

Co-creating housing strategies: Hosting five families with housing challenges

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Introduction to the Field Book - <http://hostleadership.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Chapter1.pdf>.

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It has long been a part of the public sector tradition to offer shelter to people in need. What happens when it's no longer “we” are helping “you”, but “let's do this together”? Is it possible to collaborate with vulnerable people, developing a new housing policy? In this fascinating chapter, we hear about a project from a local context in Norway, using Host Leadership ideas to work with families in poverty to develop a new way of working for housing, across sectors

Introduction

The welfare state in Norway and similar countries have challenges to continue serving the people in the municipality with the equivalent organisation and service level we see today given the growing number of elderly people in relation to number of tax-payers. For this reason there has been a request for new practices in different service areas including social housing, especially in relation to low-income families with children. Involving the public sector and families in co-creating solutions has been identified as an innovative approach in changing the interaction between public services and citizens. This case is a part of an action research study of a project that aimed to develop and pilot co-creating new housing strategies for families in poverty.

This project took place in Larvik city, a municipality in Norway with 45 000 inhabitants. The city was chosen since the city is the home-city of the project leaders and we found possibilities of establishing a relative innovative idea inside trustful relations with representatives of different local institutions. We saw the opportunity and chose the city for this reason. Five families were involved in a six month joint group process. The families were invited to join a process which aimed to increase their psychological quality of life. Another aim was to inform and challenge the public systems to deliver solutions across sectors better fitting the target group's needs. In this case we will focus on the processes and meetings with the five families. We will apply central elements mentioned in the seminal *Host* book by McKergow and Bailey (2014). We will present our practice in relation to the six roles of Host

Leadership and conclude with some learning points about co-participation and stepping forward.

Theoretical background.

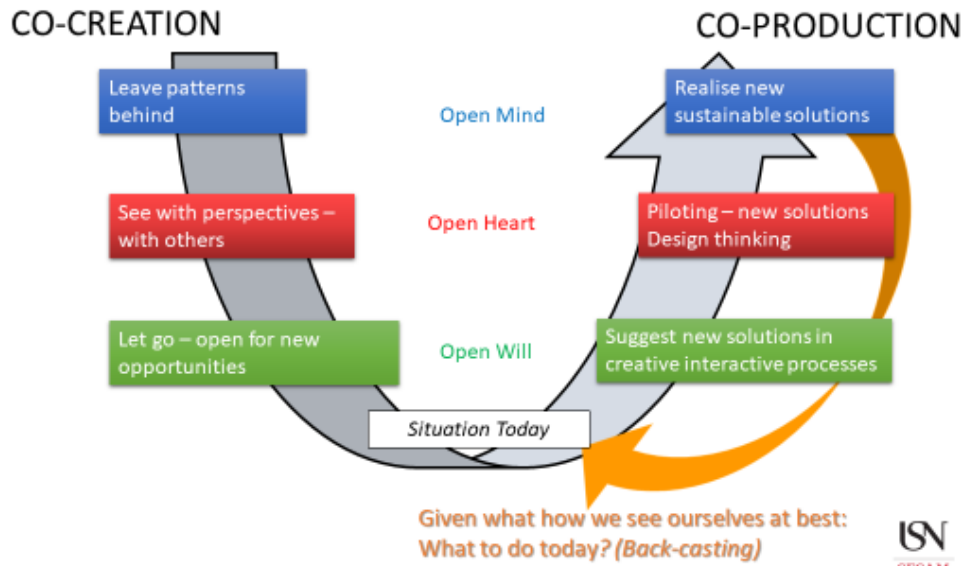
This project's ambition was to apply three theoretical models in our meetings with the families. The time elements were organised with Otto Scharmer's U-turn (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013). The Diversity Icebreaker concept (Ekelund & Pluta, 2015, Ekelund, 2019) was used to create a shared language of diversified preferences and perspectives. The method was integrated within a Theory U perspective to generate self-appraisals through from mind, heart and Will. Subsequently the Diversity Icebreaker concept of Red, Green and Blue were applied to elicit various perspectives, thought process and action plans associated with desired housing outcomes. This is the left side and right side of the Scharmer's U-curve (see Figure 1 below).

Voorberg, Bekkers and Tummers (2015) define social innovation as the creation of long-lasting outcomes that aim to address societal needs by fundamentally changing the relationships, positions and rules between the involved stakeholders, through an open process of participation, exchange and collaboration with relevant stakeholders, including end-users, there by crossing organizational boundaries and jurisdictions. According to the European Commission (European Commission 2011, 30), 'social innovation mobilizes each citizen to become an active part of the innovation process'.

The terms co-creation and co-production refer to the active involvement of end-users in various stages of the production process (Voorberg, et al. 2015). These authors reserve the term 'co-creation' for involvement of citizens in the (co)-initiator or co-design level. Co-production is being considered as the involvement of citizens in the (co)-implementation of public services. Co-creation is considered as a cornerstone for social innovation in the public sector. Co-creation with citizens is a necessary condition to create innovative public services that actually meet the needs of citizens.

The co-creation perspective in this project happens in multiple settings. The co-creation of "how to understand ourselves in relation to housing" was the main focus in this case.

Figure 1. Theory U and the Diversity Icebreaker



In practice

The families met monthly with two researchers at a local charity. In the meetings, the families were involved in a six month development process to generate solutions to their housing related challenges. A primary aim was to strengthen participants’ influence on and autonomy in relation to the process, focussing on their resources over their limitations. Other foci included exploring values, developing pragmatic housing solutions and building relationships with the other families participating in the project.

Host Leadership (McKergow & Bailey, 2014) defines six roles:

1. Initiator
2. Inviter
3. Space creator
4. Gatekeeper
5. Connector
6. Co-participation

We will now describe how we worked and share our most important experiences and learnings, organised through the structure of these six roles.

Initiator

Recruitment of participants to the project was effectuated by the person that was most central in the Larvik municipality’s social housing office function. The inclusion criteria were low-income families with children having a difficult dwelling situation. Six families wanted to participate. She obtained acceptance from the families to give their names and contact information to me (Bjørn Z. Ekelund), the lead author.

Inviter

I then visited each of the families and informed them about the plans; six meetings, some elements of the theories that would be applied, the ambition also to include learning for public institutions plus our research ambitions. The sixth family did not want to take part because they were afraid that the confidentiality from the families to others in the society would not be respected by everyone in the group of families. I underlined that the project had no connection to future decision-making concerning future housing issues for the families. They signed an agreement of participation in line with this scope.

Space Creator

As a meeting space we used the large kitchen of a voluntary organisation that distributed cheap secondhand accessories and furniture. The meetings took place from 6pm to 9pm. This created an informal atmosphere, and at the same time had a context relevant for smart living, given the little money available – how to get more out of less.



We started all meetings with setting the table together with soups or sandwiches. Then different topics were introduced. Getting to the meeting space was not that easy for everyone. I contacted each of them before every meeting to offer them to bring them

with my car if needed. Some of the single mothers needed baby care, and we paid for this expense. We did not want to add to the economic burdens on their shoulders through this project.

Gatekeeper

The gatekeeping role consisted here of two functions; one is to introduce the elements of our theories into practice, naming U-curve and Diversity Icebreaker – and the other is to create a psychological safe climate for participation and sharing. The first one is the formative elements of stepping forward that implies taking control by giving the participants tools and language for understanding themselves, others and the challenges of housing. The second one is the practice of acknowledging what each of the participants share. The host leader's acknowledgement might function as a non-directive promotion of change. The acknowledgement and comments from the other participants in equal position leads to more relevant self-validation and shared information relevant for solving problems.

At the first meeting we stepped forward with setting the norms for confidentiality. Then each person was invited to talk about themselves and their family in a way that could help the others to understand them. No structure were set on the content except time. The research interview identified the positive effect of not being alone. Participants consistently identified being with others in the same boat as one of the most important contributions of the project.

Being able to discuss their housing situation with their peers was experienced positively. Peter summarises this as follows:

“It’s important to realise that you’re not alone, to meet other people who are struggling. Helps you get perspective on your situation”.

Vigdis refers to the support he felt from others in the group:

“It’s about motivating each other. Helping each other understand you are not alone. When we meet like this, you get so see that everyone is struggling with the same things, and we can help each other out. We get some respite, a breather.”

The second meeting was about recognising themselves in the Diversity Icebreaker concepts of Red, Blue and Green through questionnaires and other material. This is a short version of the main qualities of the three colours.

The categories in Diversity Icebreaker

RED	BLUE	GREEN
Feelings	Concrete	Big picture
People-oriented	Practical	Possibilities
Interaction	Facts	Future
Easy-going	Details	Ambitious
Patient	Logical	New ideas
Heart	Mind	Will/Body/Hand
Feeling	Thinking	Behaviour
Pathos	Logos	Ethos

Then they draw their housing history non-verbally in the downward slope of the left side of the U-curve (Figure 1). Afterwards they interviewed each other, and the dialogue partners had different colour preference within the Diversity Icebreaker categories. Shahila similarly described the process as a

Figure 2 The categories in the Diversity Icebreaker

voyage of self-discovery:

“I learned a lot about myself when we were drawing the various places we’d lived in. I drew the family I was born into, and my travels to a different country. I lived alone, looked after myself, and started trusting myself. And I drew the first time I slept without my mother or my brother nearby. Then I became a mother myself. Things like that. I learned who I was, got to know myself.”

The third meeting was centred around the economic situation and challenges for each of the families. Some of the families volunteered to be a case for creative input for improvement. Interesting ideas emerged about how to make good economic solutions by renting parts of the house – these ideas helped one of the families to buy a house six months later.

The fourth meeting was about how the housing situation could look if it was as good as possible. We explored Red, Blue and Green perspectives on what a best possible housing

situation could look like. We asked the participants to write a letter to themselves that could be sent in about three years, on how things could look at their best. They refused this exercise by saying that this was too unrealistic. They found it more relevant to focus on today's and tomorrow's situation. As a facilitator I found it important to respect the ideas voiced by the participants. I realised that my idea was not right at this time, in this context, and decided to bring this forward as an important learning about participants openness for moving position mentally along the U-curve, into the future.

Being content emerged as a topic. Tonje describes this as follows:

"I'm past a lot of the shame. I've learned to accept my situation and make the most of it. Appreciate what I have. It's been a kind of epiphany. I was so stuck in my way of thinking before. Trapped. I've learned I don't have to be ashamed of being "poor". And I use the scare quotes because I don't feel that I'm deprived."

The fifth meeting was on a Saturday with all the children in a trampoline park and pizza as a lunch meal. We informed the participants about this at the outset in order to create some positive event in the future that also could be shared with the children. It was also identified as meaningful in terms of getting to know the other families, getting to know people from other generations, with different cultural backgrounds. And most importantly, they had fun.

The sixth meeting was a wrap up for each family and some sharings of what they planned to do next. Given the time spent and topics shared these six months, what implications did it have for their actions in the near future? They also reflected upon the learning points of being content with the positive sides of life. Tonje also emphasises the importance of focussing on the positives, of living in the moment. For her family, this represented a survival strategy:

"Why sit around yearning for things that aren't achievable. There's something to be said for living in the moment. If we're constantly waiting, constantly deferring, things start to get on top of you. Sometimes it's good to compartmentalise. Push things into a corner. To say you know what, we'll do the things we HAVE to do. Then things are pretty much fine."

She said she'd spoken to her children about being happy with what they had, not focussing on what they didn't have.

Connector

This was the first time ever in Norway where multiple families who are in poverty met and develop a joint confidentiality, breaking the tradition of confidentiality between the service provider and the individual family. The consequence of this was both validation as well as empowerment. Practical help was given in between family members from day one, without being an intention from our side. The effect seen was very similar to what we see in successful group therapy when people at last meet someone who has shared similar experiences. Some of the members still keep contact in order to solve problems for each other. It became for some of them a unique network, different to what they already had from before.

In this process participants identified being with others 'in the same boat', validated and normalised their own life circumstances, and narrowed the cultural distance between

participants. They focused on finding the positives in their situations, and began to meet welfare service providers in a new and more constructive way. As such, they re-formulated strategies for how to improve communication with the representatives from the municipality.

The way participants spoke in these contexts suggest they were starting to see themselves as autonomous agents in their dealings with these services. Tonje felt she had increased her consciousness of how she interacted with others through the project. This also gave her insights into the dilemmas facing providers:

“Something’s changed in me in relation to meeting other people, like we’ve learned on the course. Like how we are, and how others are. There are people working in these places, they’re snowed under with work. It’s easy just to think about yourself in these situations, but when we understand what life is like for them it’s easier to approach them differently. This may lead to them approaching you differently as well.”

This is an illustration of how the participants themselves developed new connector strategies with important others outside the family group.

Co-participating

A central element in Host Leadership is that we as leaders take part in some of the processes. We, Ellen and I, were eating together with the participants. We tidied up the room together afterwards. When there were lacking some persons for group processes, we stepped in. When economic challenges and solutions was discussed in the third meeting, we shared our best knowledge and experience. We took part in the mapping of colour preferences. It even lead to an act where one of the participants voiced a meta-perspective, sharing with the others but knowing that we also heard:

“You know that Bjørn Z. and Ellen, they are both very Green. It implies that if we talk with big words, in a very enthusiastic way, share ideas of what potentially could happen – then they will be happy.”

The co-participating role seemed to make it easier for the participants to take an agency role based upon their learning. In the follow up of the project we also involved the participants to validate our research. They become our research assistants.

Conclusion

This project has some unique qualities. First and most important is the act of bringing together families who normally are treated individually with confidentiality by representatives of the municipality. Second, in the host function we did not act as teachers or experts, but as people that hosted the meetings in a very informal context, where the host function of sitting together around a table and eat was the starting point. The space created is easily recognisable from the hosting literature and metaphors. Third, in the gatekeeping function we imposed concepts where the U-curve created a sequence of goals for each meeting and with Diversity Categories of Red, Blue and Green language that created a new language that participants enjoyed to practice. The qualitative research (in progress; Andvig, Kopro and Ekelund) shows that the participants seems to have experienced a personal growth of dignity and empowerment through the dialogues and the group processes described above. The citations above illustrates this. We believe that the friendly hosting function combined with a simple and trust creating structure made it possible for participants to experience unique learning

processes.

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