

Case Study of the Transformation of the Utrecht City Government

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Abstract

A bottom-up transformation of the Utrecht City Government occurred at a time when the government found itself with departments disconnected from each other and when the city was facing increasingly complex issues that required cooperation between departments, as well as greater involvement of stakeholders across the city. The government had earlier tried to address the problems by a top down implementation of Lean, which failed. The bottom-up approach brought together groups of employees and citizens in “Pleinen;” open and equal conversations that created a safe space to address long-standing problems. The Plein, that was designed and facilitated by employees themselves, has transformed the way problems are addressed and solved within the Utrecht City Government. This case study was developed through an in-person group meeting of employee/coaches, a series of 15 individual phone interviews with key players in the change, and an on-going conversation both in-person and by telephone with the major change agent over a period of a year. The interviews explored what actions were taken to achieve the transformation, as well as the thinking behind those actions. The following factors were identified as causal in the success of the transformation:

- *The willingness of management to specify a goal e.g. from A to B, without specifying what “B” should look like – staying with ambiguity.*
- *High involvement of a group of volunteer employees in the change*
- *Participation in meetings of the Plein were voluntary and by request of the problem owner.*
- *Reflecting a change occurring the larger environment*

INTRODUCTION

Utrecht is the fourth largest city in The Netherlands with a population of more than 300,000. The Utrecht city government is divided into eight departments that are spread across the city in 40 different buildings. As the city grew, the governmental departments became disconnected from each other. At the same time, the city government faced increasingly complex issues that required cooperation between departments, and an ever growing involvement of stakeholders from across the city.

Maarten Schurink, the new City Manager of Utrecht City, was faced with a serious situation. He was aware that two years previously the government had pushed a Lean program that had been poorly adopted by managers. He did not want to put into place a big program that would be perceived as coming from the top of the organization, rather he wanted to develop a bottom-up movement. Maarten began to speak of the change strategy for renewal of the city government as “via B.” He notes. “When we started I was searching for a term. We settled on going from A to B.” But Maarten acknowledges that B changes all the time, so you never get there. “When you say “via B” everybody thinks it means something different. Then there is a discussion about what B is. It is helpful to have a word that is so

neutral that people cannot say we have arrived. If you find the right word you get people to think for themselves about what the core of the change is.”

Maarten’s direction to Hans van Soelen, Program Manager for Organizational Change, was to develop organizational learning with the help of the people themselves. Hans explained what the city was facing. “The problem was that there were issues in the organization that didn’t get solved even after many meetings had been held. We noticed that it was not the issue itself that was the problem, rather it was the way people talked about a problem that was making it difficult to solve. However, no one raised the issue of how the group talked during meetings. It’s easy to talk about the topic, but it’s difficult to talk about the way others are talking. We needed to be talking about the whole issue, to talk deeper, to do the whole talk, not just do it the way we usually talk.”

With this insight in mind, Hans brought in Nelleke Metselaar, a specialist on communication and implementing change, and together they began to look for ways to improve the quality of interaction within the organization. They drew on ideas from a number of sources, among them Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, 2005), Theory U (Scharmer, 2009), Collective Sensemaking (Dixon, 1996) and Generative Questions (Gervase Bushe, 2015). Hans explains, “We were searching for tools that were near to common judgment. We call it ‘farmers judgment.’”

Using the concepts from these thought leaders, they begin introducing ideas about holding more open and equal conversation at two levels, 1) the working level to address issues of cooperation, attitude and behavior, and 2) at the level of the senior officials to address some of the most difficult issues the government was facing. At the working level, Hans looked for opportunities to help groups have more productive and appreciative conversations through many small workshops, often tailored to the situation a specific group was facing. He kept the change low profile by introducing ideas slowly and only when they were appropriate to the situation.

At the same time that initiatives were being introduced at the working level, Nelleke began to develop a way for senior officials and top management to address more complex issues, using the idea of Pleinen. Everyone knows a Plein as a meeting place, often an open space within a park, but what it meant for having an organizational conversation was left for government employees to ponder.

Early in the development of the Plein, one by one employees from the city government, who had been present at a Plein, volunteered to be coaches for a next Plein and to help create it. This group became an internal learning group, holding regular meetings to develop their own facilitation skills as well as to think together about how to lead a Plein. Shortly after the group formed, the author was asked to provide a workshop for this group to talk about collective sensemaking. After the workshop the author observed the progress of the change through monthly interviews with Nelleke as well as conducting a series of fifteen interviews with participants, coaches, issue owners, chairpersons, and the city manager, Maarten Schurink. This case study focuses primarily on the Plein, although the appreciative approaches at the working level and the Plein at the top management level reinforced each other.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PLEINEN

Nelleke describes a Plein this way, “When a complex issue or a dilemma arises which cannot be solved without a broader perspective, a manager can ask for a Plein: a meeting where we take the time to talk the issue over with the right colleagues, partners or experts. We also try to pick up the ‘undercurrent’ - about the way we work together. We practice with new forms and with more openness in the interaction. This is done with the aim to get faster breakthroughs to dilemmas and to learn how to work together with citizens and partners in a modern society - with reduced government funds and citizens who are more demanding and sometimes more skilful.” Hans notes: “We say ‘people speak with the back side of their tongue’ meaning you keep some information to yourself. But in the Plein you play with the cards open.”

Over a year and a half, over 50 Pleinen were been held across the Utrecht government offices. During that time the design for conducting a Plein continued to develop and change. I Nelleke notes, “We have been intentional about not standardizing the Plein as a process, rather wanting to experiment and let the design emerge based on what is needed in the organization.”

Maarten explains his thinking behind this need for ambiguity in the Plein as a methodology. “The main difficulty is that when you try to train people in a methodology, they want to elaborate on the concept and make it perfect. My conviction is that when you try to make it perfect, then the concept becomes more important than having a meaningful discussion. It is not the most important thing to know what a Plein is, rather to know that they are having a meaningful discussion. The methodology can become too important. I think one of the rules should be that there should not be too many rules. If you have too many rules you take away the initiative - they want to do it themselves. We have had some Plein where there were more rules. What happened was that some people would say that the method was not okay. So then you get a discussion about the rules and you take the focus off the discussion about the issue that they came together for.”

From meeting to meeting, a Plein differs considerably. There are nevertheless, roles that are in place for most Plein:

- The Issue Owner - the person who recognizes a problem and requests a Plein. This is voluntary on the part of the owner; no one is required or even asked to have a Plein. The issue owner is present in the meeting. He or she may even provide a brief explanation of the issue, but the issue owner’s main function is to be an equal participant in the discussion.
- The Coach - a ‘sparring partner’ for the issue owner to help him or her think through the issues before the meeting. Together the coach and issue owner talk through who should be invited to the Plein. The coach designs the activities of the Plein and organizes an evaluation afterward. During the Plein the coach looks for and sometimes raises underlying issues.
- The Chair – serves as moderator for the Plein. The chair is usually recruited from upper management, and is aware of larger political topics that the issue may be related to, so can often place the issue in context. However, the chair is someone who is not involved in the issue so can act independently as a moderator. This leaves the issue owner free to take part in the discussion without having to chair the Plein as well.
- An Observer - a person who is asked to participate in a Plein to provide an unbiased or fresh look from someone not involved in the issue.

- Attendees – those who are involved in the issue or that are impacted by it. The intent is to have a diversity of views in the meeting. Those attending experience the Plein as a different way to talk and often take the ideas about how they talked, back to their own part of the organization, effectively spreading the value of holding more open and meaningful discussions. Attendees are characteristically willing to take part as it has become prestigious to be asked to participate in a Plein.

Most Plein start with an intake meeting where the problem owner and a senior coach meet to understand the issue from the issue owner's perspective as well as the context in terms of the larger organization and politics. One task of the intake meeting is to determine if the issue is a suitable problem for a Plein. The main requirement is that the issue be one in which there is a deeper issue than the "presenting problem," to achieve what Argyris (1985) refers to as "double loop learning." In some situations talking through the problem at the intake meeting is sufficient to gain perspective on the issue and to allow the issue owner to move forward without even holding a Plein.

A Plein brings together 10-40 people from different departments, often with external stakeholders attending as well. The meetings last anywhere from two to four hours. There may be a series of Plein held about a single issue. A few practices have been used consistently in the many Pleinen, for example, starting in a circle, breaking into small groups to work on the issues, reporting back to the large group, stopping to reflect on how the attendees are talking. Although a good design of the Plein is essential to change the typical, and often not so productive meeting behavior, Nelleke expresses concern that these very visible activities, if they are used too consistently, will come to be what people think a Plein is, rather than seeing that a Plein is really about talking at a deeper level. She explains, "The inviting presence and the awareness of the Plein coach about what is happening in a Plein is much more important than the method we use."

A few days after the Plein the issue owner and coach meet again to think together about how the meeting went and to think through next steps. The question is, "Did we meet the aims we set before hand? Would you do something different?" These evaluation meetings help the process of the Plein advance, but are also useful for the issue owner to reflect on what he or she has learned.

CONCLUSION AND RESULTS

The following conclusions offer an explanation for why a bottom-up strategy has worked for the City of Utrecht

Finding One's Own Way by Staying with Ambiguity

In part the Plein works because those leading the effort have taken concepts from many sources and blended them into a process that fits their environment and situation. They have used experts to inform their thinking, rather than expecting them to provide answers. There is a willingness to stay open to new ideas and even to seek them out, but without assuming they represent solutions. In an interview with the author Hans articulates this idea: “We are trying to find our own way. We have learned from thinkers in the field, like yourself [Dixon] Cooperrider, Scharmer, and Bushe, but we don't need consultants. We search always to see if we do it right ourselves. It is about changing the culture of the organization – the way we interact with each other. It is a way of opening your heart. That is only possible when people are doing it themselves.”

Nelleke and Hans have allowed the Plein to grow and develop rather than trying to transfer a solution into the Utrecht Government as a completed design. Finding their own way requires staying in a state of ambivalence while learning what is needed. However, ambiguity does not necessarily paralyze action, rather it can mean taking deliberate action in the interest of learning what works. The early Plein were just this – attempts to see if one action or another would be useful for the Plein. From the beginning Nelleke, with the assistance of the Plein coaches were able to reflect on what they were learning and to adapt. Weick (2001) talks about the value of holding on to ambivalence in order to reach what he calls profound simplicity. “When we are confused we pay closer attention to what is happening in order to reduce the confusion. Later, all we remember is that this period of confusion was an unpleasant experience. What we often fail to realize is that we also learned a lot of details while struggling with the confusion. Those struggles and their consequences comprise learning, even if momentarily they don't feel that way...Mindless organizations,

however, tend to settle for the first superficial simplicities they stumble onto, and as a result they know neither themselves nor their environment very well. This, by the way, is why benchmarking seldom works. You can borrow the simplicities but you can't borrow the confused complexity that gives meaning to the profound simplicity. Without that background, you have no idea why the simplifications are profound, why they work, or what lessons they summarize. Hence, the borrowing is superficial. It fails to come to grips with either your own resources or the environment, and typically fails when implemented.”

Starting with Maarten and carried through by Hans and Nelleke there is an understanding of the need to stay with the confusion while the necessary learning is occurring. We hear that conviction also in Nelleke's comment about not putting closure on the design of Pleinen, “I talk about having a ‘scaffold,’ that is a light structure, but not wanting to fill it in completely so it can continue to develop.” The willingness to stay with ambiguity was also at the center of Maarten's use of “via B” as the change strategy.

Involving Employees in Creating the Change

A second reason for its success is the group of Plein coaches who, having experienced a Plein, wanted to be a part of making more such conversations happen in the organization. It is important to note that the Plein coaches are not a group of HR people, who might be expected to join such an effort; rather they are a cross section of employees who wanted to be a part of something they see as significant. The group, which has grown to over 30 employees, can be thought of as a community of practice that meets once a month to discuss how their work is going. They sometimes invite in university professors or other thinkers to provide them with new ideas, but most of their meeting time is in conversation among themselves. They are willing and able to talk deeply about their own behaviour with each other and really want to learn about how to be a good sparring partner, how to design a good meeting, and how to make positive and effective interventions. From Nelleke's perspective this group is a critical element in the organizational change that is occurring. She says, “I find this one of the most interesting developments and the main reason that Pleinen are successful instruments for change. Pleinen grow because the employees themselves have

adopted it. They recognize it as an important instrument that can help them to solve wicked problems and take down the boundaries between departments, and between the government and citizens. They want to join because there is something in the air when we are together, a sense that we are the people who are changing things. If we didn't have this group the organization would not change.”

Involving employees in the change in this way is a basic concept of the newer change theories that are based in the social constructionist movement, for example, Appreciative Inquiry, Future Search, Open Space Technology, Theory U and Collective Sensemaking, to name a few. This kind of involvement differs from the more traditional change model of Kotter (2008) in which those at top of the organization define a desired future state and then seek “buy in” from the employees through extensive communication and training.

Involving Management in a Generative Way

When a change effort is primarily driven by the enthusiasm and interest of employees it is difficult to see what the role of senior management should be. Obviously officials need to support Pleinen with necessary resources and likewise officials need to be aware of what is happening and with the outcomes that are generated. But how to provide resources and insight without bringing hierarchy into the room in a way that diminishes openness is difficult.

The developers of the Plein have found a workable solution by using high-level officials to chair Pleinen, but making sure that the topic is not within that official's line of responsibility. As chair, they are able to observe first hand the benefit to employees in the discussion as well as the resolution of issues. An added benefit is that chairing a Plein helps high-level managers develop useful discussion skills themselves, as well as gaining an awareness of the value of developing those skills more broadly across the organization. The presence of a high level official also adds status to the meeting, signifying its importance to those attending. Their presence may also increase the likelihood that follow-up actions will be taken.

Chairing a Plein provides an official with direct experience of the issues the

government is facing by hearing the actual words of those involved rather than reading a report in which concerns have been summarized and categorized, and has therefore lost much of the detail and emotion. It is through such encounters with direct (or near direct experience) that weak signals (Schoemaker,2009) are identified that can provide early warning about an issue. As different officials chair Pleinen their accumulated understanding can be invaluable to the government. Nelleke cautions, “The chair is a big role in Pleinen. Most of the time we ask the leaders of our organization to take this role, but it requires independence, honesty, and ability to create a safe setting for the participants – skills which are not always present in officials. So we are careful about the choice and guidance of the chairmen.”

Reflecting Change in the Larger Society

In a recent election in Utrecht, the winning aldermen ran on a platform of “Utrecht we make it together.” Pleinen, which in large part are about citizen involvement, are very much in synch with that current political direction. From the beginning Pleinen have invited in citizens. Two weeks after the municipal election, the Utrecht government held the Stadsgesprek or “City Plein,” seven Pleinen held over a two day period and involving 400 citizens. The citizens attending were honored that the aldermen took time to listen to their plans and welcomed the opportunity to be heard. And it boosted the cooperation of the coaches and chairs who were an integral part of the meetings. Plans are in development to increase the level of citizen involvement as Pleinen continue to develop.

Pleinen are also in keeping with the wider change in society toward horizontal networking. Maarten explains, “The key is seeing what is changing in the outside world. We have to connect to the way the outside world works. Society is developing more and more towards a network society in which people and businesses work together in changing networks.”

Experiencing New Ways of Engaging Each Other

The organizational members that come together are able to solve difficult organization issues - what Argyris (1985) calls single loop learning. But what they are also discovering is how they can talk with each other in a more meaningful way – double loop learning. They are not learning how to talk more meaningfully by taking a class or developing new skills, but by doing it. They now know it is possible, which they may not have believed before attending a Plein. Likewise with the high level officials that are chairing the sessions – they are experiencing that it is possible to solve problems in a new ways. They are changing the culture of the Utrecht city government, one conversation at a time.

RESULTS

Maarten explains the organizational outcome so far. “We have held 50 Pleinen and we are planning 30 more. It is a cultural change; people begin realize that it is normal to work together and to speak to others. They are now more curious about others’ opinions. I am doing a tour of all 180 front line managers. They all say working together has improved over the last two years. It was a really nice realization. They are saying it by themselves with no prompting from me. It is not only the Plein but also the other interventions, for example, Appreciative Inquiry used in meetings that is making the difference. When there is a problem it is always easy to email each other, but now they are calling each other to say, ‘Lets sit in a room to see what we can solve.’”

There are signs that groups and individuals across the government are coming together with the intent of holding a more open conversation – of talking in a more meaningful way, without going through the intake and coaching process. Nelleke, explains, “In the last two months groups have organized meetings themselves using some of the principles. Also more Pleinen are being held with people from other organizations and citizens. And we see that citizens who have been involved in a Plein are very happy; they recognize the more openness, the serious attempt for co-creating and most important, they feel that they are being listened to.”

As one attendee commented, “It is spreading slowly. There are now too many people that have been involved for it to die away. It will continue.”

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