

From collaborative heroes to collaboration as a culture: The importance of internal collaborative skills for sustained collective action

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Abstract: *This paper discusses the emerging responses among Swedish agricultural advisory organisations to farmers' demands for a whole-farm approach to extension. A case study approach was taken focused on three extension organisations in Sweden and their conscious ambitions to change their way of working. The cases reflect the opportunities and pitfalls when developing collaboration on all organisational levels, from the individual to the inter-organisational. The empirical findings have been reflected on from the theoretical perspective of how to develop a collaborative culture in organisations. In the paper we describe their experiences of collaboration between individuals, in work teams and inter-organisational – an experience that in two of the cases ended up in a fusion and building of a new advisory firm. The paper seeks to analyse what appears to be the constraints facing farm production advisors and their organisations in processes of internal and external collaboration. We argue that one of the main reasons why the farm production advisors do not become as active as they potentially could be in the sphere of business and rural development is that they and their organisations lack a collaborative culture. One conclusion is that in order to be a trustworthy partner for external collaboration and to be able to initiate processes of collective action, one must first build up a well-functioning collaboration on individual, team-based and organisational level.*

Keywords: *Sweden, multiple case study, extension organisations, collaborative culture*

Introduction

The scene

The preconditions for being a farmer and thus a part of the agricultural production system are constantly changing. But if weather and the politics have been dominant features of the uncertainty in the past, one can now add a fluctuating market as probably the most important factor for the insecurity. Additionally, the demand from society has broadened (Ds 2001:68). In the Rural Development Program for Sweden 2007-2013 (Jo 08.007) it is also evident that the government would like to see Swedish farmers become more entrepreneurial than before.

Many farmers have realised that in order to run a farm enterprise that is economically viable, ecologically sound and socially acceptable, the different branches of the farm business must ensure that the output of the whole farming system does not become sub-optimal. In order to be successful one must both be flexible and capable of developing a long-term farm strategy. This implies that advisors working in a supporting role with farmers need to have insights about the different components of the farming system as well as its overall economy and management. It is also important that both the farmer and the advisors remain focused on enacting their collective decisions. When shifting focus from 'here-and-now-questions' to discussions concerning farm business visions, goals and strategies, it is crucial that all advisors connected to the farmer take part in such discussions. The call for a whole-farm approach in extension have been one of the hallmarks of the Farming Systems movement since the 1980s (Collinson, 2000) and this was noted also in Sweden in the 1990s (Nitsch, 1994). However, it is not until recent years that actors within the Swedish agricultural production extension system have understood that the forms of extension have to change in order to better correspond to the demands of the farmers and of the wider society.

Challenges

The challenges of farming are many. Farmers often have to manage decision-making processes characterised by high levels of complexity and uncertainty. They also have to balance different kinds of needs and demands, taking both short-term and long-term perspectives into account. This reality is facing the advisors as well. Moreover, the groups of farmers they support are themselves getting more and more educated. In order to support and give advice based on a whole-farm perspective, advisors with different subject-related expertise need to collaborate. Or, as one of our interviewees put it: ‘Sweden is simply a very small country. We have to collaborate in order to be competitive.’ To achieve this cooperation, both intra- and inter-organizational collaboration is needed. Figure 1 below presents a schematic view of the Swedish agricultural extension system.

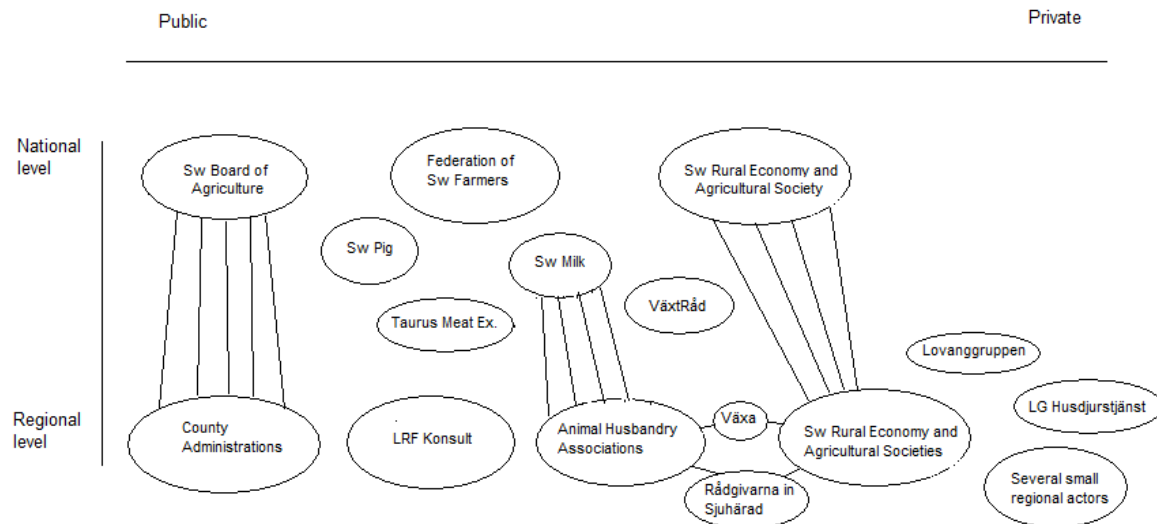


Figure 1. The main actors in the Swedish production extension system.

The first steps towards advisor collaboration in Sweden were taken about 10 years ago. Then some of the big farms created their own farm councils with a mixture of competencies – often bringing a person from the bank and one or more production advisors together. During later years several advisory programmes have been developed such as the *Start Package Milk* programme, which is financed partly by the Federation of Swedish Farmers and Swedish Milk and partly by the farmers. An initial aim of this programme was to gather momentum for the construction of new milking parlours. But as the profitability of the dairy enterprises continuously declined, the programme has been broadened and is now directed to all dairy farmers that are interested in developing their production. Programmes of this kind have forced advisors to work collaboratively, and the overall response to this push seems to be positive from the point of view of both the farmers and the advisors.

However, the subsidies linked to these programmes will end during 2010. One implication of this for the extension organisations is that they would have to find new ways of collaboration – something that is not without problems. Historically, it has not been particularly common for advisors to collaborate. Some of the earlier organisational initiatives failed and the initiatives found to be working today are at an individual level among ambitious and successful advisors with an interest and involvement in the collaborative way of working. These advisors are seen as competent persons who are well respected both among farmers and colleagues. So, even if such collaborative heroes are found here and there, hitherto the advisory organisations have failed to create a collaborative culture that extends wide. Consequently, the challenge facing managers within extension organisations is to create such a culture whereby working together in supporting a common client would be seen as a social norm rather than an exception.

Collaboration – What and Why?

All collaboration initiatives are to be seen in their own circumstances and history, since they often arise as a response to what is happening in the surrounding environment. Collaboration as an organisational culture and as a fundamental quality is much talked about in the corporate sector and within organisational science. Working together in teams and creating shared visions are crucial components when striving to become a learning organisation according to Senge (2006). However, within the area of Swedish production extension this discussion has merely started. We claim that there is a need to develop a collaborative culture within the extension organisations as well as among the advisors, especially since the latter have a knowledge tradition and a culture that counteract such ambitions. The agricultural extension system in Sweden is thematically divided, mirroring the educational system rather well (Fig 1).

Different levels of collaboration

For the purpose of the present study, we have chosen Mactavish's (2006) terminology of different collaborative opportunities. Mactavish claims that there are many occasions to act collaboratively, and she categorises them into four collaborative opportunities; interpersonal, work team, organisational and external (Fig 2). A number of elements that are of importance to a successful collaboration are connected to each of these four opportunities.

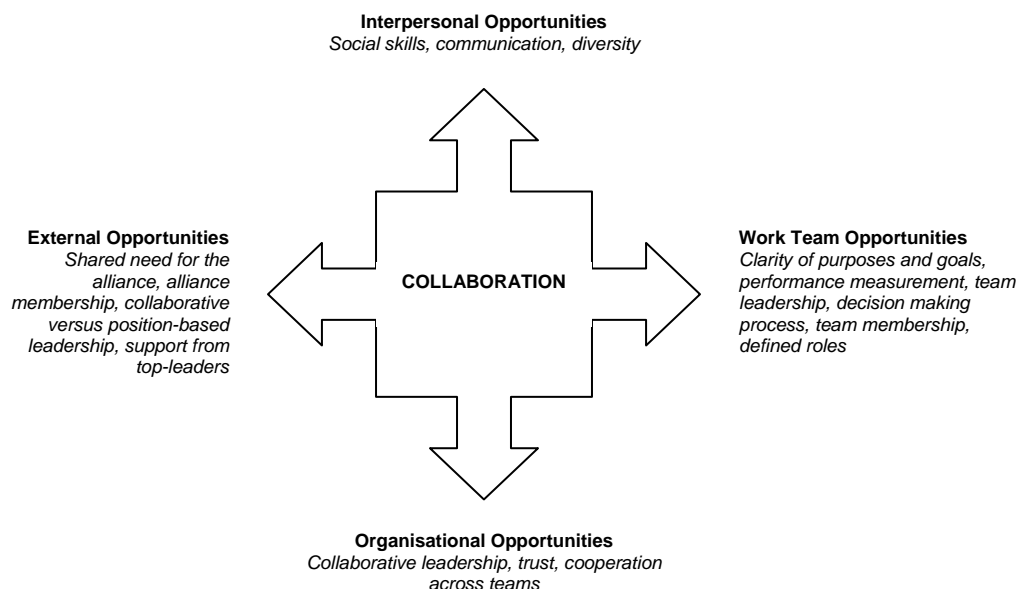


Figure 2. The Four Collaborative Opportunities (based on Mactavish, 2006)

Senge (2006) writes that 'Organizations work the way they do because how we work, how we think and interact; the changes required ahead are not only in our organizations but in ourselves as well'. We all bring our histories of experiences and anticipated futures into collaborations (Ison and Russell, 2000). Mactavish (2006) also pinpoints that collaboration is neither a discipline nor a practice unto itself – it has meaning only when rooted in a specific interaction. Consequently, even if an organisation can take a number of measures to support and improve collaboration institutionally, when all is said and done the responsibility for taking the very action and make it a practice always rests on the individual.

About creating a collaborative culture

Margaret Mead defines culture as 'a body of learned behaviour, a collection of beliefs, habits and traditions shared by a group of people and successively learned by people who enter the society' (Mead, 1951). Thus culture is about values, patterns of thought and behavioural patterns that are shared by humans within certain defined groups (Asplund, 2009). Asplund states that in order for a

meeting between cultures to be a cross-fertilizing and a creative process, learning about our own as well as the other culture is demanded. Daniels and Walker (2001) also pinpoint the importance of understanding and respecting the cultural diversity when collaborating. When talking about people with different scholarly backgrounds, one must also remember that there are different epistemic cultures (Leeuwis, 2003) that are to be managed as well. Edmonson *et al* (2001) write that a collaborative culture is recognised as an effective platform for progress within an organisation. They state that creating a collaborative culture requires effort – group efforts by all members in the culture. Furthermore they claim that a collaborative culture requires continued effort for maintenance. They list the five factors that are seen as important in order to create a collaborative culture, and these are; 1) physical proximity, 2) deliberate communication, 3) shared vision, 4) selective hiring and 5) effective leadership and empowerment.

The empirical data

Aim and method

The aim of this paper is to point out the difficulties experienced among extension organisations concerning inter- and intra-organisational collaboration, despite their outspoken ambition to collaborate, and to propose ways in which a collaborative culture among advisors might be created.

The study takes a multiple case study approach (Yin, 2003), with three advisory organisations in the southern part of Sweden. The main method used for data collection was semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed. Three persons responsible for the advisors and the ongoing changes within each organisation were interviewed. The three interviewees within each organisation were chosen because they were seen as visionary persons when it came to the demands for the future of extension. The interviews focused on the background behind and the inducement for the changes that each organisation has been going through. Besides the interviews, internal working documents of the respective organisations were also studied.

The three cases

In the cases below we will meet regional organisations belonging to the two biggest extension organisations in Sweden. These are *Hushållningssällskapet* – Swedish Rural Economy and Agricultural Societies (*HS*) and *Husdjursföreningarna* – The Animal Husbandry Associations. Both are membership-based organisations and are represented in every county in Sweden. While *HS* focuses on extension related to crop production, economy, building construction, rural development and environmental issues, *Husdjursföreningarna* mainly deals with services connected to dairy farming.

Växa

In 2007 the two advisory organisations *HS Halland* and *Hallands Husdjur* (one of the Animal Husbandry Associations), both active in the county of Halland, merged and created the economic association *Växa* together. The first idea of merging came already 12-15 years ago, leading to the building of an ‘Agrocenter’ where some of the two organisations’ advisors were co-located. The Managing Director (MD) of *HS Halland* has always been fond of the idea of creating one common organisation for the agricultural extension service in Halland. Compared with many other counties in Sweden, Halland has a rather intensive and diverse agricultural production. Farms there are not characterised by being particularly expansive, but stable. From a Swedish perspective, they have often been in front-line. This advantage was something that the MDs for *HS Halland* and *Hallands Husdjur* wanted to secure. So, instead of risking that *Hallands Husdjur* had to fuse with another Animal Husbandry Association, they sought other solutions to protect their county.

When the fusion was still in its infancy, the MD of *HS Halland*, who is also the head of the advisor group at *Växa*, took initiative to a joint workshop between the advisors from the two former organisations. The idea with this workshop was at least twofold – to push the advisors towards collaborating to a greater extent, and to identify new advisory products for their customers. After

the workshop, *Växa* made an experiment with conducting team-based extension on a few farms. For different reasons, that experiment came to nothing, but it ended up with the creation of focus-groups to discuss different topics related to their practice.

Today, two years down the line however, *Växa* is changing their organisation to be team-based. To support that development, *Växa* is working with structuring their advisory services into different modules. By doing so, they elucidate how advisors with different competencies can collaborate to reach set goals. By means of modules, the colleagues get a better understanding of each other's skills. It also makes the service clearer for the clients and guarantees a certain level of content and form of the services offered and delivered. This 'module' thinking is one way to make the advisor organisation more professional in its way of working. Hitherto much of the competence within the company has been tied to the individual level. With a more structured method of working, the aim is to transfer the competence from the individual to the organisation. In order to reach this aim, the advisors have to accept the idea of team-based extension. Consequently, they have to begin to see the clients as belonging to the company instead of them being 'mine' and 'yours'.

The essence of the team-based organisation that is now being built are functional and creative teams. Therefore, *Växa* has begun to apply personality tests when seeking new recruits. They claim that while many advisors traditionally have played a supporting role, the growing challenges in agriculture demand a different kind of advisor personality. An additional measure to accomplish the vision of becoming a professional organisation is, in their view, the building of a data-based Customer Relationship Management system. In this system, each customer has his or her own 'card' where each advisory encounter and its main contents are noted.

Rådgivarna in Sjuhärad

At the end of 2005, *HS Sjuhärad* started an internal process called 'Tomorrow's extension'. The aim was to develop their business and to render it more effective. One of the ideas was to develop a new advisory service called 'holistic extension', which should meet the clients' entire advisory need. Already in that stage, *HS Sjuhärad* realised that they would not be able to meet the challenges of tomorrow on their own. Thus they invited the MD of the regional Animal Husbandry Association, *Södra Älvsborgs Husdjur (SÄH)*, to join and participate in that development process. For different reasons the ideas of a holistic extension did not succeed. Today, their advisors are a part of five 'farm councils' instead. However, the internal development process ended up in the formulation of a number of development areas. These have been discussed in suitable constellations, and have proved to be very valuable for both the employees and the advising practice. The discussions made the need for a closer collaboration with *SÄH* evident. Therefore, a group of people from the two organisations went on an inspiration trip to Denmark together.

Parallel with the internal process and the collaboration discussions with *SÄH*, there were also ideas of creating a common office for actors working with or selling services to farmers in the region. In 2007, the Rural Advisory Centre was built, and it now hosts eight companies working within the rural sector. From an extension perspective, the co-location of *HS Sjuhärad* and *SÄH* is of course the most interesting one. Already when they moved into the new offices, the advisors were blended along the one corridor intended to stimulate the everyday talks. The responses from the advisors have been positive. In the autumn of 2008, the employees got to answer a questionnaire about the co-location (*HS Sjuhärad*, 2008). It showed that the advisors appreciated the small talks over a cup of coffee, where many issues came to be addressed. They even claimed that the co-location had contributed to raising the value of extension. Furthermore they could see that the workplace had become more attractive, that the workers' comfort level had improved and that the collaboration between the MDs of *HS Sjuhärad* and *SÄH* also had improved.

During 2008, the idea of creating one common advisory organisation became even clearer. When analysing the changes in the surrounding world, they could see that the demands put on their advisors were becoming higher; that the clients demanded more concept solutions; and that the pace of change was continuously going up. They also believed that an extension organisation that was able to provide a horizontal extension (based on teams) instead of just vertical (subject specific)

extension would be in the forefront in the future extension. In January 2010, after having had joint workshops with the personnel, the new organisation *Rådgivarna* was formally created and launched. Their goal now is to become sharper in what they do and to be better in formulating and following-up extension goals together with the farmers. Another way to get there, they believe, is by developing data-based 'customer cards'. The MD of *Rådgivarna* also pinpoints the importance of increasing the advisors' knowledge about each other's competencies, in order to facilitate the required internal collaboration.

Freja Husdjur

Freja Husdjur has a two-year-old history and is the result of the fusion of two regional Animal Husbandry Associations. Besides a MD, *Freja Husdjur* has a head of the advisor group, who has a rather big influence on the advisory practice and how it is organised. A couple of years ago, they developed ideas about what they also called 'holistic extension'. That advisory product was the result of a development project made during a specialist advisor course given by Swedish Milk. The aim of that product was to analyse the present situation, to formulate alteration/improvement goals, to specify who will do what and to make a follow-up on the set goals.

However, just when their advisory product had been launched and was being successfully developing, the national advisory programme *Start Package Milk* was ready to be brought in. This programme has occupied a lot of personnel resources which was why their own idea has been dormant for a while. *Start Package Milk* has always relied on a collaboration among competences such as breeding, feeding, building construction, economics and veterinary support. For *Freja Husdjur* this has implied a closer collaboration with colleagues from the regional *HS*. Even though there is a risk that the clients have been accustomed to a rather cheap extension service due to *Start Package Milk*, the head of the advisor group believes that it has lifted their production related extension to a completely different level.

Even if the inter-organisational collaboration can be improved, *Freja Husdjur* and *HS Skaraborg* (one of the regional *HS* that is found within *Freja Husdjur's* distribution area) have already today an agreement to co-operate. The agreement stipulates that advisors who have common clients should have a yearly meeting. Sometimes, the head of the advisor group says, when two advisors connect well with each other, this contact flourishes out to a well-functioning collaboration where the two respect each other's competences. He went on to say that the really good advisors are those who understand that one could never know everything oneself.

At an organisational level, the collaboration is supported by the arrangement of joint educational days, and the two MDs also have annual meetings where common matters are discussed. Even if the collaboration might work very well on an individual level the head of the advisor group admits that he envies *Växa* and *Rådgivarna*. Compared to them, *Freja Husdjur* serves a much bigger regional area. Thus, the possibility for them to develop the kind of close collaborations as seen in *Växa* or *Rådgivarna* is much more difficult. Their wish, however, is that there will be chances for co-locations at some local offices within the district, aimed at achieving structured and constructive advisor collaborations on farm-level.

Analysis and Discussion

Collaboration as a journey

Although the history and the present situation differ between the cases, it is easy to find similarities. In the case descriptions above we have given snapshots of the journey to date of the three extension organisations. Senge (2006) writes that '*Building learning –oriented cultures is hard work in any setting. It takes months and years – indeed, it is a never-ending journey*'. These cases show very well that starting a collaborative process is not about striving towards a fixed goal set by the MDs. Rather it is something that is continuously being developed, negotiated and improved and that involves the whole organisation. This agrees with the ideas of Ison and Russell (2000) that genuine collaboration

develops through relationships where people are able to grow. It takes time to build a common understanding of the desired situation.

The first steps towards a more formal collaboration seem to have been inspired by the thought of developing an extension approach which would regard the farm as a unitary whole. This is in contrast to the traditional production extension which often deals with rather delimited and subject specific questions. The first thoughts about creating a holistic approach to extension in Sweden were formulated by the former Professor of Extension, Ulrich Nitsch (see Nitsch, 1994). Interestingly enough, the head of the advisor group of *Växa* revealed during the interview that many of the things that he is involved in changing today were things that he and his friends at the political youth league were talking about already in the eighties. The new interest in developing holistic approaches in extension is probably a reaction to what is happening in the surrounding world. The ongoing structural rationalisation in combination with a fluctuating market has made it almost impossible to run a profitable farm company with sub-optimal entities. In order to be successful, the farmer has to make a business-plan with clear visions and goals which take all resources of the farm into consideration. The challenges facing the farmers are systemic and the challenge for the extension system is to figure out how to help the farmers to meet that situation. One way is through different forms of collaborations.

Four collaborative opportunities

As referred to earlier, Mactavish (2006) distinguishes between four collaborative opportunities; the interpersonal, the work team, the organisational and the external. These have proved to be useful in connection with the data we have and the challenges that the extension organisations are confronting.

Organisational collaboration

Many organisational collaborations stem from an insight that several of the problems the organisation is presented with could not be solved by that organisation acting alone. Even though *Växa* and *Rådgivarna* took two different paths towards the building of a new advisory organisation, their preconditions resemble each other rather well. They are both situated in small counties and the former local *HS* and Animal Husbandry Association in the regions had the same area of distribution. So, instead of risking that they had to fuse with another organisation within the same mother-organisation, they chose to safeguard their county and its advantages instead. The notion of defending is mentioned by Lorange and Roos (1992) as one of the motives for entering a strategic alliance. Despite the changes made in the organisations, we believe that the staff remained satisfied. This is probably due to the strong and visionary leadership that the MDs for *Växa* and *Rådgivarna* radiate and which offers a sense of security for the staff as well. These cases also show the positive effect of formalizing collaborations by either co-locating advisors with different competencies or by fusing and creating a totally new organisation.

For *Freja Husdjur*, the situation is different. Their distribution area is much bigger than Halland and Sjuhärad, and within that area there are several active regional *HS*. Despite these factors, they hope that they will be able to find local solutions of co-locations with *HS* colleagues to improve their inter-organisational collaboration.

Work team collaboration

Even if not said explicitly in the interviews, it seems like the early experiments of working with a holistic approach or in teams were not as easy as might have been expected. *Växa* and *Rådgivarna* both made attempts in this direction which after a while came to nothing. Maybe the reason for this was that the preparatory work of making the ideas clear and showing the advisors the need for and advantages of the collaborative way of working were not apparent enough. When reading the evaluation made after *Växa's* experiment with holistic extension (*Växa*, 2008), it becomes clear that the advisors did not really take that part of their work seriously. The answers indicate that several of the advisors came to the joint meetings without being particularly prepared on other things than their own field of responsibility. Inspired by the holistic approach *Växa* has, however, decided to

rearrange their whole organisation towards a team-based one. Today the team-concept emphasizes flexibility and an ability to adapt to dynamic changes (Kock, 2004). By doing so, *Växa* hopes that collaboration will permeate not just the organisation but also their practice. *Växa's* work with arranging its advisory services in different modules is another way to build flexible teams with clear responsibilities that will create collaborative experiences. Such measures are in accordance with Mactavish's (2006) ideas.

In all cases, there was an ongoing work with developing 'client cards'. These have the potential to demand that the advisors collaborate and to help them to define their roles. Even if the team-thought is not as clear in the *Rådgivarna* case, they tried to stimulate the inter-disciplinary collaboration by deliberately mixing advisors from different subject areas in the corridor when the two former companies decided to become co-located. How the creation of a common organisation will influence their actual practice is still to be seen. No matter what, an important precondition for a successful teamwork is a positive attitude among the individuals, which leads to the next collaborative level.

Interpersonal collaboration

Senge (2006) writes that '*building learning-oriented cultures is demanding because learning stretches us personally, and it is always easier to stay in our comfort zone*'. To start collaborating and working more holistically with a farm, inevitably raises the demands on the advisors. One of the interviewees admitted that not all advisors appreciate these higher demands and would rather continue to work with 'business as usual'.

It has already been stated that collaboration is a matter for the individual. It is a challenge for all humans. To start collaborating is a conscious choice that each individual has to make. Even if it is possible to support collaboration institutionally, which has been done in different ways in the cases reported here, it is up to each individual to make it in practice. In the *Freja Husdjur* case we can see that collaboration might work very well on an individual level, even if the advisors are neither co-located nor belonging to the same organisation, as long as they have an interest in doing so. In the interviews, the advisors were being described as very good specialists. They are somewhat kings of their own kingdom. When starting to work together with other colleagues that self-image needs to be changed. Collaboration also demands a shift in how advisors look at the clients – from mine and yours to 'ours'. Another problem emphasized in the interviews which has the potential to counteract the collaborative initiatives, is the lack of confidence about other colleagues' knowledge and abilities. The fear that a colleague will not deliver according to what is expected is probably grounded in unfamiliarity with the collaborative way of working. But it is also an indication of different epistemological backgrounds (Leeuwis, 2003) among different advisor groups. This is something that the studied organisations try to deal with, for example, by arranging joint educational days and discussions.

External collaboration

In this paper, we let the expression 'external collaboration' stand for a form of collaboration that has not yet been developed among the production advisors in Sweden. However, we claim that it could be an interesting development path that the advisors and their organisations should consider. For them it could imply taking initiatives and being more active in the sphere of business and thereby also rural development. For example, the advisors could gather farmers living within a catchment to see which strategic development would be feasible for them, not just at farm level but also within a given geographical area. When working with big agricultural firms, one could also imagine that the advisor could help the farmer with his/her external contacts to find new market solutions. We believe that the main reason why external collaboration is not seen widely today is that there is no platform enabling it yet.

The challenge of creating a collaborative culture

We claim that one of the main challenges ahead for our interviewees is to develop a collaborative culture in their respective organisation. As we see it, much of the collaborative ideas today are carried out partly by individually interested advisors, partly by their own strong and visionary

leadership. These ideas and visions need to be approved and adapted among the staff and put into practice in their everyday work. Otherwise, there is a risk that the initiatives taken will fail just as the earlier ones.

Early in the fusion processes both *Växa* and *Rådgivarna* acknowledged the fact that they were two different organisations with two different histories and cultures that were going to merge. Therefore, they both arranged days aimed at describing the past in order to create one common picture of history as a basis for further discussions to come (cf. Asplund, 2009; Daniels and Walker, 2001; Ison and Russell, 2000).

Edmonson *et al* (2001) speak of five factors that they claim to be important in order to create a collaborative culture, and we find them applicable also in our cases. That the *physical proximity* has a great influence on the collaboration among advisors was very obvious in the *Rådgivarna* case. They saw a good effect just by becoming co-located and having opportunities for small talking with each other. When it comes to the *deliberate communication* it can definitely be improved. Our experience when talking with advisors in other situations is that many advisors are feeling rather lonely, even though they are a part of an organisation. To rearrange the advisory staff into teams like *Växa* did is one way to stimulate the needed cross-disciplinary discussions. If the extension service will manage to develop into the sharp and innovative discussion and inspiration partner that many farmers say they want to have, then the tradition of not sharing information about production strategies and farm economy needs to be changed. The necessity of a *shared vision* is not only important when it comes to the advisory group level – i.e. which image to convey – but also on farm level. As long as an advisor does not know about a farm's economical space, we claim that it is impossible to give relevant farm-specific advice. *Växa's* work with building advisory modules and creating teams is one step towards creating a shared vision. The importance of *selective hiring* was explicitly mentioned in the *Växa* interview. In order to build functional and creative teams, they have started to make personality tests when employing new advisors. That in itself mirrors a cultural change within extension. The last factor, *effective leadership*, was also mentioned during the *Växa* interview. The head of the group emphasized the importance of having a clear and distinct leadership several times, especially when two organisations decide to fuse into one.

Conclusions

The most common form of advisory service in Sweden is via individual contact, where rather delimited production-related issues are discussed. The specialisation among advisors implies that the average farmer maintains several advisory contacts. As long as the farmer's demands are perceived as giving answers to well-defined questions, this might not be a dilemma. But, if supporting farm development on a long term basis is the demand, then such an approach is not enough. As shown in our cases there are different kinds of actions taken within the field of inter-organisational collaboration. We would claim that the driving forces behind the measures taken are at least three-fold. First, the ongoing structural rationalisation seen in agriculture is also seen in many other sectors – including the service sector. Second, the idea of strong, rather independent regions is becoming more and more popular. This trend is not new in a European perspective, but rather new in Sweden. And third, many farmers ask for a sharper discussion partner that can support their farm management and thus help them make strategic decisions. This calls for a new way of working.

In this paper we have studied three advisory organisations that have consciously changed their ordinary way of working. In particular, *Växa* and *Rådgivarna* are not to be seen as a representative selection of how the Swedish advisory organisations are structured and working, but rather as front-line examples. As written earlier, the tradition among advisors to collaborate around common clients is quite weak. Consequently, the production advisors have neither been as active in the strategic development of Swedish farms, nor in rural development issues, as they potentially could have been. In order to get there, a new culture needs to be developed. The dominating expert culture, with strong individuals working alone, needs to be replaced with a collaborative culture. As seen, such change does not happen without a conscious agenda. However, we would claim that the prospects

for creating a collaborative culture in *Växa* and *Rådgivarna*, and thus developing their services even further, are very good. The reason is partly due to the fact that they have formalised their collaboration by merging and creating new firms, partly due to the well-planned change process that has been allowed to take time.

We claim that a well-functioning collaboration on individual, team-based and organisational levels together would create the necessary platform for advisors becoming a trustworthy partner, who could take initiatives to a greater degree and be involved in collective action towards a sustainable agricultural and regional development. However, as Southern (2005) warns: *'Ultimately, the result of creating cultures of collaboration is the development of learning communities. [...] If collaboration does not extend into a learning community, then chances are that when difficulties arise, people will revert to independent action.'*

If the advisors and their organisations would like to be the partners that many farmers are seeking, and thus be an actor that facilitates the agricultural development both at farm and at regional level in a direction that is sustainable in an ecological, economic and social sense, they have to start with improving their own collaborative skills. This demands a move from a system which contains collaborative heroes within it to one whose systemic qualities include collaboration as a culture. The work for this transformation has only begun.

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