

Leadership for Transition – reflections on a two-year journey from stumbling aspirations towards an established platform

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July 9, 2013, email from JR (Jonathan):

Hi there,

How is it going?



Hey, I was part of an application for some Grundtvig funding and we got it. Now I have funding for one other person to participate in the attached¹ project on integral leadership. It involves travel and workshop/seminar/colloquia with the partners over the next two years. I thought it might be interesting to stimulate things for your research ;-)

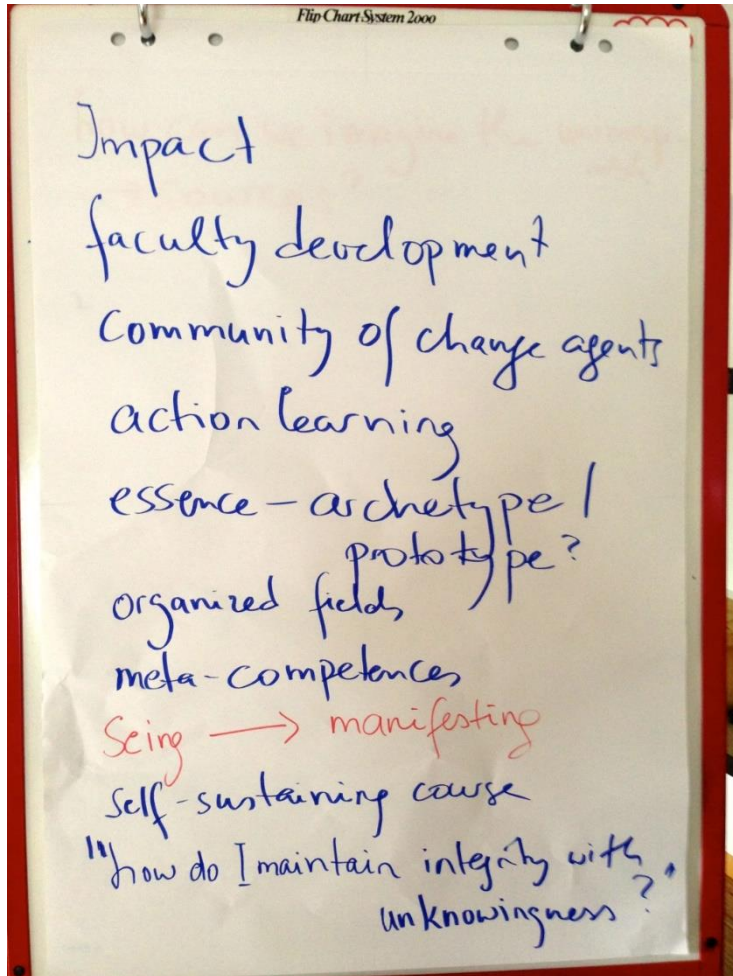
This was the beginning of my encounter with Leadership for Transition (LiFT). A vague, general and open invitation to participate in *something*. And it would prove to be very descriptive for what we undertook the two following years. It was to be an ongoing movement between vagueness and clarity. There were of course specific details and outlines as a structural backdrop, but in terms of topics, approaches, themes and forms it was pretty much undefined. Openness was to be a major shared value, which in turn supported and augmented mutual trust. And, amongst periods of frustration and uncertainty, we found ourselves comfortably standing face to face with an unknown *something*.

To this day I cannot easily sum up what LiFT has been. It was too transcendental, too integral, and too varied to be summed up. And this is not in contrast to mundane, fractional and uniform, but rather it is complementary to all of this. It has more or less seamlessly integrated opposing concepts, values and perspectives. And I believe that all the participants, as well as most of the attendees to the open workshops and arrangements have been changed in some way or another by our encounter with LiFT.

It is very easy to reject any attempts of trying to describe LiFT, rather saying “you must have been there”, but that does not do LiFT justice. One of the most important outcomes for me personally is the recognition that an integral perspective does *not* involve letting go of your previous understandings and skills, but rather to accept their inherent value, and adding other perspectives to them. Integral *thinking* might be an individual intellectual exercise, but being integral goes beyond the individual. It is a mode of co-creating something. It is to value what others bring to the table, letting it influence you, and in turn coming to terms with the fact that it is in the same manner that you influence others. As I will come back to, LiFT is a vehicle

¹ The attachments were two documents, one was the application form for Grundtvig, and one was the working draft for the same application.

for dissemination and spreading ideas, and not about personal development, although personal development is an inherent byproduct. Nevertheless, in order to do LiFT justice, it must be disseminated in many forms, including writing and publishing – and therefore describing it.



1 A flipchart with some of the initial thoughts

LiFT had two main goals: creating a forum for more or less equally oriented persons on the topic of transformational leadership², as well as training others to lead and support such undertakings. An important backdrop for this was an integral approach, which I would describe as appreciating any perspective, and recognizing that complex challenges require transcend singular perspectives.

The core structure of LiFT was in fact quite simple, based on the important insight that when you give people who are connected to the same idea opportunities to meet, then interesting things will happen. So the structure and funding supported this by connecting a group of people and giving them the resources to meet, as well as invite other people to join in on the collective idea-work.

Of course there were basic bureaucratic requirements, and expectations that “something” should come out of it, but largely it felt like a free-form sandbox for collective contributions to a shared topic. To be concrete, there were [five formal partners](#), IFIS, NTNU, BSL, ZIF and iS!, represented by Elke, Jonathan, Katrin, Christiane and Karin. Each partner could also invite one or two additional participants (such as myself), which could change from meeting to meeting, steadily increasing the number of “affiliated” persons. We met in Freiburg, Trondheim, Stockholm, Titisee, Caux as well as Vienna (which I didn’t attend). We held workshops in Trondheim, Stockholm, Vienna and Caux. There was also organizing going on between these meetings, with skype, mailing and such. All the workshops we co-hosted and co-organized by

² I use the term transformational in the broadest sense here, simply meaning a leadership which supports transformations from an unsatisfactory status quo to a more sustainable and integral state. This involves individual, subjective, structural, organizational and/or systemic transformation and much more.

a local organization independent of LiFT, which both served as a great opportunity for further dissemination and networking as well as lifting some of the practical burden of organizing the workshops.

When travelling to the first meeting in Freiburg I was talking to Jonathan, trying to get a clear picture of what to expect. The picture he presented was less than clear: “there will be some interesting people, and then we’ll see what comes out of it”. I asked if there was anything in specific he expected from me, as I wondered how I would contribute. I think the only way to sum up the answer is “just be yourself”. Needless to say, this didn’t solve my need for a clearer expectation, and I think it is fair to say that this tension was shared by many of the others. The first day in Freiburg was filled with people trying to find something concrete to hold on to, a safe position to get an overview of what was going on, or at the very least something practical to do. We would soon learn the enormous potential which lies in this boundaryless form of collaboration, but as of yet it was still uncomfortable. Uncomfortable in the way that you feel when you attend a meeting, and realize that there is no structure, no agenda and you aren’t sure who the other participants are. In hindsight I think that this was one of the best starts we could have had.



2 Trying to find a common goal

What happens when you are in a situation of uncertainty is that you feel uncomfortable. And most of the time we try to avoid this. We are, I understand even more clearly now, so adept at avoiding it that we almost instinctively create structures by which we can deal with this discomfort, and most of us don’t even recognize them. We have procedures, rules, norms and expectations by which we make sense of the world,

and we bring them along wherever we go. Most of us have predefined procedures to deal with any given problem or task. We try to solve any riddle by using the tools that have worked for us before, and so did we (at least the majority of us) at the first LiFT meeting. And so the Battle of Freiburg commenced. We all had ideas or perspectives we tried to impose in order to give LiFT a form which each of us would feel comfortable with. We defined, redefined, rejected, changed, combined, moved forward and retracted. We brainstormed, felt, shared silence, reflected and zoned out. And through this we created a map of this Terra Incognita called LiFT. If there had been a clear agenda, a set task or clear structure of authority I am not sure how much energy and direction LiFT would have had. Through accepting uncertainty we got to know each other, value the perspectives and contributions we could bring, and in addition it built trust. I believe we found something we didn't know we were looking for, as well as a way of achieving it. We transcended our individual perspectives and started to create a shared integral perspective (although this isn't a lasting situation, it is a process which requires many revisits and transformations). We started to feel comfortable in the midst of uncertainty.

A central facet of LiFT is to address complex problems which cannot be solved by singular perspectives. Sustainability is a classic example of such a problem, where the solution must involve politics, economics, science as well as individual and collective change. To face complex problems is to face fog. Over the two years the LiFT project lasted we went from being afraid of fog to seeing fog as potential material for future



solutions. This also led us to recognize that this creates an inherent problem with disseminating our newfound insights; talking about fog as a material isn't the best way to gain trust with people that don't share an integral perspective. We had to find a way which could combine tacit outcomes with the foggy conception of integral and transformational perspectives.

3 Debriefing session of LiFT Trondheim
(Photo: Elke Fein)

In order to both introduce others to our conceptual mode of thinking as well as respecting the need to start this journey step by step, we agreed to base our workshops on the idea of the [collaboratory](#). This decision was also almost serendipitous, and perhaps a result of our common need to have something concrete to hold on to. We had started to have a somewhat shared idea of what LiFT was about, and when the collaboratory was introduced as a possibility, we saw that this was a tool which didn't exclude any of our individual wants and it was malleable enough to encompass many perspectives. It would also serve excellently as a vehicle for dissemination as it required a wide group of stakeholders and participants outside the LiFT-group in order to work. As such it created a venue where we could both focus on training

ourselves and others in facilitation for integral and transformative perspectives, as well as actually initiating concrete change at the local level.

Based on my experiences within LiFT, the collaboratory is a set of concrete and facilitated tools which are structured around sharing perspectives on a shared topic or problem in order to create a new and shared perspective, as well as starting to find solutions. It respects the individual contributions across stakeholders (experts, engaged citizens, scientist, companies, NGOs or any others who have a stake connected to the set topic or challenge), and lets each of those air their views, priorities and knowledge about the topic. All too often such topics are addressed by singular stakeholders who wish to take ownership of a problem or challenge, either for profit, political interest, ideological grounds or similar. By crossing these boundaries, all participants get a broader picture of how the challenge can be understood, and more often than not find that the other stakeholders actually share sentiments rather than oppose them. Often it is hard enough to think “outside the box”, but the collaboratory invites persons who are outside *your own* box, and therefore supports analysis and problem-solving on a more integral level. This is what is called the “downloading” part of the collaboratory, where facts, positions and perspectives are “downloaded” from the participants to a common and shared understanding “pool” of knowledge.

4 Collaboratory session of LiFT Trondheim (Photo: Elke Fein)

The second part of the collaboratory then consists of setting direction: we now have a (more or less) shared platform, but where do we go from here? This part is about visualizing a future where the identified challenges are solved – how would that world look? I haven’t facilitated such an envisioning-process myself, but my experience is that it



can be very powerful, even emotional. This process seems to lift the perspective from the solving of concrete problems, to identifying the drivers, values and goals that drive the need to solve the problem. But beyond this, I find that an additional effect is that people who have felt alone in addressing and focusing on a challenge which is important to them, perhaps feeling lonely in their endeavors, suddenly feel a solidarity and sense of community. However, I also experienced the opposite, especially at the first collaboratory in Trondheim. Rather than inclusion, I experienced the visioning-process as excluding rather than including, sensing a form of rejection, where my values were not in line with that of the others. This was

very interesting from an analytic perspective, and a valuable learning in itself. However, if this had occurred to one of the regular participants, who were there because they felt they had a stake in the topic at hand, it would be very unfortunate if they felt excluded from further participation. That being said, this is not a challenge unique to the collaboratory. Rather, I would say that this is common to most, if not all, facilitated attempts of going beyond the singular problem and stakeholder to a shared perspective. It is inherent to all complex problems. Nevertheless, I think the collaboratory has been the best method for achieving this that I've encountered so far.

The third part of the collaboratory process is about developing new solutions. The newly established shared platform created an energy which fueled suggested sub-topics which we could then start working on to find concrete solutions. Workgroups were created for dealing with one of the new sub-topics that had surfaced through the visioning-process, and sketches on how to achieve possible solutions were made. An important aspect here is to have stakeholders present who actually have the possibility to contribute with their personal resources, or who have a position by which they can use their organization's resources to commit to creating tangible outcomes. Great ideas are all well and fine, but if it ends up in just talk, then it doesn't amount to much. These suggested solutions were then shared, and people could join in, network, agree to contribute to other solutions or at the very least leave more inspired to continue on their own existing projects.

Arranging these collaboratories was of course a very important part of the LiFT project, but it was not the goal itself. It supported the goals of both creating a forum going far beyond the core LiFT group and of training both ourselves and local co-hosts in facilitation, as well as in integral and transformative thinking.



The collaboratory ended up as one of the core vehicles for LiFT, but the surrounding activities have been just as important. Reflection, debriefing, fine-tuning, discussing and adjusting has been extremely important in order for us to gain further understanding and develop the core ideas of LiFT further. We have become very proficient at using and understanding the collaboratory and how to work with complex problems. But we have just started.

4 Chasing ideas can be like herding cats (here, during a workshop break), but sometimes they come to you as well. (Photo by Iris Kunze)

In March 2015 we got together in Titisee to plan the last LiFT workshop in Caux, and to discuss what the next steps would be for LiFT. Prior to this, there had already been a decision to apply for funding for a “LiFT 2”, and the core structure and contents of the application were already in place. Following our collective development over almost two years, it was only natural that such pre-structuring did not stop us from further reflection, re-interpretation, additions and subtractions. Again we found ourselves in beautiful surroundings, and we used the opportunity to walk and talk, sum up, create visions for where to go next and to simply take a moment (or a bunch of moments, we have become very adept at sharing comfortable silences) to sense and feel.

Feel what our guts told us. Feel what drove us here. Feel how we had changed individually and as a group. And this lifted the quality and direction of the application even further. Although it is often easy to assume that what has felt easy and natural is effortless. This is far from true. A lot of planning, behind the scene bureaucracy, writing, administration, reading up on core theories and perspectives – hard work in other words – is essential. But it is also essential to let it go in order to collectively find new paths or directions.

In Titisee we found that what we had developed should be developed further, shared and hopefully spread seeds of change outside our own reaches. We saw through the collaboratories that it works. Now we will go on even further. In LiFT 2 we will continue to facilitate collaboratories, reaching new stakeholders, addressing new topics and creating local competence. We will also harvest our experiences and learnings about collaborative leadership, so it can be used by others. And we will develop a unique transnational leadership training format, which offers a reflective learning space for others to experiment with and gain practical experience in collaborative leadership and communication methods in transcultural contexts. From five partner organizations LiFT 2 has now grown to seven, and instead of two years it will be working for three. There will be six transnational, hands-on stakeholder workshops, a summer-school, new publications and the creation of new networks for change. We will reach more than a thousand people and help them reach a thousand more.

I look forward to what LiFT 2 will bring, and I am very happy to know that the journey continues.

Thankfully yours,

Marius