. Eventually, it was solved by appointing one person from another department to work 40% of full-time in the dialogue group:

Now we took our representative instead to work 40 per cent, I do not think (one of the project managers) thinks this is optimal, I can understand that. She wants representation from every administration, of course (Project participant 1).

According to the project participants, a miscommunication about resources created misunderstandings and conflict, but in the end, the challenge was handled by the mentioned appointment so that the work could continue. However, the fact that one department was missing meant that another department had to take over this work, which created an imbalance in the workload. This indicates strained relationships within the organization and in the CDCP.

Another challenge discussed by the project participants is time constraint, which they argue is an important factor when it comes to achieving quality:

And at the same time, you need time in between to land a little on the matter. We cannot forget that. [...] You must be patient, I think – (Project participant 14).

The short time span that the project had was because of the stressful start, where financial support was granted late with no possibility of renewal. This aspect caused the project managers a lot of stress and did not allow them to inform and communicate about the project in time, as well as dedicate time to building a structure for the project to have functional communication channels, all of which are essential prerequisites for knowledge to be transferred (Fang et al., 2010; Szulanski, 1996):

That we got it granted after the project period had already started and then we would do anchoring work [...] it was so short times. It becomes difficult to grasp as well too [...] (Project participant 10).

We must take it in turn, it must take time. It's more important that it's good than that it goes fast, so to speak – (Project participant 12).

Time is argued to be very important by project participants, and they point out the problem of too little time to reflect, which Ajmal & Koskinen (2008) and Antonacopoulou (2016) see as a barrier to knowledge transfer. They contend that project-based work is often limited in budget and time which means stress and little time dedicated to reflection.

One of the aims of CDCP was to create a citizen dialogue where citizens could participate in the project as collaborative partners. This aspect of the project is criticized by project participants because the citizens were involved too late in the process and their participation was not as sufficient as the project managers intended:

I do not want us to talk about “them”. I miss the perspective of what the citizens in the area themselves are thinking. It was not presented to me, and I feel that we in the last meeting somehow tried to act as experts on humans – (Project participant 6).

Project participants are also critical of how the results from the dialogue with citizens were not communicated and incorporated into the organization and the CDCP. This hindered knowledge transfer from citizens to the organization and vice versa because dialogues were held with few citizens and the project was not able to reach out to as many citizens as it aimed to. Several project participants also contend that the municipality should have more in-depth dialogues so that citizens' perspectives are incorporated into the municipality's long-term plans.

Absorptive capacity

One important aspect that was part of CDCP was coaching and education in human rights-based methods dedicated to project participants who were to engage in dialogue with the citizens. Most participants who received the training are positive toward it and think of it as useful and needed knowledge within the organization:

It really puts the finger on what we lack and points out white spots around how we carry out the municipal assignment both for me as a public servant but also in general. It is an increase in the quality of municipal work (Project participant 10).

[...] if you only boil down to one thing, I get [...] How we behave when we communicate when we meet citizens, I think that is perhaps the most important thing (Project participant 14).

The transfer of knowledge into the organization through coaching in a human rights-based approach indicates a development in the organizational absorptive capabilities. Drawing on the analytical framework, the CDCP therefore increases the absorptive capability of the organization because it recognizes the value of developing and incorporating new knowledge into the organization to provide tools for an inclusive citizen dialogue (Stelmaszczyk, 2023; Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Argote, 2013b).

Conclusion

This article focuses its analysis on a Swedish municipal project collaboration. Even if each Swedish municipality can differ in its preconditions, all municipalities are organized and structured in a similar manner. As displayed in this study, the CDCP faced many challenges highlighted by the public servants interviewed. A major challenge was the lack of communication from management regarding how the project was structured and carried out. A lack of communication between the department representatives and the working groups was also mentioned. Hence, the project participants emphasized the need for more systematic communication in the CDCP to avoid confusion regarding the representatives' roles in the project as well as their departments' roles. Szulanski (1996) and Fang et al. (2010) argue that systematic communication in the project as a whole and between working groups is vital for knowledge to be transferred and for learning to occur. Lack of clarity in individual roles and understanding the work context as well as how the project is organized are arguably barriers to knowledge transfer and the learning process in the CDCP and the municipality (Argote & Fahrenkopf, 2016; Granberg, 2004; Sandberg & Targama, 2013, p. 6).

Time limitation was also a major challenge in the project, where both participants and management felt that more time and resources were vital for the successful execution of the CDCP. This, according to Ajmal & Koskinen (2008) as well as Antonacopoulou (2016), is a crucial aspect when knowledge is shared and learned, where participants need time to reflect on the knowledge learned. A challenge to collaboration in the CDCP was the absence of one department, which caused conflict and created a stressful environment. Moreover, difficulty with including citizens in the work process was also highlighted as a challenge in the CDCP, which further affected knowledge transfer between citizens and the municipality.

Project fatigue because of the high workload was also expressed by project participants as a challenge in the CDCP, which hinders the group learning process and how project participants view each other (Newell & Swan, 2000; Argote, 2013b; Allix, 2011). More challenges such as skepticism toward the CDCP, as well as a lack of understanding between the strategic and operational levels, are fostered by a lack of common goals (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005; Goswami & Agrawal, 2020).

In addition to all the challenges discussed, project participants also reflected on the opportunities the CDCP has within the municipality. Several project participants were positive about the aims of CDCP and what it tried to achieve, as well as its collaborative structure within the municipality. This attitude was grounded in trust in colleagues (Newell & Swan, 2000), as well as being a facilitator that enhanced the group learning process (Argote, 2013b). Similarly, a safe work environment and the openness of colleagues also facilitate knowledge transfer and learning processes (cf. Newell & Swan, 2000). The CDCP also showed that the municipality values developing and incorporating new knowledge into its structure through education, which points to a high absorptive capability within the organization further facilitating learning processes and knowledge transfer (cf. Stelmaszczyk, 2023; Cohen & Levinthal, 1990).

While this study analyzes the challenges and opportunities of a specific municipal cross-departmental project, focusing on the barriers and facilitators to knowledge transfer and

learning processes, it also sheds light on the challenges Swedish municipalities face today, especially in terms of communication, trust, collaboration, citizen inclusion as well as time and budget limitations. The study thereby gives important insights into organizational learning within a municipality in Sweden as well as the factors that influence knowledge transfer and learning processes. In short, the study displays several crucial aspects to improve the implementation and outcome of a collaborative cross-departmental municipal project cooperating with external actors. Communication is a key aspect for the project and the organization to be able to learn and share knowledge within their structure. Knowledge must be transferred and learned in order for the organization to develop and to tackle future challenges and its complex responsibilities. The theoretical analytical framework provided in this article has proven to be effective and is therefore transferable to other organizations in both the public and private sectors. The article thereby provides a contribution that can be used in further research to systematically enhance and benefit the understanding of factors that hinder and facilitate knowledge transfer and learning processes within organizations.

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