



The Importance of Collaborative Advantage: Middle Managers' Role in Building Innovation Support in Municipalities

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Abstract

This article explores the role of middle managers in building innovation support within a Swedish municipality, focusing on how collaborative advantage across departmental silos contribute to innovation outcomes. Drawing on a five-year insider action research project, the study examines how middle managers created and maintained an informal innovation space that enabled cross-boundary collaboration, trust-based leadership, and employee-driven innovation. While top management provided initial support, the long-term responsibility for maintaining innovation support rested with middle managers, who acted as both implementers and strategic leaders. Through narrative analysis of meeting observations and interviews, the study highlights how middle managers developed a shared identity rooted in collaboration, enabling them to navigate organizational tensions and promote new ways of working. The findings show that innovation support in fragmented public organizations depends not only on structural conditions but also on relational work, strategic communication, and the ability to foster collaborative advantage. The study contributes to public sector innovation literature by emphasizing the importance of middle managers' internal collaboration and their role in shaping innovation beyond formal mandates. It also underscores the need for stronger alignment between middle and top management to ensure the long-term integration of innovation support into organizational routines.

Keywords:

middle managers; public
sector innovation;
collaborative advantage;
innovation capacity

Practical Relevance

- Middle managers collaborative practices are pivotal to municipal innovation because they create and maintain cross-departmental spaces where shared problems can be addressed beyond organizational silos.
- Municipalities should recognize middle managers not only as implementers of top management decisions, but as strategic actors who build relationships, align priorities, and sustain collaborative work over time.
- Development of innovation support depends on an active relationship between middle and top management: middle managers can develop workable solutions, but top management must provide legitimacy, protect time, and bring escalated decisions to closure
- Top management support must be continuously renewed, since legitimacy, attention, and protected time can quickly diminish when priorities, leadership, or organizational conditions change.

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Introduction

Public organizations are confronted with complex, cross-cutting problems, often described as societal challenges and wicked problems (Head, 2019; Rittel & Webber, 1973), which require coordination across organizational and professional boundaries (Lagreid & Rykkja, 2015). Innovation is frequently invoked as a necessary response, yet it often occurs in an ad hoc manner, lacking systematic transformation and adoption (Magnusson et al., 2021; Piening, 2013; Torfing, 2018). Despite this growing interest in public sector innovation, there are still few insights into how public sector organizations innovate (Clausen et al., 2020; De Vries et al., 2016; Sørensen & Torfing, 2022). While the literature on organizational conditions for public sector innovation is expanding, two areas remain underexplored: the role of managers, especially middle managers, in supporting innovation (Bason, 2022) and contextually situated studies of how innovation support is built and sustained in practice (Cinar et al., 2024; Jackson et al., 2019; Wegrich, 2019). This gap matters because innovation depends on whether organizations can initiate, coordinate, and sustain efforts long enough to change practice. This directs attention to innovation support, the internal organizational conditions and practices enabling sustained innovation efforts (Lewis et al., 2018; Meijer, 2019), rather than innovation outcomes or project performance.

Managers are widely recognized as essential for innovation support, not necessarily by innovating themselves but by creating environments that support it (Bason, 2022; Lewis et al., 2018). Their role involves granting a “license to innovate” (Bason, 2022, p. 300) and establishing conditions that enable innovation support over time (Fogelberg & Nählinder, 2019; Wihlman et al., 2014). Despite this recognition, empirical studies on how managers, especially middle managers, support innovation remain limited (Blakçori & Psychogios, 2021; Lidman et al., 2022; Raes et al., 2011; Sukoco et al., 2022). Middle managers occupy a unique position between strategic leadership and operational execution (Chen et al., 2017; Raes et al., 2011). Here, middle managers are those positioned between top management and frontline/unit management, responsible for translating strategic direction into practice across vertical and horizontal boundaries (Bason, 2022; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Sukoco et al., 2022). This dual position makes middle managers pivotal for building and maintaining collective action across professional groups, units, and priorities in public sector organizations.

Municipalities are a particularly relevant public sector setting for examining these internal dynamics. As local representatives of the public sector, municipalities are functionally divided into departments with distinct missions and hierarchical structures (Holmberg, 2010; Montin & Granberg, 2021). While this structure allows for specialization and alignment of responsibilities, it also creates silos that can hinder collaboration and innovation support across departments (Bach & Wegrich, 2019; Deslatte & Stokan, 2020; Lagreid & Rykkja, 2015). Many of the societal challenges municipalities face span administrative domains and professional jurisdictions, increasing the need for internal collective action that crosses departmental boundaries. For example, complex service needs (Goerge & Wiegand, 2019), traffic and mobility management (Trivellato et al., 2021), and crisis response (Moynihan, 2009), require sustained coordination among several municipal units (Hämäläinen et al., 2026; Lagreid & Rykkja, 2015; Petersen & Hjelmar, 2013).

Traditionally, silos are viewed as borders between organizations (Hujala et al., 2022; Huxham & Vangen, 2013), but in municipalities they exist internally. A pluralistic lens is therefore relevant; municipalities can be understood as fragmented systems with competing interests and shifting coalitions rather than as unitary organizations (Christensen et al., 2020; Denis et al., 2007; Jarzabkowski & Fenton, 2006). From this perspective, innovation support becomes an organizational achievement negotiated across internal boundaries, making middle managers' boundary spanning central.

In pluralistic municipal settings, middle managers face the challenge of being tasked with supporting innovation without clear ownership or guidance. They are often “wedged between expectations and conditions” (Lidman et al., 2022, p. 104), needing to interpret strategic directives and develop support mechanisms that align with both departmental silos and broader organizational ambitions (Blakçori & Psychogios, 2021). Middle managers' roles extend beyond implementing change (Chen et al., 2017; Currie & Procter, 2005); they must also engage

in boundary spanning that enables collective action, for example by building arenas for collaboration that bridge silos and connect hierarchical levels (Bason, 2022; Williams, 2019). Focusing on how middle managers span boundaries, horizontally across departments and vertically across levels, offers a way to examine how innovation support is enacted in the present and maintained over time in municipal organizations. Therefore, this article aims to explore middle managers' role in building and maintaining innovation support in a Swedish municipality through the following questions:

How do middle managers build innovation support in a municipal organization through horizontal and vertical boundary spanning?

How does the relationship between top management and middle management affect how innovation support is maintained over time?

This article specifies a mechanism through which innovation support is built and maintained inside pluralistic municipal organizations. It shows how an empirically grounded innovation space can function as an arena for collaborative advantage through middle managers' boundary spanning and collective action, and how shifts in top management engagement condition legitimacy, justification of resources, and diffusion beyond the innovation space and into the wider organization over time. The next section develops the concepts used to analyze this mechanism.

Theory

From Management to Middle Management: Position, Responsibilities, and Boundary Spanning Roles

In most accounts of public sector innovation, top management sets strategic direction while remaining at some distance from day-to-day practice, which shifts much of the translation work below the top tier (Bason, 2022; Lewis et al., 2018; Rohlfer et al., 2022). In this space, middle managers occupy a pivotal position. Organizational performance is influenced by what happens in the middle, where managers are both recipients and implementers of change and must constantly interpret, negotiate, and enact strategic directives under real operational constraints (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Currie & Procter, 2005; Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020; Sukoco et al., 2022). Their work involves balancing short-term operational demands with longer-term direction, while mediating tensions that naturally arise in change processes (Blakçori & Psychogios, 2021; Das & Teng, 2000; Williams, 2002). Middle managers thus implement strategic policies formulated at the top while also creating the conditions for organizations to act in accordance with stated policies.

Against this background, middle managers often function as boundary spanners (van Meerkerk et al., 2021). They engage vertically, upwards with top management and downwards with employees, and horizontally, across peer departments or units, often with limited formal authority or tools relative to the scope of expectations placed on them (Bason, 2022; Chen et al., 2017; Geuijen et al., 2017; Williams, 2019). In municipal organizations, frequently characterized by siloed structures and differentiated service areas (Erlingsson et al., 2025; Montin & Granberg, 2021), this boundary spanning work addresses fragmentation by linking activities, information, priorities, and resources across internal organizational boundaries (van Meerkerk et al., 2021; Williams, 2002; Zachrisson et al., 2018). Such work is frequently carried out amid ambiguity and resource constraints, and depends on building relationships, trust, and local legitimacy across boundaries and between units (Hasche et al., 2020; Kjellberg & Szűcs, 2020; Williams, 2019; Zachrisson et al., 2018).

Taken together, these features position middle managers as practical agents of collective action inside hierarchical public organizations. Through boundary spanning, they help orchestrate day-to-day cross-boundary work that aligns units and people with ambitions expressed in shared strategic policies.

Middle Managers' Collective Action across Vertical and Horizontal Boundaries

Collective action is used here as an umbrella term for how individuals work across interdependent organizational boundaries toward shared concerns (Huxham & Vangen, 2013;

Provan & Kenis, 2007), encompassing the distinct practices of cooperation, coordination, and collaboration (Keast et al., 2007). The term foregrounds interdependence and boundary spanning without presuming any particular depth of integration.

Horizontal and vertical collective action

Keast et al. (2007) conceptualize three forms of collective action, cooperation, coordination, and collaboration. They can be understood as a continuum from shallower forms, such as light touch information exchange, to deeper interdependence with joint work and shared risks. These forms of collective action differ in relational depth and time horizon, and they can develop from short-term exchanges to more consolidated arrangements over time.

At the deeper end of this continuum, collaboration can be associated with collaborative advantage, understood as synergies that produce outcomes unattainable by any actor alone (Huxham & Vangen, 2013; Keast et al., 2007). In pluralistic municipal settings, middle managers may need to build from cooperation and coordination toward collaboration where feasible, while remaining attentive to the costs, risks, and governance needs of deeper interdependence (Blakçori & Psychogios, 2021; Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020; Williams, 2019). Sustaining such arrangements also depends on legitimacy and appropriate modes of network governance (Provan & Kenis, 2007), as well as on ongoing work to manage competing agendas and align motivations across units (Currie & Procter, 2005; Ellis et al., 2025; Huxham & Vangen, 2013).

In practice, middle managers rarely choose between cooperation, coordination, and collaboration as distinct modes (Keast et al., 2007; Williams, 2019). Instead, they shift among them as interdependencies become clearer, relationships develop, and tasks evolve (Williams, 2019). The same initiative may begin as coordination and later deepen into collaboration as trust and shared purpose grow. This matters because moving toward deeper interdependence also increases the need to justify time, resources, and priorities beyond the immediate participants (Huxham & Vangen, 2013; Williams, 2019). This brings middle managers' vertical boundary spanning into view, since upward support and downward engagement shape whether horizontal efforts are protected, resourced, and sustained over time (Bason, 2022).

Middle managers' vertical work involves upward engagement with top management, for example contributing to strategic dialogue, clarifying priorities, securing space and support, and downward engagement with employees, for example translating direction into practice, mobilizing teams, and supporting implementation (Williams, 2019). This bidirectional role has been described as 360-degree engagement, emphasizing the multidirectional nature of their responsibilities towards employees, superiors, colleagues and external partners (Bason, 2022). Empirical studies show that middle managers simultaneously act on top level directives and manage relationships with employees, switching between leadership and followership as situations demand (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020; Tyskbo & Styhre, 2023). Perceptions of room to maneuver also differ across managerial layers, with middle managers often seeing possibilities for action where top managers emphasize constraints (Wihlman et al., 2014). These vertical moves are crucial because they determine whether horizontal collaboration is legitimized, protected, and translated beyond the immediate group.

Tensions in middle managers' collective action

While expectations for cross-boundary horizontal work are frequently explicit, middle managers may lack sufficient authority, tools, or consistent guidance to carry them out, which generates tensions and ambiguity in practice (Hujala et al., 2022; Lidman et al., 2022; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). As Williams (2019) notes, the middle manager, traditionally a conduit between top management and the frontline, also becomes a conduit between the home organization and the collective action setting, assuming responsibilities that extend beyond one's own unit. The management of tensions is therefore a recurring feature of collective action (Das & Teng, 2000; Vangen, 2016), as interdependence across boundaries tends to generate competing expectations and priorities (Huxham & Vangen, 2013). In such settings, tensions are not only obstacles, but they also require confrontation to be handled in ways that allow collective action to continue and deepen relationships.

In settings where actors work across boundaries, the need to establish legitimacy internally and externally is central to sustaining engagement and securing commitments across participants (Ellis et al., 2025; Provan & Kenis, 2007). Moreover, collective action rarely begins with a single shared goal, instead it typically involves the merging of multiple agendas, ongoing negotiation, and sensitivity to different motivations, a process in which the pursuit of formal consensus can become a source of inertia rather than a precondition for progress (Hoppe et al., 2024; Huxham & Vangen, 2013).

Middle managers' horizontal (interdepartmental) and vertical (upward and downward) collective action jointly constitutes the day-to-day work through which collective action is enabled in hierarchical public organizations. By moving along a continuum from coordination to deeper interdependence, building legitimacy, and confronting tensions, middle managers create practical conditions for collaborative advantage when appropriate.

Setting

Swedish municipalities are self-governing local authorities responsible for a wide range of welfare and technical services within national legal frameworks (Erlingsson et al., 2025; Ladner et al., 2025; Montin & Granberg, 2021). Their functional specialization and committee-based governance create strong internal boundaries, making cross-department collective action practically important when problems cut across administrative domains (Ladner et al., 2025).

This study follows an innovation-support initiative in a Swedish municipality of just over 100,000 inhabitants (approximately 10,000 employees). In 2018, the municipality launched a strategic initiative to strengthen its capacity to handle cross-cutting safety and security issues by establishing two interdepartmental arenas: a top management team (TM team) and a middle management team (MM team). The teams were intended to support sustained collective action across silos, with the MM team operating as the cross-department core for translating ambitions into practice over time (Municipality, 2018a).

The initiative was catalyzed by a national grant to combat segregation. Funding was initially secured for three years, with later uncertainty about longer-term levels. The municipality's grant application framed segregation as difficult to address within ordinary operations and positioned the grant as a means to build innovation support and organizational learning. The stated goals were (1) improved structural conditions for cross-department collective action/innovation support and (2) two community centers in selected neighborhoods (Municipality, 2018b).

Empirically, the study centers on the MM team as an interdepartmental arena and on the middle managers who enacted it. These managers sat between top management and unit-level management and represented six operations: education, city planning, public housing, culture and leisure, social services, and adult education and labor market services.

Time-limited external funding, such as in this case, tends to projectify municipal change efforts where work is organized as grant-driven projects that struggle to outlive the funding cycle, limiting learning and weakening the capacity for sustained collective action (Fred, 2018; Jacobsen, 2022). For wicked problems like segregation, however, short-term projects are a poor fit because progress depends on sustained cross-boundary coordination and the embedding of new practices (De Vries et al., 2016; Head, 2019; Lagreid & Rykkja, 2015; Piening, 2013; Sørensen & Torfing, 2022). The combination of strategic ambition, external funding and a wicked issue makes it a highly relevant context for studying innovation support. The next section explains how this longitudinal process was studied and how the analysis was designed to trace the building and maintenance of innovation support through boundary spanning and collective action over time.

Method and Data

This study is situated within a larger insider action research project (Coghlan et al., 2007; Coghlan et al., 2019; Shani & Coghlan, 2014). The researcher has been embedded in the studied setting (Berglund, 2025; Chavez, 2015), which provided access to organizational arenas and processes that are often difficult to observe from the outside. Within the larger project, the

purpose of this article is to support practitioner sensemaking with research informed analysis (Dahlstrom, 2014; Shani & Coghlan, 2019; Williander & Styhre, 2006).

The analysis draws on narrative analysis (Czarniawska, 2004, 2010) to follow how collective action and boundary spanning developed over time in and around the MM team. Narratives are not objective retellings; they are multi-voiced accounts, and the interplay between voices reveals how events were understood and acted upon (Borins, 2012; Espedal & Synnes, 2022). Narrative analysis provides a way to structure sequences of events and to identify recurring patterns and regularities in how issues are framed and handled over time (Bhatia, 2020; Czarniawska, 2010).

Narrative analysis is especially useful for longitudinal studies of socially constructed phenomena such as leadership (Gilstrap, 2007), and for communicating findings (Dahlstrom, 2014). This makes the approach well suited for studying innovation support in an embedded research project, due to the emergent and nonlinear process of innovation shaped by interpretation, adaptation, and evolving contexts over time (Van de Ven, 2017, 2018). Narrative analysis is well suited for capturing such processes (Borins, 2012). In this study, the narrative approach supports making the process of building and maintaining innovation support visible to participants, the researcher, and the reader.

The analytical strategy emphasizes preserving the temporal and contextual flow of events (Helin et al., 2014; Langley & Tsoukas, 2016). Rather than fragmenting the material into coded behaviors and abstract categories, the analysis follows the unfolding storyline to understand how meanings, practices, and relationships evolve over time. The study used an inductive approach to capturing the unfolding narrative (Borins, 2012; Czarniawska, 2010). The analysis identifies recurring patterns and phase-specific issues. This temporal sensitivity allows tracing how actors' interpretations and needs shift over time, and how collective practices stabilize (Helin et al., 2014). By treating narrative accounts as data, the strategy captures the interplay between context, action, and meaning that is central to understanding innovation support as an emergent process.

The analysis is based on participatory observations, where the researcher is an active participant in the studied setting (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Participatory observation involves the researcher being present when events take place and documenting activities and interactions as they unfold (Woodside, 2016; Zyzak & Jacobsen, 2020). The story is primarily based on what van Hulst and Ybema (2020) categorize as meeting room talk, the collective and formal gatherings between organizational actors. The researcher participated in 73 of 75 MM team meetings and two workshops (April 2018 to March 2023), missing two due to scheduling conflicts. The study also includes 42 TM team meetings during the same period. During COVID-19 restrictions, meetings shifted to digital formats, but meeting frequency and middle manager participation remained stable.

The material supports analysis of vertical boundary spanning and how issues moved between the TM team and the MM team over time. Across the observation period, meeting participation included 21 middle managers and 18 top managers, with some turnover in individuals while the departments involved remained stable throughout.

The observational material was complemented with eight individual semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) with middle managers conducted in 2021, totaling 680 minutes to support triangulation (Flick, 2018). To further strengthen this, the unfolding storyline was cross referenced with meeting notes taken by a supporting function to the MM team over the entire period. Together, these sources provided a longitudinal, multi-source basis for following how innovation support was built and maintained through collective action and boundary spanning over time.

Table 1. Overview of data collected

Data source	Description	Amount
Meetings	Middle management team	73
Workshops (middle managers)	Aimed at developing and learning from collaborative practices in 2020	2
Meetings	Top management team	42
Semi-structured interviews	Middle managers in 2021 and one in 2022. Between 30 and 60 minutes.	8 (680 minutes)

Ethics

The care and protection of participants is crucial in all research, and especially in action research where researchers and participants are closely involved over time (Banks & Brydon-Miller, 2018; Mustajoki & Mustajoki, 2017). Within the larger project, participation was voluntary and based on informed consent, treated as an ongoing process rather than a one-time event. Consent and expectations were revisited as the work evolved, and opportunities for dialogue and feedback were built into the research process (Lindhult, 2019). To reduce risks associated with insider proximity and organizational hierarchies, the study emphasized confidentiality and careful handling of identifiable material, including anonymization where needed to prevent harm (Eldh et al., 2020), by an assigned number to each individual, or dates for meetings. These safeguards guided how material was documented, interpreted, and reported across the study.

Findings

The findings are presented as a chronological narrative through phases, beginning in 2018 after the national grant was announced and following the work until 2023. The phases are a narrative device and should not be read as strict demarcations. Although not the focus, the grant played a catalytic role in what became a process of collective action and shaped the municipality's overall terms for building new practices. Introduced in 2018 as a three-year initiative, the grant faced uncertainty after a temporary removal in 2019 and ultimately continued through annual extensions in 2021 and 2022. These changing conditions surrounding the grant influenced the process across phases and will therefore remain visible throughout the findings.

Phase 1: Preparation (April to August 2018). We know we need to work in new ways

In spring 2018, the TM team initiated a shift in how the municipality approached work against segregation, spurred by the announcement of a government grant. Instead of assigning the task to a single department, TM appointed middle managers from four departments, education, social services, labor market, and culture and recreation, and asked them to jointly prepare the grant application and the planned implementation (the MM team). A process facilitator from the City Manager's Office supported the work. Several members of the initial MM team configuration already had informal relationships through long-term employment and by working together, which reduced the initial threshold for collective action.

Three features characterized this phase. First, TM delegated substantial responsibility to the MM team with very limited substantive steering. From the inaugural meeting in April 2018, TM asked the MM team to formulate the municipality's long-term approach and how to best use the grant, while leaving the design of the work largely to the group. The only directive recorded from the initial TM meeting was, "how do you [middle managers, authors note] see your role in the upcoming work against segregation" (2018-04-13).

Second, the MM team quickly reframed the assignment as a question of internal conditions for collective action rather than as an application task (2018-04-18). Discussions centered on persistent coordination problems across departmental boundaries and on creating shared direction while leaving room for locally grounded experimentation. This tension was captured

in the MM team's formulation of their responsibility as to "build both structure and support" (2018-05-04).

Third, because the funding level was known, both MM and TM discussions early turned to how resources could be used without reproducing short-term, siloed initiatives. Collective action was repeatedly treated as a current organizational challenge rather than a technicality to solve later, captured in the statement: "Unless we highlight current problems with coordination and collaboration, they will remain in the future" (2018-04-18).

The preparation phase shows the early formation of an *innovation space* in empirical terms, that is, a recurring cross-department arena where middle managers could interpret an ambiguous task, surface tensions around internal coordination, and begin building a discussion regarding shared practices spanning departmental boundaries. It also shows the first instance of a recurring pattern in the relationship between TM and MM, TM delegating responsibility and asking reflective questions, while leaving MM to construct the concrete direction and working approach. Although providing freedom to act, it was primarily a top-down relationship.

The short, intense phase ended with the MM team formulating a formal plan for how to use the grant in August 2018, followed by approval from the TM team (2018-08-15). The exchange was comparatively frictionless, because the decision largely concerned allocating external funding, rather than confronting the municipality's internal coordination difficulties even though these had been integral to the discussions in preparing for the grant. In other words, TM could endorse the spending plan without having to define, acknowledge, or take responsibility for the organizational conditions that the MM team had already begun to frame as central. Those internal difficulties, and TM's role in countering them, would become harder to avoid once implementation required legitimacy and diffusion across departments.

Phase 2: Formation and expansion (August 2018 to January 2019). They need to give us a mission

By late fall of 2018, the governance structure was formalized through a political decision. A steering group at TM level was established, led by the City Manager and senior executives, and the MM team became the operational cross-department core. Both teams were expanded to include managers from city planning and the public housing company. The MM team was also complemented by three support functions, including process management and communication.

With expansion came practical challenges, new participants did not share the implicit understanding that the original four members had developed in Phase 1. In meetings during autumn 2018, this uncertainty repeatedly surfaced as questions about mandate and deliverables, including "what is our shared goal" and "what do they (top management) expect us to deliver" (2018-10-07). In response, the original MM team members often returned to TM's initial prompt, "how do you as middle managers see your role in the work against segregation", and treated it as an invitation for the group to self-define rather than as a mission statement. This difference in expectations created early tensions between members who had worked under relative freedom in the preparation phase and new members who expected clearer externally given structure and focus, even as the team gradually reduced uncertainty through repeated joint sensemaking.

The team's uncertainty about an externally defined mandate diminished once the grant application was approved. The lack of a clear overarching goal from TM did not disappear, but it receded into the background as the approved plan became the practical mission, and the team's responsibility shifted discussing their collective purpose toward realizing and operationalizing what had been promised in relation to the funding agency. By late 2018, tensions about structure and tasks gravitated toward the cross-department work on which the application had been built, including a commitment to locally grounded through the development of two community centers (Municipality, 2018b).

Phase 2 shows how the innovation space was built through repeated joint sensemaking, but also how it depended on MM actively producing shared purpose when TM steering had been broad and ambiguous. It also shows how the relationship between TM and MM created a structural tension, as the expansion of the MM team required legitimacy and clarity, while new members had not been introduced to the work through their respective TM channels. This was

an early indication of a later pattern, as the work expanded, the MM team increasingly carried responsibility for defining and legitimizing collective action, while securing departmental commitment remained uneven and was not consistently driven by TM.

Phase 3: Bonding through challenge (2019). A mutual responsibility

In early 2019, the grant application was approved and retroactive funds from 2018 were provided, and the municipality prepared to implement the plan. However, national level turbulence created uncertainty, and the grant was slated to be cancelled. The sudden risk of losing funding threatened to interrupt activities already set in motion.

Amid national uncertainty, TM re-engaged by asking the MM team to prioritize which activities were most critical. Yet meeting documentation shows that TM struggled to convert these cross-department proposals into decisions, repeatedly returning issues to be re-evaluated. In these exchanges, the MM team produced consolidated proposals across departments, but the material shows how TM did not follow through as a group. The episode illustrates an early vertical tension, middle managers could generate shared proposals, while the authority to jointly legitimize and anchor decisions remained uncertain at the TM level.

Two patterns became visible simultaneously. First, horizontally within the MM team, the funding crisis functioned as a bonding mechanism. One middle manager reflected later in an individual interview that “before, we talked a lot about funds, but suddenly it was not our individual silos that were important. The mission was front and center” (1). This reflection captures how the MM team shifted from negotiating departmental interests toward collective prioritization under pressure. Once the funding difficulties were solved in the spring of 2019, MM could once again focus on developing operations and discussing how support could be built to achieve better operations through collective action. Points of this discussion for deepening relational depth were framed as “a need to better understand each other’s respective operations” (2019-04-08).

Second, vertically, the crisis revealed an emerging fragility in the relationship between TM and MM. Even when departmental representatives in the MM team had agreed on a plan, TM did not convert this into a clear decision and instead returned the issue to MM for further work. The crisis was resolved when external funding returned at the national level, which reduced the immediate conflict, but the pattern remained observable, issues that required joint decisions were pushed down to MM to be investigated further, then returned upward without closure, and then pushed down again.

Phase 3 shows how collective action inside the MM team deepened beyond coordination, because prioritization required cross-department tradeoffs and mutual responsibility. At the same time, it provides an early instance of a recurring tension in the relationship between TM and MM, MM showcased the ability to generate shared proposals, but the organizational authority to legitimize and anchor such decisions remained uncertain and was often met with a need for additional information. The top-down dynamic that worked in Phase 1 did not translate well when MM generated bottom-up proposals that required TM to provide closure and legitimacy.

Phase 4: Identity formation (late 2019 to early 2022). We have left our silos and work together in new ways

After the funding uncertainty eased, the MM team increasingly described itself as a collaborative unit rather than as a group of representatives from separate departments. This was reinforced through repeated meetings where the team supported ongoing initiatives (mainly the community centers), managed shared resources, and discussed how to communicate the work externally. For example, the team emphasized the need to communicate with “one voice” from the team to their respective departments (2019-10-14), and later noted varying understanding across departments, and a need to involve additional managerial colleagues to widen “strategic capacity” (2020-01-13).

During this period, the MM team worked to stabilize their shared practices. The MM team also increasingly discussed how the innovation space, although not a term they themselves used, could be widened beyond the team by engaging other management groups and forums, and by

building routines that could translate collective action into departmental practice. Similarly, TM discussions in early 2020 also addressed legitimization through communication and widening culture of collective action, through a need to “create broader involvement” (2020-02-19), but the material in this section suggests limited follow-through in terms of decisions by TM that clearly anchored responsibility for diffusion into each department, as this need was repeatedly highlighted by the MM team.

By autumn 2021 only one of the original four middle managers remained. Even as membership changed, incoming middle managers adapted to established routines with less tension, suggesting that the innovation space provided continuity and collective identity beyond individual participants. Within the MM team, collaboration became increasingly treated as the core purpose of “how we work”, rather than as a temporary method. The team’s meetings continued to function as a stable arena for joint sensemaking, support of shared initiatives, and mutual support despite turnover in members.

During this phase, the MM team put significant effort into developing the two community centers, emphasizing support for involved operations to develop collective action on their own by providing freedom and support in doing so. This work also reinforced the MM team’s internal emphasis on collective action. To support such work, they sought to improve their own management practices in line with what they expected of the operations involved in building the meeting points. An important aspect of this collaborative work was to protect the development of the community centers from “unreasonable expectations of short-term results and control” (2021-09-27), acting as a buffer to support employees in developing the centers without being shaped by pressure for rapid results and by departmental demands for reporting, measurement, and control.

The phase also contains explicit tension statements that illuminate how the MM team interpreted their situation in relation to TM. One middle manager stated, “the steering also has to be a part of the work. Communication with others has to be active. We [top and middle managers] have to live it” (3). Another said, half jokingly, “sometimes one wishes to go back to when things were simple and not complex”(1). A third statement captured the irreversibility of learning, “of course we have to move forward. We cannot unlearn what we now know” (4).

Phase 4 shows the consolidation of an innovation space as a semi-stable arena for collaboration among middle managers. It supported continuity, learning, and the confrontation of tensions associated with collective action. It also shows that the ambition to widen the space into departments depended on vertical support that remained uneven. The relationship between TM and MM becomes more clearly visible as a limiting condition for diffusion. MM could develop practices internally in the project, but bringing these experiences into the wider organization required legitimacy, time, and explicit support that was not consistently provided by TM.

Phase 5: Conflicting demands and outside pressure (2022 to 2023). Initiatives without connection to the ongoing crisis cannot be a priority

In 2022, the municipality entered a period of acute strain, including a dramatic increase in gun violence. In March 2022, the MM team received a mission from the TM team linked to crisis response that came with intended escalation chain for fast decisions (2022-03-29). However, the pattern described in the material suggests that the principle did not work smoothly in practice. When MM raised needs that required joint decisions by TM, a need for guidance or decisions was often pushed back down as questions or as requests for further analysis. This created frustration during a period of intense time constraints and high levels of uncertainty. This pattern also reflects back to the funding uncertainty in Phase 2, MM had done the preparatory work as far as they were able and escalated to TM for decisions and guidance, but TM asked for additional information in order to decide. In the context of the crisis, calls for guidance and decisions were often met with additional work. An example of this recurring vertical dynamic was captured in September 2022 when a middle manager summarized the pattern as, “everything always comes back to us at this level” in one of the recurring meetings aimed at handling the crisis.

Throughout 2022, external pressures placed substantial crisis-management responsibilities on the MM team. The team used the innovation space as an arena for managing these demands, but this also altered its function. Meetings increasingly focused on urgent reporting, information sharing, and coordination of delimited activities, displacing the team's earlier long-term collaborative work across departments. During the spring of 2022, the MM team increased its meeting frequency from approximately every four weeks to at least weekly. Despite this increased frequency, the innovation space became more vulnerable under these conditions. A middle manager described the resulting loss of direction: "we have lost our compass" (20). The MM team also repeatedly expressed frustration that issues requiring joint decisions were returned to them for further work rather than being resolved at the TM level.

The data during this phase illustrates a tension central to the overarching story, the same arena that enabled collaborative advantage under stable conditions became vulnerable when short-term demands dominated and when vertical support did not simultaneously protect time and legitimacy for long-term work.

Phase 5 makes the divergence between MM and TM modes of collective action visible. Under pressure, coordination logics dominated: work was divided into discrete tasks and follow-up and reporting took precedence. The MM team's earlier practices aimed at sustaining collaboration were challenged, and the vertical relationship re-emerged as a limiting condition: MM needed decisions to be made yet often encountered further questions and requests for additional analysis, in contrast to the intended escalation chain for fast decision making.

Phase 6: 2023 and beyond. Hard work comes to fruition

Even under the strain of 2022, the MM team maintained core collaborative practices while continuing to support and launch initiatives, including structures for crisis management and community-focused work. In spring 2023, the community center initiatives were evaluated with strong results and turned into stable public services. One manager reflected on the evaluation, "this is what we always knew. This confirms what we always believed in" (2023-03-09). The statement captures a continuity of the MM team's orientation, the work was sustained through shared conviction and accumulated experience of collaboration and later affirmed by evaluation aimed at audiences without prior involvement in the work.

At the end of the period, the longitudinal pattern is that the innovation space among middle managers persisted as an arena for collective sensemaking, resource re-prioritization, collective problem solving and mutual support. At the same time, the material suggests recurring limits in how far this space could be extended into the broader organization without stronger vertical support, legitimacy and clearer anchoring beyond the MM team.

Epilogue

The period covered in this study ends at a point where the collaboration had both demonstrated its value and been tested by competing short-term demands. What remains most visible in the material is not a single result, but a pattern, middle managers built and maintained an arena for collective action that enabled collaborative advantage under stable conditions, but this arena remained vulnerable when crisis demands dominated and when vertical support did not consistently anchor priorities across the organization.

Discussion

This discussion returns to how middle managers build and sustain innovation support in a pluralistic municipal organization through horizontal and vertical boundary spanning. Two overarching narratives from the case structure the discussion. The first concerns the emergence of a recurring cross-department space in which middle managers maintain collective action, confront tensions, and protect time for longer-term work. The second concerns how this space was shaped by shifts in top management engagement, and the implications this had for legitimacy and for sustaining innovation support over time.

Creating an innovation space: An arena for collaborative advantage

Bason (2022) highlights middle managers as actors who enable innovation by coordinating across multiple directions. Findings indicate that middle managers played an active role in building and maintaining what may be described as an innovation space, an informal, cross-departmental arena for experimentation, learning, and support for operational change. Initial resources and permission from top management enabled the space to form (Bason, 2022; Lewis et al., 2018), but the long-term work of maintaining it rested largely with the middle managers.

A key early indicator of how this space emerged is how the MM team framed the assignment in Phase 1. Rather than treating the grant as a short-term application task, the MM team's early meetings centered on what the municipality needed to become capable of doing across departmental boundaries, and on how existing obstacles to working together needed to be addressed. This shift in framing, from writing an application for external funding to building internal conditions for working differently, essentially emphasizing innovation support instead of project outcomes (Lewis et al., 2018; Nählinder & Fogelberg Eriksson, 2017), marked the beginning of an innovation space as a recurring arena for collective action.

The innovation space also functioned as a practical arena for working with tensions that arise in collective action (Huxham & Vangen, 2013; Williams, 2019). Rather than treating tensions as noise to be avoided, the space provided opportunities to surface, confront, and work through competing priorities and different departmental logics, which is central to sustaining collaboration over time (Huxham & Vangen, 2013; Sukoco et al., 2022). This is an empirical pattern that aligns with research that describes how innovation processes generate tensions that must be navigated rather than eliminated (Boukamel & Emery, 2017; Meijer, 2019).

Interpreted through the collective action continuum (Keast et al., 2007), this indicates a shift from coordination toward more collaborative interdependence, supported by shared practices that stabilized participation despite turnover. Even when team membership changed, incoming middle managers adapted to established routines and a collaborative identity, suggesting that the innovation space functioned as an internal structure for maintaining collective practices over time (Johansson et al., 2022). These patterns in the data help to illustrate how innovation support can be enacted from within municipal organizations. Building support involved problem solving across departmental boundaries when new needs emerged. Maintaining support involved sustaining collective practices, deepening relationships, and keeping the arena active even when short term pressures threatened continuity. In this sense, innovation support is not only an enabling condition, but also an organizational achievement underpinned by collaborative advantage that requires ongoing work.

Top management engagement, legitimacy, and the maintenance of innovation support

The relationship with top management played a mixed role. An initial "license to innovate" Bason (2022, p. 300) helped launch the work, but sustained engagement and strategic support from top management weakened over time. As a result, the practices developed in the innovation space were only partly integrated into broader organizational routines (Berghlund, 2024; Nählinder & Fogelberg Eriksson, 2017). This resonates with research showing that middle managers are often expected to convert strategy into action while also developing their own tools to do so under changing conditions (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Sukoco et al., 2022). This also points to apparent difficulties in legitimizing collective action beyond the immediate innovation space and into the wider organization without strategic support from top management (Bason, 2022; Chen et al., 2017; Williams, 2019).

Phase 3 illustrates the vertical tension: MM could generate cross-department proposals, but TM repeatedly returned issues for re-prioritization rather than providing closure. This left legitimacy and lack of commitment from departments unresolved. This episode makes visible a recurring dynamic, middle managers could generate shared proposals, while organizational authority to legitimize and anchor decisions remained uncertain.

This is best interpreted as a pattern of waning engagement that gradually shifted strategic work onto the middle management level without providing sustained support (Bason, 2022; Raes et al., 2011). Rather than a stable delegation arrangement, the material points to recurring

moments where issues that required joint decisions and organizational anchoring were pushed back to the MM team for further development without closure leaving middle managers alone in building, maintaining and enacting innovation support (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Currie & Procter, 2005; Lidman et al., 2022).

This dynamic has direct implications for legitimacy and for how innovation support is maintained. When strategic support and decision authority are unstable, middle managers are pushed into a dual responsibility: solving operational problems through collaboration close to practice and carrying strategic work that secures legitimacy, protects time (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Sukoco et al., 2022), and enables diffusion beyond the immediate innovation space and into the wider organization (Bason, 2022). This clarifies why sustaining innovation support depends not only on practices inside the innovation space, but also on organizational recognition and protection over time.

The crisis phase makes the consequences of this narrative pattern particularly clear. Under acute strain, coordination logic (Keast et al., 2007) dominated and the MM team's meetings were described as being taken over by crisis management, with limited room to maintain long-term development work. This suggests that maintaining innovation support depends not only on middle managers' capacity to build collaborative advantage in an innovation space, but also on sustained top management engagement that anchors decisions and supports diffusion across the wider organization.

Phase 5 functions as a boundary condition for the mechanism identified in this study. Under acute strain, the MM arena shifted from maintaining collaborative advantage to operating primarily as a coordination device, with reporting, task allocation, and short-cycle problem handling dominating meeting time. This shift clarifies that innovation support is not maintained by the innovation space alone: it depends on vertical reinforcement that protects time, legitimizes longer-term priorities, and provides closure on escalated decisions (Lidman et al., 2022; Nählinder & Fogelberg Eriksson, 2017). Conceptually, sustaining innovation support requires an interaction between horizontal maintenance of collective practices inside the innovation space and vertical legitimation beyond it through time protection, prioritization, and proper escalation closure.

Funding turbulence as a stress test for legitimacy and continuity

The case also illustrates how time limited and shifting funding conditions shape the possibilities for maintaining innovation support in a municipal context often characterized by short term funding and projects (Fred, 2018). The grant initially created a window for building an innovation space, but subsequent uncertainty regarding the grant repeatedly redirected attention to prioritization and short-term justification. These shifts interacted with the TM–MM relationship increased the practical importance of legitimacy work (Provan & Kenis, 2007; Williams, 2019), since the ability to sustain the innovation space depended not only on internal commitment but also on decisions and protection at higher levels. Even when funding later continued, the episodes show how uncertainty itself can function as an ongoing pressure that makes long term maintenance more difficult (Das & Teng, 2000; Huxham & Vangen, 2013).

Taken together, the discussion advances a conceptual understanding of innovation support as an organizational achievement built and maintained through collective action and boundary spanning inside municipal organizations. It specifies how an innovation space enables collaborative advantage and how top management engagement conditions whether such spaces gain legitimacy and are sustained and embedded beyond episodic initiatives.

Conclusion

This study contributes conceptually by specifying how innovation support can be built and maintained through an innovation space that enables collaborative advantage through horizontal interactions, and by showing how vertical relationships condition legitimacy and diffusion over time. The findings illustrate how this mechanism operates in a pluralistic municipal organization where middle managers span boundaries across siloed responsibilities.

Further, middle managers played a central role in creating and sustaining an informal innovation space where cross-departmental collaboration, experimentation, and learning could develop. Their efforts went beyond implementing directives, they actively shaped new practices (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Currie & Procter, 2005; Sukoco et al., 2022) through collective sensemaking, boundary spanning, and legitimacy work (Williams, 2019; Zandberg & Morales, 2019). Together, these findings suggest that innovation support is sustained not by formal structures alone, but by the interplay between collaborative advantage generated in innovation spaces and the vertical legitimacy that enables their continuation and diffusion

The middle managers' shared purpose rooted in collaboration enabled innovation efforts to develop even when strategic engagement from top management was limited other than in the early stages of the work. The collaborative advantage created inside the innovation space, through synergies across departmental responsibilities (Hujala et al., 2022; Huxham & Vangen, 2013), contributed to building innovation support within that arena. At the same time, uneven top management engagement constrained long-term integration and legitimacy beyond the innovation space, limiting diffusion into wider organizational routines. Innovation support therefore depended not only on middle managers' collaborative work, but also on whether it was recognized, protected, and valued within the broader organizational system.

Within the studied municipality, middle managers came to carry responsibilities that are often attributed to both top and middle management in the innovation support literature (Bason, 2022; Lewis et al., 2018). This highlights the importance of recognizing and reinforcing innovation spaces through strategic alignment (Johansson et al., 2022; Lopes & Farias, 2020) and organizational learning that supports middle management and helps organizations confront tensions between short term problem solving and longer term ambitions (Berglund, 2024; Das & Teng, 2000; Hoppe et al., 2024; Keast et al., 2007), while maintaining collaborative advantage (Huxham & Vangen, 2013). Based on this study, innovation support appears to depend on two complementary elements, collaborative advantage in problem solving closer to operational work but with mid-level support, and strategic top-level support for embedding these experiences across the different borders in pluralistic organizations.

Limitations and future research

This has been a contextually embedded research project, and findings are therefore interpreted with caution. Collaborative processes are deeply social processes with properties that are not easily transferable across settings (Huxham & Vangen, 2013; Langley & Tsoukas, 2016). In addition, Swedish municipalities operate within a distinctive model of decentralized responsibilities (Erlingsson et al., 2025; Ladner et al., 2025). Rather than offering direct generalizations, the study points to perspectives that can guide further research on innovation support at the local level. Future studies could examine how middle managers build collaborative advantage under different degrees of top management engagement, and how variations in strategic support influence the long-term legitimacy and maintenance of innovation spaces.

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