

# Design making its way to the city hall: tensions in design capacity building in the public sector

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Faced with challenges that seem intractable through their existing ways of working, governments struggling to transform increasingly turn to design to address them. Embedding design into the public sector, however, is no easy task. Based on interviews with and participant observations of civil servants, designers, and managers in three municipalities in Sweden, we present tensions faced by designers in their efforts to build design capacity. Three types of tension were identified: (1) positioning, (2) performing, and (3) impact. We argue that design making its way to organizational systems and their ways of working requires skillfully navigating these tensions. We describe each tension in terms of their contradictions embedded in dualities and discuss designers' ways of managing them. Practical applications for design and public administration are also discussed.

**Keywords:** *design capacity; organizational change; public sector; service design*

## 1 Introduction

Over the more than half a century since Simon (1969) called public administration a design activity and nearly as much since Schön (1983) showed the way forward on draining what he termed as the swampy lowlands, design has gained global traction in the public sector (PS), but only after design thinking has gained popularity as an approach to innovate. Governments around the world have enthusiastically developed design programs and founded labs to build innovation capacity and deliver citizen-centric and efficient services and policies (e.g., CIPIPE, 2018; Fuller & Lochard, 2016; McGann et al., 2018). However, this mostly occurred for probationary periods in the form of small labs with some autonomy, but highly dependent on political patronage and without any decision authority, which, in turn, made them highly vulnerable to defunding and closures (McGann et al., 2021; Tönurist et al., 2017). Add to this the incompatibility between the designerly ways of working and the organizational status quo (Björklund et al., 2020; Carlgren & BenMahmoud-Jouini, 2022; Elsbach & Stigliani, 2018; Lewis et al., 2020). With its creative, human-centered, and experimental mindset and methodology, design is often an uneasy fit in PS organizations where stability, risk aversion, and



bureaucracy are paramount. As a result, the road to building design capacity and government transformation can be bumpy. While the existing research has already identified many challenges faced by design (e.g., Bason, 2010; Lewis, 2021; Pirinen et al., 2022), our understanding of how designers navigate these challenges is still limited.

In this paper, we focus on the seemingly conflicting objectives, or tensions, designers face when building design capacity in the PS. We argue that design making its way to organizational systems and their ways of working requires managing these tensions. We define tension as the naturally existing pressure formed by opposing, interdependent forces within a system. Managing tensions is well recognized in management research, according to which organizations constantly face competing polarities: competition vs. cooperation, exploration vs. exploitation, flexibility vs. efficiency, etc. (March, 1991; Nonaka & Toyama, 2002). One way to ease the tension would be to pick a side that seems to be the right choice under the circumstances (e.g., Lawrence & Lorch, 1967). According to the paradox theory, however, tensions cannot be managed sustainably by making either-or choices between opposing forces because of the complexity, diversity, and ambiguity of organizational life (e.g., Quinn & Cameron, 1988; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Instead, finding the right balance is the key to achieving innovation. Doing this could serve as "a trigger for change" (Lewis, 2000, p. 761) while failure to manage tensions would potentially cause damage. The responsibility to understand and navigate tensions, Lewis argued, lies not only with the leadership but also with the local actors.

In this study, our goal is to bring into focus the tensions designers face and examine how they deal with seemingly conflicting demands. By so doing, we want to better understand designers' work toward building design capacity and making change happen. We first review the existing research on design in the PS, outlining key challenges. Then, through a study of three municipalities in Sweden, we present the tensions designers face. Specifically, we focus on three tensions that emerged from the data—how design positions itself, how it performs, and what impact it wants to make within PS organizations. We describe each tension in terms of their contradictions embedded in dualities and discuss designers' ways of managing them. Finally, we discuss the practical applications for design and public administration.

## **2 Design in the public sector**

In the face of pressing social challenges, the calls for innovation capacity building in the PS have intensified over the past decade (e.g., European Commission, 2013; OECD, 2019). In response to the economic crises and resulting financial pressures and austerity measures, public sector organizations were forced to search for cost-saving and efficiency in their service delivery (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992; Osborne & Brown, 2013). The ever-growing reliance upon digital technologies in everyday operations provided an additional impetus. The influx of new service platforms and applications that mediate citizen-government interactions, smart city infrastructures, and automated decision-making systems were also compelling factors that motivated PS organizations to enable experiences like those on commercial platforms. Against this backdrop, turning to design for PS organizations felt like a lifebuoy and even building high hopes that it would help them transform, leading to citizen-centered, efficient, and cost-effective services and policies.

In parallel with a search for efficiency, participatory governance (Osborne et al., 2016) in which citizens are directly involved in political decisions that concern them has received attention in the PS. For

example, over the past two decades, several cities introduced initiatives like participatory budgeting, community policing, and collaborative decision-making (Cho et al., 2021). Design, in this context, was brought in to empower citizens, change the nature of their relationships with governments, and create responsive services and policies by engaging citizens and other affected stakeholders as active participants to create solutions to issues that affected their lives (e.g., Cottam, 2019).

The enthusiasm around design often manifests itself as “an attempt to create independent change champions” (Tönurist et al., 2017, p. 1462) that can change the way government operates (Bason, 2014). To this end, design labs (d-labs) were established with the expectation to introduce new sets of tools, practices, and the mindset needed for building innovation capacity as well as enabling co-creative forms of civic engagement. To achieve design’s desired potential and make a sustained impact, however, these attempts must be integrated and exist as a dynamic organizational capability (Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997). While it may be a convincing argument that design could facilitate change and even take a transformative role in the PS (Bason, 2010; Buchanan, 2008; Deserti & Rizzo, 2014; Junginger & Sangiorgi, 2009), embedding design into the PS is not a straightforward task—if nothing else, due to tissue incompatibility between the two. That is, the hierarchical structure of the PS and its accompanying cumbersome ways of working make it a difficult fit for design (Björklund et al., 2020; Carlgren & BenMahmoud-Jouini, 2022; Elsbach & Stigliani, 2018; Lewis et al., 2020). For example, PS organizations are known for developing over the years into large, siloed structures. The human-centered approach at the core of design, on the other hand, calls for cutting across silos because delivering coherent experiences to citizens requires interdepartmental coordination. Also, design problem framing does not align with the top-down linear decision-making, typical of the PS procurement procedures (Park-Lee & Person, 2018; Junginger, 2015). Alternative framing, also at the core of design, is rarely welcomed by civil servants as they were not trained to manage ambiguity and work in a bottom-up fashion (Lee, 2020). Other barriers typically faced by design include risk-averse culture, short-term thinking, a lack of incentives to innovate, and a poor understanding of design (Bason, 2010; Lewis, 2021; Pirinen et al., 2022).

Tissue incompatibility occurs both ways. The PS mindset that does not readily embrace design is only one side of the equation. The other side relates to design’s limited understanding of the PS. Research suggests that designers must show an understanding of organizational legacies (Junginger, 2015), politics, power dynamics, and the political and organizational context of policy work (Lewis et al., 2020). Due to its “naïve blindness” to the politics of policy work, Clarke & Craft (2019, p. 14) argued, design in the PS often tends to limit its attention to efficient service delivery rather than the much-needed policy-level solutions. This, in turn, puts design into a position of simply serving the interests of the dominant new public management model (Hood, 1991) and its neo-liberal agenda of cost-cutting and performance management, as Julier (2017) warned. The transformative effect of design in the PS, according to Blomkamp (2018), is poorly supported with reliable metrics or evaluations. With no clear evidence of its contribution, for politicians, PS managers, and employees who over the years have been subject to several management fashions, design thinking risks becoming just another management fad. There is, therefore, an urgent need on the one hand to transform the PS mindset, and on the other, for design to develop a down-to-earth approach when dealing with the PS. Specifically, it needs to find its way into the PS organizations and work with and around the existing organizational structures and values.

### **3 Method**

This study investigated designers' ways of working in PS organizations in Scania, Sweden. The participants were three d-labs within the municipalities of the cities of Helsingborg, Lund, and Malmö. The data was collected through interviews, participant observation, and archival research.

We interviewed designers in all three d-labs. Additional interviews were conducted with lower- to mid-level managers and other public service employees in two of the municipalities. Non-designer interviewees had varied levels of experience with design. Our primary goal was to understand the historical context behind the labs' creation, their internal structure and relative position within the organization, and their main types of activity, goals, methods, internal/external collaborations, projects, and outcomes. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted either face-to-face or through video conferencing depending on the local restrictions for physical distancing due to the novel coronavirus pandemic. Each interview lasted one to two hours, depending on the participant's availability. All interviews were recorded.

Participant observations involved overt and active participation in a 2-day city-level service design training course for civil servants, a 1-day state-level policy design workshop conducted by a national policy design lab with civil servants from across Scania, and a half-day district-level prototyping workshop for library staff as part of their design thinking training. This allowed us to get a first-hand view of the training that was made available to civil servants and their take on it. Additional data consisted of collecting archival information, such as past project documents, articles, and podcasts by designers on their work posted on online platforms.

The data were thematically coded for any indicators of design vision in the PS, barriers to embedding design into the PS, and designers' specific ways of overcoming those barriers and perhaps creating opportunities to realize their vision. Designers referred to the barriers they faced as dilemmas or contradicting objectives which they felt compelled to navigate. Several dilemmatic situations were identified in the data which were then coded as sources of tension using affinity mapping.

### **4 Tensions**

Three main tensions concerning design work in the PS emerged from the data (see Figure 1): The tension of positioning refers to how design positions itself vis-à-vis the pre-existing organizational structures. It arises from staying as an outsider to those structures to bring an innovative perspective while at the same time attempting to be an insider to gain trust and develop deep insights. The tension of performing emerges from the differences between design's ways of working and existing organizational routines. The tension of impact refers to the level of change design wants to achieve. It emerges from the desire to radically change a PS organization while delivering incremental innovations that optimize the system. We present each tension individually, but they overlap and affect one another.

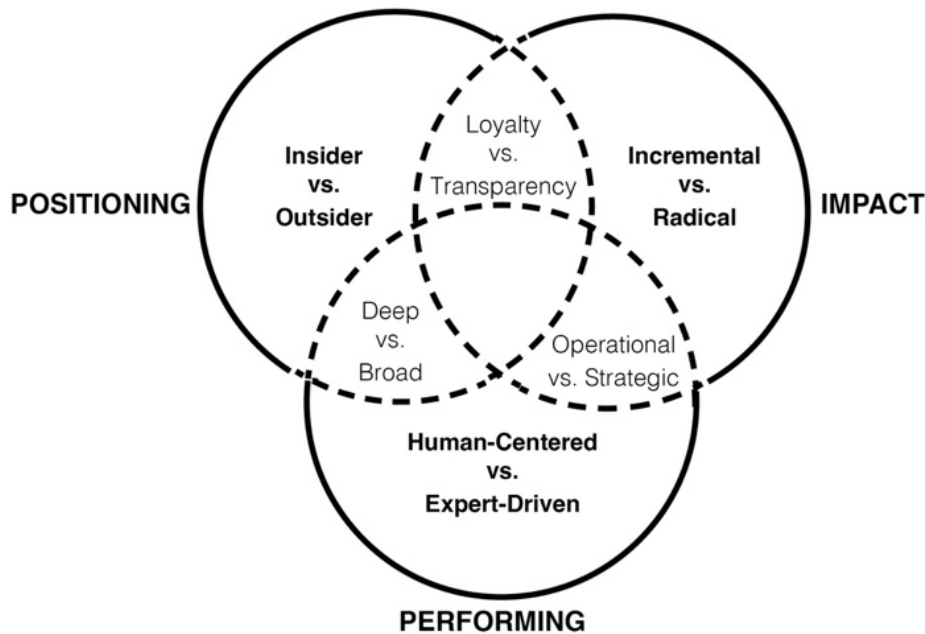


Figure 1. Three tensions in design capacity building in the public sector.

#### 4.1 The tension of positioning

All three municipalities had in-house d-labs founded to supposedly introduce an innovative and agile mindset to the cities and support digital transformation. They were intended to show the local politicians' commitment to innovating the PS. The move may also be viewed as an emulation of best practices, particularly after the publicity of the MindLab, located across the border in Denmark. The d-labs were also expected to serve as models of the new ways of working and thinking in the city that was hoped would eventually diffuse into other parts of the organization. All three labs were founded with a sunset clause, subject to extension based on performance and resources. All three secured resources to operate permanently after their probationary period.

From the onset, the d-labs were given relative autonomy manifested in a "vaguely defined" mandate and "considerable freedom" to act independently without direct supervision and set up their own goals and tasks, as one designer described. That is, the nature of their relationship with the rest of the organization was never defined. Having a lab afforded designers a certain degree of freedom to explore and a right to roam freely without being completely restricted by organizational routines.

A d-lab was also considered to facilitate explorative work among civil servants. Bringing civil servants to a lab facility took them out of their everyday routines to a space with playfulness and fewer restrictions, where they could potentially find ground for some creative work and learn from each other. Helsingborg, for example, has a facility that looks like a state-of-the-art design studio. Bringing civil servants to this space for workshops, sprints, or project work, a designer argued, helped liberate the employees from the everyday rigidities that supposedly hampered their innovativeness. Operating as a lab immune from the organizational climate, however, risks that any work carried out in the lab can become ad-hoc, something that happens besides the actual work. As one participant noted, a lab in the PS can be "a fancy place that is not like your work environment, where you go to innovate, and then you return to your workplace, and everything is as it was before." This, in turn, could render design an alien activity, isolated from the reality of the organization.

As d-labs had no authority or power over other functions, designers had to find ways into the organization to gain civil servants' trust because, as one designer pointed out, "their support can make or break a project." According to a manager involved in establishing one of the labs, the choice to have an in-house lab alone was a way to make designers insiders. This is because, one designer explained, "they knew we are here to stay," pointing to the fact that over the years civil servants had been exposed to external consultants' push of management fads with little understanding of the real work going on in the PS. For designers, however, being a part of the municipal organization alone was not sufficient to become insiders. "To make things happen," a designer noted, it was vital to "get underneath the culture" without being assimilated.

Faced with managing the tension, designers developed some coping strategies for balancing the insider vs. outsider roles. It spurred them to reframe their assumptions, learn from the existing ways of working, and develop a more complicated repertoire of processes, tactics, and communication strategies that would render the d-lab's organizational placement irrelevant. For example, designers from two different labs mentioned that they initially had expected that shocking insights of user research or wowing through creative solutions would immediately convince organizational members to open their doors to design. However, that was not the case. They had to revisit their assumptions, better understand the organizational ecology, and build relationships to make their way in. This is a survival skill one learns by being a member of an organization (Star & Ruhleder, 1996). But even a member may only have a partial view of the organization. The large and siloed nature of the municipalities meant that each department had a unique profile that designers needed to decipher and work with. It takes a long time, and even after a few years inside, they still could not solely rely on their own experiences.

One coping strategy was to design with the departments rather than for them. Yet the three d-labs had different ways of doing this. The d-lab in Lund, for example, chose to act as a facilitator. They organized a series of sprints in which civil servants were full owners of the ideas while the d-lab provided process support and a safe space for experimental work. The d-lab in Malmö worked selectively when approached by departments with issues. The lab was then immersed fully in a project for a specific period. In so doing, it worked with civil servants and exposed them to designerly ways of working, hoping that it would plant the seed of design into their routines. Designers in Helsingborg, on the other hand, referred to their work as that of an internal consultancy and a "spider in the web," explaining that they spent considerable effort working with departments drawing together actors from the infamous municipal silos.

Other ways to navigate the tension were being accessible, building relationships, and creating alliances. For example, in parallel with longer engagements, all d-labs were available for shorter consultations. In Malmö, they held regular office hours or supported shorter projects to foster trust through ongoing communication, as well as engaged in short sprints. In Helsingborg, to build relationships, designers relied on the so-called innovation leaders in departments who were tasked with promoting and facilitating innovation. For designers in the other d-labs, mid-level managers typically served the same purpose: They were critical in allowing designers to be perceived as insiders. As one manager explained, "It was a lot of work for me to take away the fear, confusion, and misunderstanding [about design among civil servants]." He let designers in by seeking their support, and at the same time encouraged civil servants to let go of the existing ways of working.

In daily work, designers often found themselves moving between insider and outsider roles as required by the context. Rethinking the polarity allowed them to develop a complicated repertoire of coping strategies that better managed the organizational intricacies and conflicting expectations of stakeholders, particularly those of politicians and civil servants.

Navigating the insider vs. outsider tension raised questions about the extent to which the design work should be allowed to diffuse into the organization. That is, designers were faced with whether to build deep vs. broad design capacity across the organization. The deep design capacity is about embedding professional design expertise within the organization, whereas broad design capacity refers to planting the seed of design across the organization. As each capacity relates to both how designers position themselves and how they work, this tension lies at the intersection of positioning and performing. Developing deep vs. broad design capacity was not a matter of preference, but given the limited resources, it was a competing demand, and thus, the tension was managed to find and maintain a fine-tuned balance in mind. The three municipalities, however, differed in how they did this. In Lund, for example, where the emphasis was on creating champions of innovation, designers acted mainly as facilitators in guiding civil servants through sprints. In Malmö, on the other hand, designers were the expert problem solvers, and training civil servants were seen as a way of supporting designers' work.

To improve readiness and support building broad capacity, municipalities offered training programs on design thinking to employees. As with many other similar programs, however, design thinking as taught in those programs was perceived as a linear, step-by-step process that one could apply by following a guide, such as the service design toolkit called Innovation Guide (Sveriges Kommuner och Regioner, 2022). That is, the broad design capacity that the municipality wanted to instill often took on the shape of a project management procedure. But when design is applied without adequate design expertise, the results will be rather limited and may not go beyond the obvious. Also, due to the culture of risk avoidance in the public sector, trying something new is not easily embraced by civil servants who are typically not used to experimenting with things. Add to this the dirty secret of training, known as the forgetting curve. The idea that civil servants would readily transfer what they get out of taking part in a 2-day training to their everyday work is thus romantic at best. The d-labs did support training but warned that it might give civil servants the wrong impression that they have mastered design and that they do not need the design experts anymore: "What we need is the skilled craftsmen, we don't need project leaders," a designer noted. A better option, according to him, would be to engage civil servants hands-on in design and let them work alongside designers.

## **4.2 The tension of performing**

Governments operate under a slow, bureaucratic, and regulated system to prevent abuse of resources and corruption—and municipalities in Sweden are no exception. This way of working, however, is at odds with the fast and experimental nature of design, which lies at the heart of the tension of performing. The specific contradictions in which this tension emerged included human-centered design vs. putting out fires, the user-first vs. digital-first approach, human-centered vs. expert-driven decision-making, and human-centered processes vs. problem-plagued processes.

While designers often described their approach as human-centered, to deal with high pressure, it was not uncommon for them to find themselves in situations where they had to choose between the human-centered perspective and a temporary patch for the broken system. The complex municipal

design problems, the multiple stakeholders involved, and the bureaucracy did not make it any easier for them to hold onto the human-centered perspective. As they worked with departments, designers recognized several inefficiencies. As a result, significant design work was oriented toward fixing the broken system by focusing on backend functions and internal actors than on citizens and their needs. The definition of what counts as broken, or which aspect of the broken system gets priority, however, is a political decision. With the transition of power in municipalities, the directions and ruling ideals of the work may change overnight. Budget cuts, layoffs, resource reallocations, organizational restructurings, etc. create uncertainty. It follows that civil servants' jobs and assignments sway with the political currents, and deciding on what city services are broken or what gets priority may at times depend on internal politics than what the research dictates. Take libraries, for example. During mandate periods when the social values of libraries are elevated, funds are assigned to projects that support social initiatives. Otherwise, projects that simply provide tech fixes seem to take priority.

Governments chronically suffer from unhealthy priority setting due to an overemphasis on politics. As a result, the dark side of digitalization is often overlooked, ignored, or suppressed concerning its effect on PS organizations. It is no secret that the pressure of digital transformation was the real reason behind establishing d-labs in the first place. Just look at the projects the labs took on. An overwhelming majority of them are related to feeding the political agenda of digitalization, which was possibly the reason why designers were often faced with a choice between what may be called a digital-first approach vs. a user-first approach. The digital-first approach takes its point of departure from the presumption that a digital platform is needed and, as one designer noted, it currently dominates the organizational thinking in all municipalities. He recounted how the design lab challenged this presumption in projects where research pointed to improved organizational processes or simple non-digital interventions as desirable solutions. Designers, he explained, had a clear stance that digitalization is never the only answer to address complex problems. When research did not support a digital solution, they tried to convince, even confronted, managers pushing for digital platforms, to consider decisions informed by user research data.

The d-labs' human-centered approach often challenged the expert-driven decision-making that dominated the municipalities. The cities traditionally relied on experts who made decisions based on their knowledge of and/or experience with a subject matter. Designers, on the other hand, advocated for decisions based on user insights, and not only on experts' views. This was not welcomed by experts as it put their authority under question. For example, one department was clear from the outset that they needed a map-based solution for a project, based on the expert's view. Normally, the expertise would never be questioned, and a map-based system would have been acquired. However, based on its observations in the field, the d-lab created a list-based prototype. As the department had opted for a map-based solution, both map- and list-based prototypes were developed and tested—and it turned out that the list-based solution worked better for field workers.

Even though designers were brought in to introduce human-centered and agile ways of working to municipalities, nobody knew what this meant or even cared about it. The truth was that there was often no room in the existing processes that allowed this kind of work. Therefore, designers often found themselves, as one designer described, "hacking the system" or "slipping in design" into the existing processes. Conducting user research in the early and often vaguely defined needs-identification stage of procurement processes, she elaborated, was one such way for her to "slip in



design.” At the end of the day, however, she found herself having invested more time and energy in creating buy-in for design than what she did for the design work itself. In a recent project, for example, two weeks of user research required six months of her time to raise support and acceptance of her ways of work and findings.

The tension of performing arose when designers walked into the scene with an agenda to change the way things are but were met by internal forces of resistance. There is no one right way to manage this tension, and designers seemed to have adopted all three coping strategies noted in earlier research; that is, acceptance, transcendence, and confrontation (see Lewis, 2000). To perform efficiently in organizations, they accepted the tension and created awareness that would hopefully lead to action. They transcended the tension by developing a repertoire of actions that supposedly helped them blend their ways of working with existing organizational routines. Being humble and conscious of what the organization needed and how it worked always helped. Confrontations were inevitable, but they were always backed by evidence from research and testing with the goal in mind to cultivate a user-centered decision-making culture.

Designers also relied on their communication strategies to navigate the tension of performing. For example, to manage confrontation when introducing new processes, they first reflected on their communication skills, noting that if they failed to manage it wisely, they ran the risk of alienating themselves. Showcasing the value of new approaches through visual storytelling was one way to bring into focus their ways of working. Fun and humor were used to mitigate any face threatening acts when discussing any shortcomings. After all, transformative work often creates resistance as it may be perceived as a threat to the existing ways of working. As one manager noted, “The real transformation takes a lot of courage because it requires becoming vulnerable because you have to tell people about your inadequacies and failures.” In situations where designers needed to openly confront the status quo, they attended meetings armed with data, detailed blueprints, and prototype testing, hoping to encourage actors to question what is needed and why it is needed.

### **4.3 The tension of impact**

In design research, there has been a seemingly endless debate on design aimed at incremental improvement of products and services by addressing relatively tame problems versus design aimed at radical and disruptive change by addressing wicked problems. This incremental vs. radical tension is also associated with the problem of tradition and transcendence (Ehn, 1988). The systems that designers seek to change in municipalities, such as social services, are often the lifelines of many people—dysfunctional as they might be, it would be irresponsible to uproot them in the name of progress if no other systems have yet been put in place. Incremental change, the gradual shift from one infrastructure of services to another, is then a way to challenge problematic or outdated systems without leaving those dependent on it high and dry. This is true when making changes to most systems or organizations, but it is particularly true when it comes to PS work. On the other hand, the dysfunctionality of the PS may be so severe that radical solutions that would transform the system at large may even be needed (Cottam, 2019). Yet this kind of change is rare as the PS built its systems to ensure stability and any change typically occurs slowly.

Incremental vs. radical change may have different temporalities. Optimizing a known and manageable problem or an already existing design can often be delivered in a short period, whereas complex problems that call for transformation often require long-term exploratory work. While this dichotomy

is not necessarily true, it has a huge impact on how design is evaluated and taken up in PS organizations. All the d-labs aspired to transform their organization by creating a new, innovative culture. However, founded for a probationary period only, they were pressed to demonstrate short-term results to survive and secure a budget and a permanent status. They were pressured to deliver outcomes measurable in terms of quantifiable metrics, such as cost-saving, or improved efficiency. In one designer's words, "It is the actual [quantifiable] results that gave us a more long-term traction." This, in turn, made them reach for the low-hanging fruit; that is, projects that required optimizing the existing processes. The downside, however, was that in an organization with little knowledge of design, initial work created an archetype of design work across the organization. The more successful the labs were in delivering incremental innovations, the more demand was created for such work. This, in turn, risked any transformative work that they were committed to doing. This holds for both the nature of the work and the way the labs' impact was assessed. Immediate performance monitoring became the only yardstick. However, measuring long-term design efforts using traditional quantitative metrics intended for assessing day-to-day work will only obscure any organizational learning and capacity-building efforts.

Then how do we radically change the organization while delivering at the same time what the organization wants and needs today? This question lies at the heart of the operational vs. strategic tension. To manage it, the three d-labs (1) trained organizational members about design, (2) inspired them through examples, and (3) provided them with immediately applicable solutions, although they differed in the weight given to each. The Helsingborg d-lab, for example, stood out with inspirational work. This was not a coincidence since it operated as part of the city's innovation hub and was founded during the years leading to Expo 2022, projecting Helsingborg as one of the world's most innovative and green cities. Designers saw training, inspiration, and problem-solving as indispensable to be able to move between strategic and operational impact. Training members planted the seed of design across the organization and is assumed to be essential for building design capacity. Inspiring through radical projects helped set a vision. And providing operational solutions showed relevance.

The issue of impact also raises the question of impact for whom? In all three d-labs, there was a strong and naïve belief that design serving the needs of the public and transforming the PS would lead to a better society. Such beliefs motivated the designers we interviewed to leave behind better-paying private-sector careers. Add to this a desire to connect with residents and increase citizens' awareness of and trust in their ways of working and in the PS: "Because I know how easy it is from the outside that it looks like nothing is happening. And I [would] rather want them to see that something is happening, and they can criticize and say something about it," a designer explained. All the d-labs were, therefore, interested in making their work known to the public. Another reason was to make themselves visible within the organization. Specifically, they wanted to consolidate public support behind them and use that power to have a greater influence within the organization. For example, one of the labs started making podcasts and writing about their work on the world wide web, and another one wanted to post all their projects on the municipality's website. They were both interested in complete transparency when it came to the problems designers addressed, their processes, the results of their work, and even the financial burden of the broken system on taxpayers. This level of openness with the public, however, was internally not welcomed and raised questions about the so-called commitment and loyalty of designers, leading to the loyalty vs. transparency tension. The ostensible reason was the worry that making the public aware of all work would create false

expectations that everything posted would be launched and realized, and when it was not, it would lead to disappointment and a greater distrust. Another excuse was that it was rather unusual to publicly discuss how certain ways of doing things were inefficient and wasted millions of taxpayer money every year when a simple solution to save those millions was possible. As newcomers, being stigmatized as disloyal would be catastrophic. To resolve the issues, the d-labs negotiated internally and found solutions that enabled a certain level of, but not complete, transparency. For example, one d-lab decided to post inspirational projects only and not routine incremental innovation.

## **5 Discussion**

Despite an unprecedented increase in interest, design sits uneasily within the public sector. The ways of working in the PS are top-down, slow-moving, monolithic, and even conservative, but for designers, this only means that the PS is a breeding ground for change. This is not surprising as the PS carries many of the welfare functions of society—issues that touch and impact the lives of millions of people. But bringing about major change in a large organization struggling with deeply rooted and highly complex problems and doing it with a handful of designers from the bottom-up, without any decision authority whatsoever is nothing more than tilting at windmills.

The three main tensions that emerged from the data are intertwined and affect one another. For example, the municipalities' solution to deal with the incompatibility between the public sector's ways of working and that of design was to separate design from the rest of the organization and hope that innovation would flourish. However, with no supportive culture and decision authority, it became next to impossible for designers to get acceptance and thus, the need for acting as insiders. Similarly, the impact they wanted to make dictated the way they worked. That is, how they managed tensions defined who they are. Being a designer in the public sector, then, is to live with these tensions. Designers need to manage them wisely to achieve meaningful change and find solutions that work both on paper and in the real world. Failure to do so risks rendering design programs as just another form of change-washing.

Becoming wary of these tensions is a first step toward taking shared responsibility for writing the codes of the organizational culture. Building a community of practice, a shared culture with a shared language that embraces design is crucial for sustained impact. The designers we interviewed were aware that they could fulfill their change-maker role to the extent that they became accepted members of the organization who understood and spoke its language. To have a sustained impact, however, fostering a shared culture is crucial. This may only be possible by embedding design into the metabolism of the organization. It is, however, beyond the scope of this study to measure the extent to which the municipal d-labs' efforts to build design capacity are sustained. Let it suffice to say that relationship-building, formal training, activities that expose civil servants to design, and storytelling were some of the steps taken to serve this purpose.

A chain is only as strong as its weakest link, and this is also true in the PS design work. Designers' shared responsibility is just another link in the chain. Building a community of practice is not just for designers to learn the language of civil servants and politicians, it is also for civil servants and politicians to acquire the design jargon and understand that there is more to innovation than being a buzzword. Civil servants are key agents to transfer the jargon, tools, and strategies of d-labs into their

daily routines. The same goes for managers and politicians. They must be facilitative leaders who work with people rather than control them and help move forward rather than dictate.

One big challenge is the new public management which, despite its shortcomings, is still alive in Sweden. Defining steps in a process and identifying performance indicators for each step that supposedly demonstrate its efficiency, new public management leaves little room for anything other than control. Quantifiable performance indicators, such as cost savings or KPIs, are seen as the only contribution of innovation efforts. Building capacity, however, requires looking beyond short-term indicators and a shift of focus to organizational learning (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000). Nurturing an organization's ability to mobilize its members, encourage experimentation, institutionalize innovative practices, and balance divergent interests are some of the ways the PS can achieve this (Meijer, 2019). Recent models, such as the human learning system (Lowe et al., 2020), proposed an alternative to new public management. We believe that moving away from performance management to collaborative and holistic learning could pave the way for easing the tensions described here. For example, experimental work can be integrated into regular organizational activities. Design work would then not be a stranger in the city hall.

## **6 Conclusion**

Today's massive challenges in front of governments make it imperative to transform themselves but at the end of the day, their success all comes down to the people factor. It is against this backdrop that our study provided a glimpse into the efforts of designers to build design capacity in the public sector. We illustrated that three main tensions exist that make it hard to achieve this goal. They refer to (1) how design positions itself relative to organizational structures, (2) what constitutes the right thing to do and the right way of doing it, and (3) what impact design wants to make. As aspiring change-makers, designers in the three municipal d-labs developed a repertoire of coping strategies to sustainably navigate these tensions. They strived to find and maintain the right balance, often walking a fine line between opposing forces.

This study is in a sense a reminder that the much-in-vogue municipal d-labs are only one piece of the puzzle. Their path to success in becoming innovative agents of change in the city hall, no matter how promising it might sound in theory, depends on successfully embedding design into the organization. By bringing these tensions into focus, we hope to take the conversation beyond simply what design methods are capable of while some challenges exist and draw attention to what, why, and how of design capacity building, specifically, how these challenges unfold and the ways designers cope with them. Achieving greater clarity around this is essential if design is to consolidate its role as a transformative force in the public sector. It could also help foster an environment that would make designers' task less challenging.

Despite remarkable growth in recent years of research on design in the PS, it is still in its infancy. The politics of design capacity building, specifically, the role of committed leadership has received little or no attention. Also, the question of what coping strategies work better in what situations remains unexplored. As many coping strategies identified here involved informal processes of relationship building, networking, negotiating with diverse actors, and subtle application of design tools, future research should examine the situatedness of design in day-to-day capacity building work. In so doing,

accounts of the organizational dynamics at work, ranging from power issues to organizational climate, are specifically needed.

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