

# Measuring Learning Outcomes in the Context of Reforming Public Sector Leadership Through Learning.

Systemic, dialogical, and collaborative training and development endeavours call for co-created evaluation and local meaning-giving of the results and scaling opportunities.

Measuring systems' bound learning and training results in the return of an investment logic that does not always make sense (Murtonen & Lehtinen, 2020, p. 111-116; Johnson, 2008, Cronbach, 2000). It easily leads to measuring technical details (presence, absence, cost, variable cost, satisfaction rating) instead of actual learning outcomes derived from learning and change targets. In living systems learning and growth also produce so-called unbudgeted benefits, favourable or counter-productive ripple effects that easily remain undocumented and therefore unnoticed (Warwick et al., 2017).

In this view, training and learning for public sector leaders is always a social intervention not applicable to handling the logics of performance data (Lowe & Wilson, 2017). Doing so may even disrupt systems change having a good start and lead to oversimplifications of the possibilities to scale a training 'product' without taking into consideration the essential conditions (knowhow, resources etc.,) crucial to repeating any success (Virtanen & Tammeaid, 2020, p. 158-170). This can be defined as separating thinking from its relational context (Fisher, 2021, Stacey, 2010).

Bateson (2016, p. 83) has also highlighted the uselessness of context-free data, since it leaves out processes of interdependency crucial for understanding complexity around the phenomenon and drawing meaningful conclusions: “[...] *the problem with problem-solving is the idea that a solution is an endpoint. There are no endpoints in complex systems, only tendrils that diffuse and reorganise situations [...] compensations come in crooked streams and don't end up where you thought they would. DDT stopped insects briefly, then became problematic in countless other ways. Increasing the water resources of a city meets the needs of the people but increases the population potential. Treating symptoms, teaching to the test, gathering statistics [...] all of these forms of engagement have something in common [...] blindness to the complexity of the issue being addressed.*”

Thanks to Kirkpatrick and his successors, professional evaluation of the impact of training is often done by trying to reach out to the co-created assessment of comparing intentions with results and in that way, fortifying continuous improvement from the point of view of both participants and trainers (Kirkpatrick & Kayser Kirkpatrick, 2016; Kaufman & Keller, 1994).

Kirkpatrick's idea of the return of expectations may not, however, be sufficient in a complex world, where training can and should serve as a window to wider horizons, beyond the initial expectations made in the context of a narrower or partial view of the given systemic entity.

Positive developments towards measuring the progress made in learning to work together in a cross-sectoral way for the benefit of the end user have been made for example by the Centre for Public Impact ([centreforpublicimpact.org](http://centreforpublicimpact.org)) and local coordination agencies in Sweden ([nnsfinsam.se/](http://nnsfinsam.se/)).

CPI has done remarkable work on what they call the “shared power principle” applied, for example, to modelling social care for children in a manner prioritising time and relationships with children and families (Frontline, CPI & Buurtzorg, 2020), designing the development and measurement of social learning (Lowe & Plimmer, 2021) and using storytelling to make, evaluate and showcase what is happening in systems change (Snow et al., 2021).

The Swedish coordination agencies work on matching employability efforts between different authorities and have worked towards producing a national model to verify progress in a way that is fitting to the governmental reporting culture, but true to the same values that guide the work itself.

To summarise, both experiences suggest the need to measure the results of the actual learning and change efforts first and foremost by the relevance felt by the end user and the effect on their experienced life quality, the perspective of the front-end officials in how they know that they are moving in the right direction in their work, how engaged they are in their work and how easy they find choosing new relational ways of working as well as the percentage of actual cases solved by the new cross-sectoral way of working.

Cost is an important measure in public services, but in this context only one important measure of economic sustainability considering historic costs and the predicted development of service needs. In addition, the anticipatory perspective of what should it be in place that the present services would not be needed at all is an important issue to bear in mind in measuring, to ensure that measuring does not infer standing still but is helps in opening new paths.

Swedish coordination agencies have included this in their model of inquiry in the following way: “Have the experiences from your collaboration led to the development of preventive measures?”. Their national inquiry is addressed to all interest groups from end-users, front line and back-office professionals to unit managers and boards of directors.

In the same inquiry they are also interested in “[whether] the resourceful view regarding human possibilities is shared by everybody in the coordinated effort?”

Both the CPI and the Swedish coordination agencies’ approaches to measurement support the relational, motivational, and intentional essence of change-making in human systems where learning is one critical element of a larger systems change and not meaningfully measurable as a separate entity. Or when done, the measuring model forces the measuring

process into focusing on smaller and smaller standardised details in order to generate results in the traditional way (see, for example, Taylor et al, 2020; Presseau et al., 2019).

A valuable way to look at scaling change efforts here is to consider the concept of scaling deep developed in Canada and presented by Moore, Riddell & Vocisano (Moore et. al, 2015, p. 71). They argue that scaling the process of any social change “[...] necessarily involve[s] changes to rules, resource flows, cultural beliefs and relationships in a social system at multiple spatial or institutional scales”.

Scaling for impact thinking is too narrow and too much of a product-oriented approach to grasp the social system of beliefs, connections, and workflows in which the new ways of working are born and spread. The notion of scaling deep in the Moore, Riddell & Vocisano model comes closest to the target of leadership training and development describing change-making in meaning, impacting cultural roots.

This is done by reframing stories of change beliefs and norms, the mutual sharing of knowledge, investing in transformative learning processes and establishing communities of learning and practice.

Undertaking large scale systems change in society usually requires seeking alternative resources, building networks and partnerships, and broadening the frame of the viewing window. (Moore et. al., 2015.)

When the aspiration of the societal change-maker is to impact greater numbers of people or organisations, the effective strategy is scaling out with replication followed by spreading the principles of adaptation and the cogeneration of knowledge. Scaling out cannot be effectively done by transposing a standard way of proceeding with a standard change process omitting contextual and local knowledge factors. Where it is applicable to pursue changes in laws and regulations to achieve new policy developments, this is called scaling up.

Mixing these three scaling strategies together is usually required to create a pathway to largescale or systemic impact, they argue (Moore et. al, 2015). An illustrative example of the alternative approach is evidenced by the technical and superficial culture of measuring outcomes is training institutions and purchasers’ tendency to ask for evaluation forms to be filled in by the participants after separate lectures or other sub-sections of a training programme. This type of approach illustrates the existence of only a vague understanding of learning as a process, both in terms of knowledge generation and timely meaning terms.

A well-designed learning process is always an entity which it is not possible to reduce to individual parts either which can work or be evaluated on their own (Virtanen & Tammeaid, 2020, p. 95-172; Cooperrider & McQuaid, 2012, Cooperrider et al.,2008). Social learning and growth as a leader, professional or human being are deep and multifaceted processes often

entailing a lot of bewilderment which is an important part of the process. Mechanical attempts to evaluate learning in the middle of the process can easily disturb the emerging process of deep learning, while regular dialogical evaluation of the learning experience serves not only as feedback, but also as feed-forward to new spheres of thinking and action (Virtanen & Tammeaid, 2020, p. 158-170, Carless 2007).

According to a survey made by the OECD observatory of public sector innovation (OECD-OPSI, 2021) the individual level challenges connected to future-orientation, anticipation, and innovation capability among government civil service leaders in Finland were linked first and foremost to the linear, engineering, mindset as well as to a lack of alternative experience and open-mindedness, fear of failure and a strong expert bias.

In addition, procrastination, lack of knowledge, risk aversion and rejection of change were also mentioned (OECD-OPSI, 2021). All these hinderances to the future-oriented renewal of public sector leadership can be addressed by training and development efforts designed to harness public sector leadership meta-skills and with training practices following meta-skills thinking and in line with putting meta-skills into action.

As discussed above, this requires the promotion of three guiding principles in terms of conducting public sector leadership training and learning, i.e., the relational view of leadership, public sector functions, knowledge-creation and systems' change-making, the motivational view building on intrinsic motivation and contextual relevance and the intentional view strengthening future-driven agency and co-creation.

Dr Marika Tammeaid