

## 9.2 Case Study—Enhancing Co-Creation Through Linking Leadership

### The Danish ‘Zebra City’ Project

*Anne Tortzen*

#### Introduction

Co-production and co-creation are currently high on the strategic agenda of Danish municipalities and a range of initiatives are launched by public managers to enhance collaboration with citizens and public service users. This case study describes a community development initiative in the Danish municipality of Roskilde labelled ‘The Zebra City project’. The project is a case of complementary co-creation, where the municipality set out to facilitate a range of citizen-driven collaborative activities with the aim of strengthening social capital in a ‘vulnerable’ local community. Through a ‘linking’-type of leadership, the ‘Zebra City’ initiative succeeded in linking a variety of actors, goals and interests, thereby enhancing the co-creation process.

The ‘Zebra City’ project has been initiated, framed and facilitated by civil servants from the municipality of Roskilde, categorizing it as a ‘top-down’ co-creation initiative. The case study explores how the hands-off (governing) and hands-on (facilitating) leadership interventions enacted by the public administrators influenced the co-creation initiative, illustrating some general conclusions in terms of the link between leadership and co-creation (Tortzen, 2016). Firstly, the hands-off leadership interventions exercised by the public agencies are central to top-down co-creation processes. Secondly, top-down co-creation processes tend to take place within a cross pressure of governance logics. In the case of ‘Zebra City’, a ‘linking’ strategy was applied that reflexively coped with this pressure by linking interests, actors and governance logics, thereby enhancing the co-creation process.

#### Background

The ‘Zebra City’ initiative took place in a ‘vulnerable’ public housing community in Roskilde characterized by social problems and a relatively high proportion of immigrant inhabitants. The initiative was part of the municipality’s strategic ambition to innovate public welfare and solve complex problems by mobilizing local resources (Roskilde Kommune, 2012). It was

aimed at empowering the local citizens and strengthening the social networks between local actors in the area by bringing them together in a range of activities.

The hands-off leadership of the ‘Zebra City’ was characterized by a tension between governance regimes expressed in terms of two conflicting framings of the initiative. On the one hand, the initiative was framed by the top managers according to a New Public Governance understanding, i.e. awarding the municipality a role of facilitating ‘network- and community-building’ and the ‘creation of synergy among local resources’. The designation ‘Zebra City’ also draws on this understanding, as the zebra is described as a particularly social animal that tends to protect the weakest individuals of the community.

On the other hand, however, the top management of the municipality framed the ‘Zebra City’ project in terms of a number of performance targets derived from a New Public Management understanding. Project targets were set in terms of a certain number of activities initiated locally, a certain number of citizens engaged in these activities and a wish to increase the number of citizens participating in existing local voluntary organizations. At the same time the politicians wanted the ‘Zebra City’ project to serve as a platform for their personal meetings with local citizens. Conclusively, the initiative was characterized by governance tensions and a complexity of goals and interests (Tortzen, 2016).

This tension was handled through the hands-on leadership of the ‘Zebra City’ project in terms of facilitating collaboration between a variety of local actors. The hands-on leadership was mainly exercised by the project manager, who was well aware of the tensions and different interests to be handled in the process. Drawing on her anthropological background, she applied a ‘linking strategy’ aiming at linking citizens and public administrators from different sectors with different interests, goals and resources through collaboration.

## **Experiences**

The ‘linking leadership’ interventions performed by the project manager turned out to enhance the co-creation process. A so called ‘Zebra Day’ was arranged early in the process inviting all local citizens to attend and opening the doors of the local public institutions such as the school and kindergarten, the health center and nursing home.

Furthermore, the project manager facilitated a range of activities driven by local citizens and organizations, and the ‘Zebra Day’ was attended by the mayor and other local politicians. Thereby the ‘Zebra Day’ served both as a visible event, network building activity and a platform for the politicians to meet local citizens.

Other ‘linking leadership’ interventions consisted in actively including marginalized groups in the project by reaching out to immigrant citizens

and the inhabitants of a local social psychiatric institution, who were invited to participate by cooking meals for other Zebra participants. Furthermore, the 'linking leadership' performed by the project manager resulted in a number of local activities, i.e. setting up a local choir, establishing an urban garden and a 'flea market for nerds'. Notably, some of these activities were citizen-initiated and -driven, facilitated by the 'Zebra City' project. The urban garden is an example of a citizen-initiated and -driven project which, according to one of the initiators, a woman with a severe stress diagnosis, would not have been realized without the 'Zebra City' initiative: "I would not have been able to do this on my own. Many of us have scratches, cracks and dents, but we give what we have" (Tortzen, 2016).

The 'Zebra City' co-creation initiative has been evaluated mainly positively by the participants, stressing the development of stronger relations among the inhabitants across ethnic groups as well as among the public servants working in the local area. By facilitating collaborative activities among local citizens, voluntary organizations and public administrators, this initiative succeeded in linking different actors, goals and interests. Thereby simultaneously the project succeeded in meeting the municipal performance targets and contributing to the strengthening of local networks and of individual citizens. It served as an opportunity for vulnerable citizens to take the role as co-initiators and co-designers supported and facilitated by the municipality.

## References

- Roskilde Kommune. (2012). *ZebraByer i Roskilde Kommune*.
- Tortzen, A. (2016). *Samskabelse i kommunale rammer-hvordan kan ledelse understøtte samskabelse?* Roskilde: Roskilde Universitet.