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Learning and employee-driven innovation in the public sector – the interplay between employee engagement and organisational conditions

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to examine learning and employee-driven innovation (EDI) in the public sector, with a particular focus on the interplay between employee engagement and organisational conditions.

Design/methodology/approach – The material consists of qualitative interviews with 23 participants from three municipal sites of innovation support that participated in a national programme aiming to strengthen municipalities' innovation work.

Findings – The study found numerous constraining organisational conditions resulting in consequential loss of employee engagement for EDI. The conclusion drawn is that employee engagement and enabling organisational conditions are central to EDI in public sector workplaces, and that incorporating EDI into municipal daily operations requires paying attention to the interplay between organisational conditions and employee engagement.

Originality/value – This paper provides important guidance for supporting EDI in the public sector. Implementing EDI into operations requires employee engagement to be successful. However, employees' engagement should not be overlooked or taken for granted. A practical implication of this study is that EDI in the workplace must be encouraged by creating a learning environment that supports innovative learning in the workplace. In practice, measures should be taken to support employee engagement by creating organisational conditions that provide a more expansive learning environment to ensure the continuity and perpetuation of EDI in public sector organisations.

Keywords Employee-driven innovation, Workplace learning, Learning environment, Public sector innovation

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Significant investments have been made in Sweden and around the world to catalyse workplace innovation and numerous workplace programmes have been put in place to encourage employees in both private and public organisations to engage in innovation

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(Evans and Waite, 2010; OECD, 2019). However, studies have brought ample evidence of how organisational barriers in the public sector context may hamper employees to engage in employee-driven innovation (EDI) (Boyne, 2002; Mulgan and Albury, 2003; Ritchie, 2014; Torugsa and Arundel, 2017). The question of what drives employees to learn and innovate therefore becomes especially important when studying public sector innovation.

Participating in EDI is voluntary in many public sector organisations (OECD, 2017), which means that the employee needs to perceive the opportunities offered as sufficiently valuable and meaningful in order to get involved (Billett, 2001). These aspects are commonly overlooked, as employees' drive to participate in innovation work is often taken for granted (Rosenblatt, 2011). However, taking employees' drive to innovate for granted may severely impact how EDI is supported and how the process is understood. Employees not only need the drive to come up with an idea and initiate the innovation process, they must also maintain a drive that is strong enough to cope with all the steps required from ideation through to development and implementation (Puccio and Cabra, 2012). This drive also needs to be strong enough to outweigh the asymmetric incentives for EDI that exist in public sector contexts where employees have no shares in their workplace, salaries are not dependent on the ability to innovate, and innovations developed by employees at work will become state property (Albury, 2005; Borins, 2001; Mulgan, 2007). Furthermore, organisational barriers such as risk aversion, bureaucracy, organisational silos, rigid budget processes and lacking leadership have also been proven to hinder public sector innovation (Albury, 2005; Cinar *et al.*, 2019; Mulgan, 2007). These organisational barriers and asymmetric incentives may also be accompanied by barriers at a more personal level, such as the risk of losing face if the innovation fails or the risk of creating extra work for oneself or one's colleagues (Amabile and Pratt, 2016). For employees to engage despite such personal risks, strong internal and external driving forces are needed to initiate and sustain employee engagement.

All these factors together explain why it is of particular importance to explore the connection between employee engagement and organisational conditions for learning and EDI in the public sector. This article's contribution is therefore to provide empirical knowledge about learning and EDI in a public sector context where innovation work has been initiated. More precisely, the aim of the study is to examine learning and EDI in the public sector, with a particular focus on the interplay between employee engagement and organisational conditions. In addition, the study will also provide practical guidance on how to improve innovation support in municipal contexts by increasing our knowledge of learning and EDI in the public sector.

The data used in this study was collected from three municipal sites that participated in a Swedish national programme aiming to strengthen municipalities' innovation work. The empirical material is based on 23 qualitative interviews with employees, first-line managers and innovation coaches who participated in this initiative. As we will argue, different agendas of employees, first-line managers and innovation coaches can impact learning and innovation when innovation work is initiated.

This paper has been divided into six sections, including this introduction. The next section introduces the conceptual framework, starting with EDI and its close connection to workplace learning. The subsequent sections present the research setting and the methodology used in this study. This is followed by an outline of the findings, while the final section contains a discussion of the central findings and study limitations and suggestions for future research.

Conceptual framework

EDI is defined as "the generation and implementation of new ideas, products, and processes – including the everyday remaking of jobs and organizational practices – originating from interaction of employees, who are not assigned to this task./. . ./Employees are active and may initiate, support or even drive/lead the processes" (Høyrup *et al.*, 2012, p. 8). The definition suggests that ordinary employees have the potential to drive innovation by initiating and using ideas to remake their work (see also Evans and Waite, 2010). It is well recognised in studies of workplace learning, that learning in everyday work can serve as a catalyst for EDI that contribute to making employees' ideas and initiatives visible and making use of their resources in the workplace (Cangialosi *et al.*, 2020; Ellström, 2010; Evans and Waite, 2010; Halvarsson Lundkvist and Gustavsson, 2017; Høyrup, 2010).

Exploring the interconnection between EDI and workplace learning also brings attention to the significance of creating workplace learning environments conducive for idea generation and the use of ideas to redesign work. Analysing workplaces as learning environments can be done using the restrictive-expansive continuum model developed by Fuller and Unwin (2004). This model's underlying theoretical assumption is that expansive learning environments contain enabling conditions that create rich opportunities for learning, whereas restrictive learning environments contain constraining conditions that create barriers to learning. Learning environments that are distinguished as expansive provide employees with opportunities to participate in several communities and encourage communication across organisational boundaries. In these expansive learning environments, time is specifically devoted to support innovative learning and teamwork is valued and innovative practices are seen as important. In expansive learning environments, employees' ideas are recognised and discussed and can have an influence on working conditions (Kersh and Evans, 2017). It also involves increasing the employees' opportunities to participate and benefit from the investments made in the organisation (Evans *et al.*, 2006). Restrictive learning environments are consequently characterised by the opposite features such as unsupportive environments that do not encourage EDI (Høyrup, 2010), which can have a negative impact on employees' learning (Fuller and Unwin, 2004).

However, making a workplace a more expansive learning environment is not only about creating the necessary conditions for learning. The conditions granted to employees may vary depending on their role, form of employment, gender, race and relationships, resulting in workplace-bound agency for the employee (Billett, 2012). Conditions for participating in workplace learning that stimulates EDI can also be contingent on the employee's willingness, attitude, background and experiences (Evans and Waite, 2010; Fuller and Unwin, 2004), resulting in employees acting in opposition to what is afforded, thus creating a state of independence between workplace affordances and employee engagement (Billett, 2001; Engeström, 1999; Engeström, 2001; Fuller and Unwin, 2004; Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2004).

Supporting workplace learning and EDI can therefore be described as a complex process in which the employees' engagement and the workplace conditions interact and are reciprocally negotiated (Billett, 2004; Derrick, 2020; Evans *et al.*, 2006; Evans and Waite, 2010; Gustavsson, 2009; Gustavsson, 2012; Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2004; Halvarsson Lundkvist and Gustavsson, 2017; Somerville, 2002). Both the employee and the workplace can also be seen as active agents, each with their own agenda in initiating and maintaining workplace learning and EDI (Billett, 2001; Billett, 2004; Billett, 2012). These agendas may coincide but may also contrast, and it is reasonable to assume that the workplace's purpose in supporting learning and EDI may not be completely aligned with the employee's self-interests (Billett, 2012; Evans and Waite, 2010). This also results in a perpetual and dynamic

change process which forms the conditions for learning and EDI in workplaces. As the employees learn and make changes to their workplace, their agency and engagement changes; this leads to further learning and changes in workplace conditions, and as conditions change the employees' agency and opportunity shifts (Billett, 2012; Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2004). In this circular and reciprocal process, the employees' agency and engagement for learning and driving innovation are thus not static, and nor are the conditions provided by the workplace.

Research setting

The study was carried out in Swedish municipalities, focusing on three municipal sites of innovation support. Swedish municipalities are politically governed organisations with responsibility for social care, education, community planning, environment and health protection, waste disposal and sewerages, housing, emergency services and libraries. The 290 municipalities together employ 900,000 people, corresponding to a quarter of all Swedish employees (SKR, 2021). Significant investments have been made by the Swedish Innovation Agency (Vinnova) in the form of national programmes to increase the innovation capacity within the public sector. One such national programme ran from 2016 to 2019, with the long-term goal of achieving sustainable and lasting support for innovation in Swedish municipalities, and for this support to be part of regular municipal operations (Vinnova, 2016). The participating municipalities were free to choose the strategy and structure that would best fit their needs, as long as the support was aimed at employees with the goal of facilitating EDI. Municipalities that applied for these funds could elect to cooperate or apply individually, but each project within the programme could receive a maximum of four million SEK that had to be matched by the applicant(s). Twelve sites of innovation support, involving 57 Swedish municipalities, were granted funds by Vinnova.

This study includes participants from three of these 12 sites. At one of the selected sites of innovation support, which served one medium-sized municipality, a training-based approach was used to provide support for EDI. Courses were taught on various techniques for working with innovation, and all departments within the municipality were welcome to participate. At the second site, the innovation support offered coaching to employees in one medium-sized municipality. The coaching was offered to employees working on innovative ideas regardless of departmental affiliation. At the third site, the innovation support was offered to employees at social service departments in three medium-sized municipalities. At the third site, the support function applied a mixed approach offering both training and coaching to support EDI (for details, see Lidman *et al.* (2022) removed to preserve blind review criteria).

Method

Selection and participants

A qualitative research design was used to capture the subjective experiences of three different target groups comprising 23 participants from three municipal sites of innovation support that participated in the national programme discussed above. The selection of participants was based on the criteria that they had come into contact with the innovation support and/or held key positions. Participants included seven employees, seven first-line managers and nine members of internal staff that had been assigned the role of innovation coaches. These coaches designed, set up and were responsible for the innovation support. The reasoning behind the selection was that each of these target groups would bring a different perspective on EDI .

Data collection

As restrictions related to the COVID pandemic were in force at the time of the data collection, 17 of the 23 interviews had to be held via phone or video conferencing, while the first six took place on site as planned. All interviews were performed by the first author of this article, and each interview was preceded by a reiteration of the information in the leaflet that had been previously sent by email to the participant. This information included notes on the purpose of the study, information about confidentiality and details of how the data would be handled in accordance with GDPR. The right to discontinue participation at any time was also reiterated and permission to record was requested. The interviews lasted approximately 60 min and were carried out in accordance with guidelines for qualitative research interviewing (Kvale *et al.*, 2014). The semi-structured interview guide that was used was slightly adapted for each target group, but all participants answered similar questions. The questions were grouped into themes covering questions about the innovation support, employee engagement and organisational conditions for EDI. For example, employees were asked "What drove you to go through the work it entails to work through an idea together with the innovation support?" while coaches and managers were asked "What do you think drives someone who has an idea to go through the work it entails to work through an idea together with the innovation support?". All target groups were asked "Do you know of someone who had an idea but dropped out before finishing his/her innovation?" and "Do you know why he/she dropped out?" and in addition the employees were also asked "What could have made you drop out?" and "Did you at any point feel that you wanted to drop out? Why?"

Data analysis

When all the interviews had been completed, the recorded material was transcribed verbatim. Following this, the transcribed interviews were read multiple times to locate the passages where the participants talked about conditions related to employee engagement and organisational conditions for learning and EDI. The passages were then analysed using qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2014). In this step, the analysis resulted in categorising conditions that were enabling and those that were constraining, at employee and organisational levels:

- Constraining condition related to the organisation = statements indicating that something in the municipal organisation created barriers that hindered employees from learning and engaging in EDI, regardless of whether the barrier originated in the work group, management or other organisational structures (such as "I was required to abandon the idea because of new directives from my manager").
- Enabling condition related to the organisation = statements indicating that something in the municipal organisation created opportunities for employees to learn and engage in EDI (such as "the innovation coaches have provided my employees with so much help in realising their innovative ideas").
- Constraining condition related to the individual = statements indicating that employees' engagement, disposition, background or willingness created barriers for learning and EDI (such as "I'm not interested in innovation" or "I fear being questioned").
- Enabling condition related to the individual = statements indicating that employees' engagement, disposition, background or willingness created opportunities for learning and EDI (such as "I find these new innovative ways of working really interesting and inspiring").

In the next step of the analysis, the categorisation of the enabling and constraining conditions was sorted into to the restrictive-expansive continuum model developed by Fuller and Unwin (2004) to identify expansive and restrictive environments for learning and EDI. Using this analytical model, each condition was tagged as either an expansive or a restrictive feature of the environment for learning and EDI using one of these four categories (1–4 above). In this last step of the analysis, a pattern emerged (presented in Figure 1), showing both the features of the environment for learning and EDI and the differences between the perceptions of employees, innovation coaches and first-line managers. The qualitative analysis was aimed at unearthing qualities in order to present the most prominent patterns in each group, these patterns will be presented in the findings section.

	Restrictive	Expansive
Conditions related to the individual	• Fading individual engagement due to restrictive organisational conditions (E/C/M) • Low interest in innovation displayed by some employees (C/M) • Fear among employees to engage in innovation (M)	• Belief in the innovative idea (E) • Excitement for innovation (E) • Enjoyment of innovation (E) • Interest in innovation (E) • Will to engage sparked by appealing innovation methodology (E) • Courage and confidence to engage stemming from increased knowledge about the innovation process (E) • Will to explore (C) • Will to be validated (C) • Will to enjoy self-realisation (C) • Will to use one's competence (M) • Curiosity (E/M) • Will to improve operations and citizen services (C/M) • Will to do a good job (C/M) • Need to channel frustration (C/M)
Conditions related to the organisation	• Busy daily operations resulting in lack of time for innovation(E/C/M) • Rigid budget processes (E/C/M) • Legal restrictions in municipal operation governance (E/C) • Risk aversion within organisation (E/C) • Fragility of innovation initiative when relying on a few enthusiasts (E/M) • Organisational silos (E/M) • Lack of support from upper management (E/M) • Lack of support from support functions (E) • Frequent reorganisations interfering with innovation processes (E) • Organisational inertia (E) • Lack of support from direct management in implementation phase (C) • Lack of incentives for managers to engage (C) • Lack of training in earlier stages of the project (for managers on how to support) (M)	• Support from the innovation support operation (E/C/M) • Significant autonomy and authority to work with innovation because of employee's professional role (E/M) • Support from employee's direct manager (E)

Figure 1.
Conditions at the individual and organisational levels that created restrictive and expansive environments for learning and EDI in relation to employees (E), innovation coaches (C) and managers (M)

Findings

This section describes the findings and is divided into three sections, one for each group of participants.

Employees

When employees recounted their innovation journeys, they identified multiple organisational conditions that enabled them not only to engage initially but also to maintain engagement in innovation work. The majority emphasised how solid support from their direct manager had been essential in order to initiate and sustain efforts. Some also mentioned how their professional role (related to process development or operational development) gave them the autonomy and authority they needed to fit innovation into their daily work. All the employees spoke highly of the innovation support operation and said that it was welcoming, run by positive people and resulted in valuable networking, and that the courses were informative and well organised, with highly relevant content and course material. Their positive experiences of the innovation support gave them an understanding of the process, which led them to dare to engage as they knew what to expect. The employees also claimed that the hands-on course exercises resulted in a willingness to learn and engage in innovation as they found this user-centred way of working appealing. In addition, they mentioned other more motivational aspects for engaging in innovation, such as a strong belief in their own innovative idea, as well as more affect-driven motivations such as excitement, enjoyment, curiosity and interest in innovation.

However, the employees also identified multiple organisational conditions that constrained their engagement in innovation. They experienced their busy operational reality as restrictive from an innovation standpoint, creating time and engagement conflicts. This also made it hard to keep a momentum going, and to find time to use newly gained knowledge and learn more to continue the innovation work. This conflicted with their own willingness to maintain engagement. They also recognised that this made it easy for colleagues who (unlike themselves) were not particularly interested to put the innovation initiative aside and return to old habits.

Frequent reorganisations putting structures and work practices in a state of flux were also mentioned as one of the primary organisational conditions that posed barriers to engaging and maintaining learning and driving the innovation work. These reorganisations made it hard to learn and establish new ways of working, making the process slow and involving a risk of having to start again. They also made it obvious that departmental efforts to engage in innovation often depended on certain individuals, and that the initiative could fail if those individuals left. Furthermore, the employees disclosed that a lack of support from upper management and support functions such as IT led to innovation projects being abandoned:

> *We came quite far, but that's when it stopped, and it is not the case that you, you do not continue to work with projects that are not supported from above, then you say 'No, we need to quit'. (E1)*

In addition, employees said that the organisational silos structuring the municipal operation made working with bigger, organisation-wide challenges an uphill battle. Collaboration between departments was further hindered by budget processes and the need to assign and split costs between participating departments. The fact that these budgets were set and assessed on a yearly basis also made it hard to work with proactive, innovative solutions that would not yield immediate measurable results. The employees also stated that much of the insecurity and fear that they felt during their innovation journeys could be traced back to the deep-rooted risk aversion present in the municipal context. Some theorised that the

fear of failure and being questioned stemmed from the fact that many municipal operations are governed by law. While talking about how organisational risk aversion affects the will to continue to learn and venture into the uncertain that innovation work brings, one employee said:

> *It can feel difficult, that you get a lot of questions and so on and still have to dare to be open to that. And. yes, make it through all the steps anyway. (E2)*

The employees also recognised that a kind of bureaucratic inertia – based on maintaining what already is instead of developing what could be – was making it hard to change cultures and structures to include innovation. One employee also explained that the attitudes of some colleagues could hold back the rest:

> *There is still that 'Yes, but this is the way we have always done things', which exists in all work teams, I can imagine, more or less. Or 'Why should we make changes when it's good as it is?'. (E3)*

According to the employees, the innovation initiative had not gained the traction they had hoped for, and the diverse interests among colleagues made it difficult for individuals like themselves who wanted to work with innovation to learn and maintain engagement to drive innovation in daily work.

Innovation coaches

The coaches identified multiple organisational conditions that had negative effects on employees' learning and engagement in innovation in the workplace. They expressed how the focus being limited to daily operations and current budgets left very little space for employees to drive innovation. One explanation from the coaches was that employees in politically and legally controlled operations with distinct core missions were bound by tight budgets and staff shortages, resulting in difficulties for employees within health care, social services and education to engage in EDI. The coaches stated that these employees' workplace conditions made it hard for them to attend training, visit coaches and find time to practise what they had learned after they finished courses. The coaches also said that some employees even withdrew their idea when they found out they could not just leave it for someone else to deal with, and that some employees who developed their idea lost their enthusiasm when management did not support the implementation phase. Coaches identified budget processes, risk aversion, pre-set agendas and a lack of management incentives as the main barriers to employees' learning and engagement in EDI. One coach verbalised the effects by saying that 46% of the terminated innovation projects were due to the employees' losing their engagement.

However, the coaches also identified conditions that they saw motivated employees to innovate, such as the employees' willingness to do good, serve others, create value, take pride in their work, explore, be validated, enjoy self-realisation and relieve frustration with things that were not working. The coaches described that these individual incentives were such strong motivators for some employees that they continued to engage despite encountering obstacles in the organisation.

In addition to the rationales for setting up the innovation support operations, the coaches said that employees' drive and engagement affected their choice of support strategies and activities. Some strategies were clearly geared towards supporting employees' existing engagement, while others were designed to offset some of the constraining organisational conditions mentioned earlier. To keep the employees' momentum going, coaches said that they tried to focus on scaling down ideas to reach a test phase quickly. The process of scaling down counterbalanced risk aversion by making the consequences of failed projects

less serious. These small-scale tests prevented projects from being hindered by the regulatory approval needed for larger projects. At all three sites, the coaches had to continuously design and redesign the innovation support to adapt to lower thresholds for employee participation. Training to support learning to drive innovation was shortened to enable employees from busy operations to participate. The coaches emphasised that timely feedback to make employees feel seen was important, and that all employees who contacted them with an idea should be offered a face-to-face meeting promptly. One coach explained that these initial meetings were important to elicit and maintain employee engagement:

> *At the first meeting we don't need to talk about 'return on investment', but rather about driving forces and [. . .] and things like that. (C1)*

The coaches described how, in order to enable employees to refresh their learned knowledge, a website containing all the training techniques and learning material was set up at one site. Creative spaces were also set up that served as physical reminders of the ongoing innovation initiative. Coaches at all three sites emphasised that they tried to keep the innovation training "fun" to engage the employees in innovation work. They stressed the importance of engaging employees via fun, first-hand experiences, and by doing so even the sceptics would leave training sessions enthused.

As participation was voluntary at all three sites, the coaches recognised that employee engagement was key, but also that not all employees were interested in learning how to drive innovation. Therefore, the coaches decided to engage only with those employees who showed a willingness to participate until a "tipping point" or a "pivotal mass" had been reached. By doing so, the idea was that the rest of the employees would follow through a type of snowball effect:

> *[The idea is to] work with those who are receptive. Not putting energy on those who are naysayers, but those who say "Hey, yes of course, I believe in this" and to give them resources and mandates and push them a little to work on this to create a snowball effect to reach a pivotal mass. (C2)*

It turned out that many of the employees who chose to participate in innovation projects and training had professional roles related to operational development. Therefore, the coaches testified to the difficulties in creating a sustainable, self-perpetuating focus on innovation in daily operations, even though several of the innovation projects and training activities in themselves were seen as successful.

First-line managers

The managers identified organisational conditions that impaired employees' engagement, but also conditions related to their ability as managers to lead employees' innovation work in the workplace. They spoke about these limitations more clearly than the coaches did, and expressed more scepticism about the possibilities to overcome these constraining conditions that the municipal context afforded. They relayed how a lack of support from upper management resulted in limited opportunities for them to support innovation, as well as how it affected employees' possibilities to drive innovation. The managers mentioned time pressure, rigid budget processes, silo structures and a lack of priority for favouring innovation as examples of organisational barriers that made innovation laborious. They also expressed concerns that all the support that had been given to them or their employees was dependent on the commitment of a few enthusiastic individuals, and without their support they believed that the innovation initiative would perish.

Furthermore, the managers recognised that all employees could get good ideas, but that only some would spring into action and develop and implement their ideas. They theorised

that this could be attributed to the employee's intrinsic willingness to engage, which propelled their way of driving innovation forwards. Some of the employees' driving forces mentioned by the managers were their willingness to improve operations, use their competence, improve citizen services, do a good job and channel frustration and curiosity. Moreover, some managers emphasised the importance of preserving these employee engagements by encouraging their innovative initiatives. One manager explained that this was an important part of the managerial responsibility:

> *Some just have that entrepreneurial thing and [. . .] if you have not caught it then they might lose interest and they think there is no point in disclosing ideas or something like this, but if you can catch it and lift it, at least for a while, and see if there is some fragment [you can work with]. (M1)*

While pointing out that some employees possessed entrepreneurial qualities that led them to engage in innovation, the managers also emphasised that other employees lacked these qualities or were adversely affected by barriers within the organisation. The relationship between employees' lack of engagement and the offer to all to participate in innovation courses was explained by one manager as follows:

> *We have received quite a few courses on innovation from the innovation support operation and they have been available for everyone to participate. But then of course the ones who are interested in innovation are always there [. . .] and those who aren't are never there. (M2)*

The managers attributed much of the lack of employee engagement to individual differences. They stated that some of their employees simply preferred to engage in maintaining the current, well-known operations rather than in innovation. Some managers also attributed the employees' resistance to engaging in innovation to fear, such as fear of change, fear of the unknown, fear of judgement, fear of failure, fear of losing control and fear of creating additional work for oneself or one's colleagues. Other managers attributed the lack of engagement to the employee's life stage or private situation, which meant they had more or less energy to expend on innovation at work. In addition, other managers attributed the variations in engagement to the employee's professional role. And one manager said:

> *There are a few who have caught on [. . .] so it is and it is most often [. . .] maybe process leaders, development leaders [. . .] people who maybe [. . .] also have a lot to do, but still may see a direct gain in using these methods in their work. Or have the opportunity maybe in another way to use the methods I think [. . .] and they don't have to relearn a new mindset to the same extent, because if you have taken on the role as a development leader it's because you think it's [expletive] fun to work with development. (M3)*

Despite the managers at the three sites identifying barriers to innovation related to employee engagement and the organisation, one thing they all had in common was an undivided positive attitude towards the innovation support implemented. They explained that the innovation support was a great help for employees to start generating ideas and take action aimed at innovation, even though the managers themselves thought that they did not receive much training in leading EDI until the later stages of the innovation support implementation.

In sum, the findings show what the employees, innovation coaches and first-line managers identified as enabling and constraining conditions for learning and EDI at individual (employee) and organisational levels in everyday work. Figure 1 provides an overview of the conditions and places these conditions in an expansive-restrictive continuum for visualising environments for learning and EDI.

The following section discusses the conditions at individual and organisational levels that created restrictive and expansive environments for learning and EDI.

Discussion

This study offers important insights into the interplay between employee engagement and organisational conditions for learning and EDI in the public sector. As visualised in Figure 1, the patterns that emerged uncover, firstly, an asymmetry between conditions related to employee engagement and conditions related to the organisation; and secondly, that employees, on the one hand, and innovation coaches and managers, on the other hand, tended to have different notions of what motivates employees to engage in EDI. These patterns will henceforth be discussed.

One of the most obvious findings is that the municipal context displays a number of conditions for learning and EDI that typify restrictive learning environments (Fuller and Unwin, 2004), for example, a lack of time and a lack of communication across organisational boundaries due to organisational silo structures (Halvorsen *et al.*, 2005). Employees, coaches and managers were in agreement that these constraining organisational conditions resulted in a consequential loss of employee engagement for driving innovation (Billett, 2012; Evans and Waite, 2010). Although the innovation support operations provided employees with opportunities to participate in learning and innovation activities (Evans *et al.*, 2006), it was not sufficient to fully facilitate bottom-up approaches to innovation (Høyrup *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, the innovation support operations were not able to mitigate the numerous organisational conditions that created a restrictive learning environment. As a result, the employees' interest in engaging in EDI faded (Billett, 2012; Evans and Waite, 2010; Kersh and Evans, 2017). Supporting the employees by teaching them techniques for how to work with innovation may improve their literacy in innovation work and increase their capacity to define what they need to work with EDI (Kersh and Evans, 2017). This will however not aid in offsetting organisational conditions like rigid budget processes, a lack of support from IT functions or a lack of support from upper management. The innovation support's focus on the employee hence resulted in a restrictive-to-expansive movement at an individual level, for example, by building courage and confidence to engage in innovation, stemming from increased knowledge about the innovation process. However, this movement lacked a parallel and matching movement at an organisational level. Offsetting constraining organisational conditions with employee engagement was not enough, as the employees that participated did not have the mandate to alter organisational or working conditions, and nor did the innovation support coaches. Hence, supporting employees to participate in innovation activities without creating enabling conditions in the workplace does not appear to be a sustainable way to realise an organisation's full innovation capacity (Høyrup *et al.*, 2012).

Instead, this article argues that both employee engagement and enabling organisational conditions that provide opportunities for learning are vital to achieve a sustainable, self-perpetuating focus on EDI in the municipal setting (Derrick, 2020; Gustavsson, 2009). Ideally, the interplay between the employee and the workplace should be harmonious, in the sense that the organisational conditions support and help sustain employee engagement, and that employee engagement can have an influence on working conditions (Kersh and Evans, 2017). However, this was not the reality described by the respondents in this study. Employees testified to difficulties in maintaining engagement, and as a result their innovation projects were terminated (Puccio and Cabra, 2012). In addition, coaches and managers seemed unfamiliar with what motivated employees to engage in EDI. A comparison between the conditions related to the individual in Figure 1 shows a weak overlap between what the employees stated as their reason for engaging (seemingly strong, affect-driven motivations to participate, such as belief, excitement and enjoyment) and what coaches and managers presumed employees were motivated by (e.g. willingness to be

validated or a need to channel frustration). Furthermore, the innovation coaches and managers also stated that some employees relinquished participating in learning and innovation activities due to fear, or simply did not have the willingness to participate (Evans *et al.*, 2006) even though they were given ample opportunities to do so (again diverging from the employees' responses). Employee participation was therefore kept voluntary, and coaches only engaged with those employees who showed a willingness to participate. The coaches explained that this strategy would eventually result in the organisation reaching a "tipping point", producing the desired enterprise-wide dissemination. The idea was that when a sufficient number of genuinely interested employees had incorporated innovation into their daily operations, it would be inevitable that the rest would follow suit because of social pressure. Considering the previously reported restrictive elements of the learning environment, it is however questionable that social pressure would be enough to "tip" the rest of the employees to drive innovation once the hypothetical "tipping point" had been reached. Even though no specific professional role had been specified during the selection, all participating employees happened to possess roles related to process development or operational development. Many of these employees also attributed their opportunity to engage in learning activities supporting EDI to their professional role, and explained that this role gave them the autonomy and authority needed to fit innovation into their daily work. Correspondingly, some managers disclosed that employees with these roles related to process development or operational development were more likely to engage in innovative practices. It is however unclear whether the employees with development roles were overrepresented as innovators because they had a particular passion for innovation or because they experienced stronger incentives, social pressure or expectations to participate, or perhaps because the autonomy enabled them to better see and engage in the opportunities afforded by the innovation support (Fuller and Unwin, 2004). Regardless, it is reasonable to question whether other employees with neither of these enabling conditions would really follow suit, and whether such a strategy would harmonise with the goal of creating long-term organisational change. In line with previous research, these findings indicate that participating in learning and EDI solely on the basis of social pressure and obedience will likely lead to superficial learning which is quickly forgotten and abandoned once the training is over (Billett, 2004; Billett, 2012). The paradox between learning in everyday work and formal training for implementing EDI further demonstrates the importance of understanding employee engagement when devising support for EDI in the workplace, and not taking it for granted (Rosenblatt, 2011).

Conclusion

The findings of this study provide important guidance for supporting EDI in the public sector and describe the complex relationships between employee engagement and organisational conditions. The conclusion of this study is that taking employee engagement for granted may lead to insufficient support strategies, such as training employees in procedural techniques for developing innovations and then expecting all employees to eventually catch on and fully incorporate them into their daily work, creating a self-perpetuating and lasting movement. The study adds to our knowledge about how employee engagement is not something that just happens, but is instead something that is originated and sustained by favourable organisational conditions supporting learning and EDI. A practical implication of the study is that the idea of relying on an employee engagement "tipping point" to spur EDI may be ill-advised when it comes to achieving continuity and the perpetuation of EDI initiatives in public sector organisations. Another practical implication of this study is that EDI in the workplace must be encouraged by creating a learning

environment that supports innovative learning in the workplace. In practice, measures should be taken to support employee engagement by creating organisational conditions that provide a more expansive learning environment to ensure the continuity and perpetuation of EDI in public sector organisations. However, further studies are needed to discern the significance of different learning environments and the conditions required to sustain learning that fosters EDI in public sector organisations.

As with all research, this study is not without limitations. As the purpose of the study was to examine learning and EDI in the public sector, selection was naturally limited to municipalities that had initiated innovation activities and employees that had participated in, or come into contact with such activities. As a result of including only participants who elected to participate, the municipalities and participants included may have shown greater engagement and a more positive attitude toward innovation than average. Furthermore, the data was collected under a limited amount of time, but we see the need for further studies using longitudinal designs to better understand the nature of the interplay between employee engagement and organisational conditions. When setting up an innovation support operation for the public sector, this interaction may be crucial for ensuring sustainable results.

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