

# IS CO-CREATION A PIPE DREAM?

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## **Co-Creating Wellbeing**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Danish society of 2021 calls for a renewal of the public sector. The public sector is facing several key issues regarding value creation, increased efficiency, exclusion and marginalisation of large parts of the population in Danish society (Fogsgaard & de Jongh, 2018).

Clearly, a new way of thinking is needed if the welfare state is to succeed in solving these extremely difficult issues. Thus, there is a need for innovation and new thinking (Fogsgaard & de Jongh, 2018).

Recognising the need for innovation, the public sector in many parts of Denmark focuses on creating innovation by involving external parties. This is probably based on the realisation that innovation most often occurs at the intersection where different perceptions, attitudes and beliefs meet. In Denmark, this is often articulated by the concept of co-creation.

A new research project from Aalborg University shows that co-creation processes are not always as effective as they could be. One of the conclusions from the research project is that although there is a lot of talk about co-creation with citizens and voluntary organisations in the public sector, but this rarely results in new solutions for citizens (Frederiksen & Grubb, 2021),

Of course, the transformation from one governance paradigm to another is not a simple task. It requires a lot of work in terms of cultural development and the learning and adoption of various working methods. Behavioural changes must be made in relation to both roles and working methods among citizens, employees, managers and politicians. An organisational culture is required where curiosity about the outside world is paramount and where potential conflicts of interest are balanced.

The implementation of a new management paradigm will always be an ongoing process, where elements of previous management philosophies will be present in the organisation. This also

means that different expectations will coexist in and for the organisation (Frimann & Mønsted, 2017).

In other words, there is much to suggest that a successful implementation of co-creation requires special managerial focus and attention.

### **CHOICE OF FOCUS IN THE ARTICLE**

As the introduction suggests, in this article we have chosen to focus on co-creation primarily initiated by a public desire to develop new and better welfare services for citizens and as an interaction between welfare workers and citizens. Therefore, the article is also structured to focus on issues related to the implementation of co-creation in the public sector.

There are, of course, many factors that can influence the implementation process and thus also affect the outcome. The Danish literature on co-creation thus also points to the fact that there are many difficulties in measuring both the effect and benefits of co-creation. One explanation for this may be that co-creation is often 'intangible' and influenced by many factors, such as legislation, social capital, institutional and cultural conditions, competing agendas, etc. (Tortzen & Agger, 2015).

The above are each important factors in understanding the conditions of co-creation and thus also in measuring the impact and benefits of co-creation. However, it is important to emphasise that this article does not examine these many different factors. Instead, we have chosen to focus on mobilising employees' starting points for meeting and overcoming these many different challenges and obstacles to co-creation.

It is our assumption that successfully dealing with challenges and obstacles requires awareness of direction and goals. Communication and dissemination are often a fundamental prerequisite for successful implementation processes and therefore this article focuses on conceptual clarification of the co-creation concept.

The purpose of this article is to investigate whether an unclear concept of co-creation affects employees' ability to perform co-creation in practice.

The above theme can be rephrased into the following hypothesis: 1) If we have a lack of conceptual clarification of the co-creation concept, this leads to obstacles in performing co-creation in practice.

Recent motivation literature argues that motivation/psychological ownership depends on how the given conditions affect the experience of competence, self-determination and cohesion (Ravn, 2021).

The claim here is that one of the main reasons for the difficult implementation of co-creation in practice in Denmark is a lack of conceptual clarification of the concept of co-creation, resulting in a lack of perceived competence and direction for action. The basis for formulating this claim is the connection between the conceptual understanding of co-creation and the experience of competence, self-determination, etc.

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## **PART 1: THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATION**

The context for our analysis in this article is Tønder Municipality and the implementation work around co-creation, which has taken place in the period 2017 - 2021. Even though Tønder Municipality has had a sharpened focus on the implementation of co-creation during this period, it can be noted that it is still only to a limited extent that co-creative practices have become widespread.

In connection with this article, we have had access to employees in two administrative departments, the labour market area and the technical and environmental administration, a total of 147 employees who participated in a survey. These areas are randomly selected to participate in the survey. In addition, one workshop was organised where managers and employees had the opportunity to discuss the results of the survey and our interpretation of the survey results.

Recognising the need for the gradual introduction of a new management logic, the implementation of co-creation has been implemented via the traditional management hierarchy.

Tønder Municipality's definition of co-creation is summarised below:

"We co-create with citizens when we actively involve citizens in the formulation of common tasks where the solution is not known. We jointly own the task and we use each other's knowledge and expertise to find common solutions that are based on citizen ownership and that support citizens' mastery."

An important detail in the definition is that the purpose of co-creation is psychological ownership. This definition is inspired by the self-determination theory by Deci and Ryan. One of the main points of self-determination theory (Ravn, 2021) is that intrinsic motivation is far more powerful than extrinsic motivation; the closer we can get to intrinsic motivation, the more willing we will be to perform the action in question. Individuals are naturally more motivated to perform actions that are inherently entertaining or pleasurable - rather than actions that are solely dictated by management. The idea of achieving psychological ownership is thus to increase motivation.

According to Self-Determination Theory, three basic psychological needs influence how motivated we humans are:

1. Self-determination (Autonomy)
2. Mastery (Competence)
3. Relatedness/belongingness.

All three dimensions are important in relation to Tønder Municipality's interpretation of the concept of co-creation, as the three concepts constitute a central element in the creation of psychological ownership (Avey, 2009).

The starting point of the article is that co-creation in the literal sense of the word is a radical break with the existing governance logic in the Danish welfare society. The concept of co-creation is generally about a process where public employees develop and produce public welfare together with citizens, rather than producing for citizens as in the past.

Welfare is a result that is created in interaction. In this way, co-creation can be seen as a rejection of the universalistic principle as the predominant governing principle in the welfare state. Instead, co-creation celebrates bottom-up solutions created and customised contextually and subjectively in the given situation (Hasselbalch & Vendelbo, 2021).

**In this way, co-creation can be seen as a rebellion against the universalistic principle as the overriding governing principle of the welfare state. Instead, co-creation celebrates bottom-up solutions created and adapted contextually and subjectively in the given situation (Hasselbach & Vendelbo, 2021)."**



When you - as in Tønder Municipality - work with co-creation within the existing organisational setup and within the framework of several different coexisting governance logics, you cannot avoid running into challenges of various kinds. These can include limitations caused by legislation, administrative and political understandings, such as administrative and political top-down goals and solutions, etc.

Implementing co-creation thus requires addressing challenges related to the coexistence of several different management logics in the organisation. Therefore, implementation challenges in this context cannot be compared to implementation challenges in relation to traditional organisational change processes or strategies that stay within an already existing governance logic in a given organisation.

If an organisation is unable to adapt existing governance logics, there is an imminent danger that co-creation becomes a concept that has no substance and no real meaning for the public sector's way of working (Nørgaard, 2016).

A management logic adapted to co-creation will very much be about leading with a focus on the value that can be created together with citizens, organisations and businesses. This implies completely new roles for employees, politicians, citizens, organisations, businesses, etc. in Danish society.

This management logic will be centered around employees' degrees of freedom and citizens' needs.



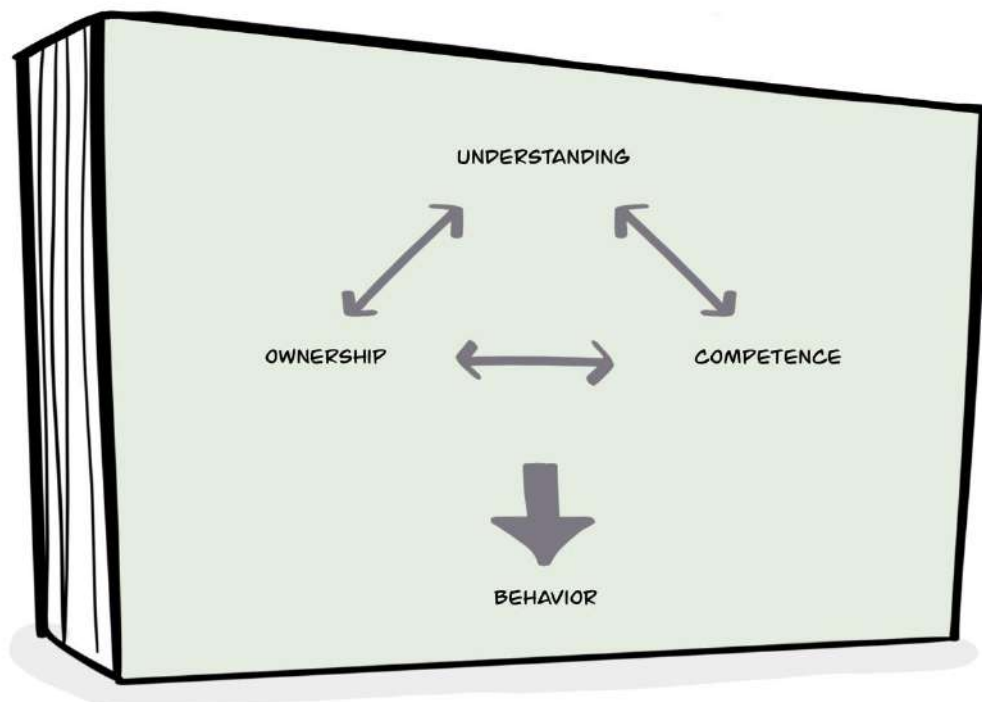
**"The need for a clear definition of co-creation thus becomes even more pressing as more and more municipalities introduce co-creation in organisations where the prevailing management logic and management thinking is not adapted to the management needs of co-creation."**

The need for a clear definition of co-creation is thus becoming even more pressing as more and more municipalities introduce co-creation into organisations where the prevailing governance logic and management thinking are not adapted to the governance needs of co-creation.

## **THE CO-CREATION CONCEPT**

The starting point for analysing the concept of co-creation is that we must try to understand the meaning of the concept of co-creation before we delve into the issues and dilemmas associated with the concept in practice. The central assumption of this article is that through the conceptual analysis of co-creation, we can create a framework of understanding that guides action and gives employees the expectation of mastering the task. It is this conceptualisation that must precede any successful strategic management of co-creation in practice. This approach is inspired by the tradition of analytical philosophy, and this article will draw on Wittgenstein and Ayer in particular.

The approach to uncovering the theoretical basis can begin by answering the relevant question: "Why should we start by analysing the concepts?" We will answer this question through different steps presented in the following model:



- The first step is the link between language and thought, which we categorise under the concept of understanding.- The second step is the link between thought, will and action, which we group under (psychological) ownership.- The third step is the link between mastery and action, which we have called competence.- The fourth step is the link between thought and action, which we interpret as one of the possible pathways to change behaviour. Our model presented above is universal and can form the basis for understanding any human process, practice or activity. It can be applied to a wide variety of processes, such as: 'playing football', 'refining oil' or, as in this case, 'co-creating'.

### **1. The link between language and thought**

The link between language and thought can be illustrated by the following quote by Ludwig Wittgenstein: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." (Wittgenstein, 2010, 5.6) In other words, it is only what we have a language for that we can talk about and think about. According to Wittgenstein, language sets the limits of what we can talk about and what we can keep silent about (Wittgenstein, 2010). This sentence is self-evident, because if we talk about X, we have a language for it, whereas what we do not have a language for cannot be communicated. The concepts and the way we talk about things means that we as humans focus on some things, while other things fade into the background (Heidegger, 2007). The things that are the subject of our conversation are the things that are being articulated. The idea here is that thought takes a concrete form through our language and the particular form that thought takes is in some sense determined by the concepts we have. The content of thought can be expressed in propositional

expressions and propositional expressions are truth bearers - they can be either true or false. We cannot think anything meaningful that cannot be expressed in language. The concepts we have therefore set the boundaries for what can be thought and what cannot be thought. In relation to the focus of this article, we can say that we understand what co-creation means when we understand what it means for the sentence 'I co-create' to be true.

## **2. The link between will and action.**

A prerequisite for taking action is that we have the will to act. We can get this will through prior knowledge, which forms the basis for thoughts and desires to change a certain situation. The will to do X rather than Y is a fundamental element that precedes any intended action. Motivation is closely related to will. Etymologically, the concept of motivation is related to exercise, which means movement (Katzenelson, 2021). In other words, to be motivated is to be moved to action. We can act in a certain way without being motivated to act in that way. However, motivation can help us to cause action (Ravn, 2021) - if we have a high level of motivation to act, the likelihood that we will act increases! Related to the topic of this article, this connection is important, as co-creative behaviour requires the will to want to co-create. In other words, having the intention to act co-creatively can be a starting point for co-creative behaviour.

## **3. The link between mastery and action**

As described above, will is a prerequisite for intentional action. But will and motivation to act are not enough to create a specific desirable behaviour. We may have a deep desire to act in a certain way but lack the competences to make those actions happen.

The final step in our model is therefore about mastery or competence, which we consider an important component in being able to perform actions that live up to the standards that apply in different fields. In relation to co-creation, we can understand that it is not enough to understand what co-creation is and have the will to co-create (see points above). It is also necessary to have the right competences to be able to co-create.

## **4. Thoughts and actions**

Finally, we can see that thoughts can help determine how we act. By this we don't mean that all behaviour is always rooted in cognitive reflection. Much behaviour can be the result of instinctive impulses and stimuli that are not necessarily conscious and, in that sense, not necessarily articulated or verbalised. In addition to thoughts forming the basis for actions, emotions and values can also do so. The important point here is that thoughts can form the basis of a decision, which can be translated into a concrete action that can change behaviour. Therefore, thoughts and reflections are one of the many ways to change behaviour.

We have tried to make the connection between concepts and thoughts on the one hand, and will, action and behaviour on the other. By making this connection plausible, it also explains the importance of the specific conceptualisation of the concept of co-creation: without a specific concept, we cannot grasp the matter and therefore cannot act in accordance with the concept. The arrows in the model highlight the reciprocal interaction between the different concepts in the model: My specific conceptualisation of the co-creation concept can influence my perceived ownership of carrying out co-creation. My perceived ownership may influence my motivation to learn the relevant competences for co-creation. My understanding of co-creation also has an

impact on which competences I need to perform co-creation in practice and which competences I may need to learn. At the same time, my practical work with co-creation can give me a broader understanding of the concept of co-creation.

The above illustration thus suggests that conceptualising the concept of co-creation is an important prerequisite for being able to concretise its content in a way that makes the concept actionable.

## **DICHOTOMY - HEAVY AND AIRY CONCEPTS**

Above we've made the link between language and action plausible, but now we want to delve deeper into the function of the concept itself. In this section, we will examine a particular categorisation of concepts that can be crucial to the practical application of concepts. We do this by introducing the distinction between heavy and airy concepts through several examples.

A traditional understanding of concepts is that meaningful concepts are tools for representing the world (Ayer, 1997) (Heidegger, 2007, p. 244-249). With the help of concepts, we can draw our attention to individual cases and objects, taking them out of their context to examine them more closely. For example, if I say: 'Look at that aeroplane!', it draws attention to the specific aeroplane and not the cars on the road, the wind in the trees, the blue sky, etc. This is only possible because we have a concept and a shared understanding of what an aeroplane is. Furthermore, the concept of an aeroplane is what makes it possible to take the aeroplane out of context. The concept of aeroplane simultaneously identifies the aeroplane and marks a separation of the aeroplane from all sorts of other objects. We intuitively agree that something falls within the categorisation of 'airplane' and that other objects fall outside of this categorisation - even though we may not be able to define these boundaries clearly.

The claim here is that there are many sentences that intuitively make sense because they all contain concepts that carry weight. Widely varying concepts such as: 'Chess', 'maths', 'pen' and 'traffic laws' make sense because we have an intuitive understanding of their content. There is something that falls within and outside of the categorisation and we understand the practice that the concepts are part of. We will refer to this class of concepts as heavy concepts. What characterises heavy concepts is that they have one or a few consistent interpretations. In other words, there are many things that the concepts do not allow to be the case for them to be fulfilled. For example, it is not meaningful to talk about 'The boy is doing maths' when he is out playing football with his friends, because the two activities to which the concepts refer are fundamentally different.

**AIRY CONCEPTS, ON THE OTHER HAND, ARE CONCEPTS THAT HAVE MULTIPLE CONSISTENT INTERPRETATIONS THAT ARE MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE. WE CAN TALK ABOUT CONCEPTS HAVING BRANCHING POINTS THAT LEAD TO DIFFERENT, CONTRADICTORY CONCLUSIONS. AIRY CONCEPTS CAN BE CHARACTERISED BY BEING AMBIGUOUS, GENERAL AND VAGUE.**

A concrete example of a term that can be characterised as having an extreme degree of ambiguity is the term 'fast'. On the one hand, it can mean firmly fixed and unmoving. On the other hand, it can mean to be able to move rapidly (Weinreich, 2021). We can therefore have two very different

and opposing actions, both of which fulfil the concept. Here we can clearly see a break with the link we have established above between concept, thought and action: there are at least two contradictory actions that both fulfil the conditions for the concept of 'fast'. The claim here, as explained above, is that if we do not understand the correct application of the concept, we cannot act in accordance with the concept.

## THE CONCEPT OF CO-CREATION IN A DANISH CONTEXT

In the following, we will examine the concept of co-creation as presented in the literature in a Danish context. We will use this presentation as a starting point to support the hypothesis of the article before examining it specifically in Tønder Municipality. The philosopher Martin Heidegger describes how, through the traditional transmission of concepts, we cover up other possible interpretations of the concepts (Heidegger, 2007, p. 41). In other words, we forget that the concepts could have other possible interpretations, which may be more adequate than the actualised interpretations. It is therefore relevant in this context to look at the interpretations and understandings of co-creation that exist in the literature and whether these interpretations encourage co-creation in practice by guiding action.

At a general level, co-creation can be understood in terms of the sub-elements that make up the concept: co-creation and creation. From this general level, we can understand 'co-creation' as referring to an activity where we create something together. The concept of co-creation is often confused with the more commonly used term 'collaboration'. Based on Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance (Wittgenstein, 1999), it can be said that these two concepts have a certain family resemblance both in their etymology and application. However, whereas collaboration is about working together, as the term also suggests, the creative element is central to the concept of co-creation. It is relevant to our understanding of the concept of co-creation that we have a demarcation between co-creation and collaboration. This is the only way we can contrast co-creative processes with collaborative processes.

Eva Sørensen and Jacob Torfing describe co-creation in the following way:

"Here, the concept of co-creation becomes relevant because it attempts to mobilise the skills, ideas, commitment and enthusiasm of employees, citizens and local businesses and associations in solving common tasks, problems and challenges." (Sørensen & Torfing, 2018, p. 33) (Originally in Torfing, Sørensen & Røiseland, 2016).

The key to the 'co-creation concept' in this interpretation is to mobilise different actors around the solution of common tasks. It is also worth noting that it is clearly emphasised who these actors are employees, citizens, businesses and associations. This interpretation of the concept of co-creation becomes even clearer in the following quote:

"At its core, co-creation is about getting public and private actors to collaborate and share knowledge and resources with each other in a joint endeavour to make better and more accurate and effective policies and create more quality in public services without it being too expensive." (Sørensen & Torfing, 2018, p. 34).

Here, the authors define the 'core' of co-creation as the co-operation between the public and private sectors. They further emphasise that it is only in this relationship that we can truly talk about co-creation. We can translate the idea that the core of co-creation is the relationship between public and private actors into understanding the relationship between these actors as an essential part of the co-creation concept. It is equivalent to saying that it is a necessary condition for 'co-creation' that we have different actors representing both the public and private sectors. We can say that this understanding emphasises *the who* of co-creation as a necessary condition for the co-creation criterion to be fulfilled.

The same authors have also described the concept of co-creation in similar terms, corresponding to what we have characterised above as the concept's degree of airiness:

"[...] [Co-creation] fulfils virtually all the criteria for being a magical concept: it is something new, not clearly defined, sounds positive and is difficult to argue against." (Sørensen & Torfing, 2018, p. 59).

WITH OUR VOCABULARY, WE CAN EXPRESS THE ABOVE SENTENCE IN MORE PRECISE TERMS: THE CONCEPT OF CO-CREATION LACKS CONTENT BECAUSE WE DON'T KNOW WHAT NEEDS TO BE THE CASE FOR THE SENTENCE 'I CO-CREATE' TO BE TRUE.

This paints a picture of two key points of attention in the literature: firstly, recognising the airiness of the concept and secondly, emphasising *the who* of co-creation as essential to co-creation.

In a Danish context, researchers Fogsgaard, Emholdt and Bebe also emphasise *the who* of co-creation as central:

"When we talk about co-creation in the public sector, it refers to a collaboration between public and non-public actors in developing and producing welfare" (Fogsgaard, Emholdt & Bebe, 2018, p. 94).

Tortzen also describes co-creation based on the relationship between the public sector and civil society: "Co-creation - understood as co-operation between the public sector and civil society to develop and produce welfare - is currently being proclaimed as 'the salvation of the welfare society'." (Tortzen, 2018, p. 164). And later: "Co-creation is when public actors and citizens work together to better utilise the assets, resources and contributions of all parties to achieve empowerment, greater efficiency or better results." (Tortzen, 2018, p. 170).

Many researchers studying co-creation refer to Agger and Tortzen's (2015) definition as the prevailing one (see for example: (Ulrich, 2016) and (Fogsgaard, Emholdt & Bebe (2018))). One can imagine that the consensus that can be seen in the definitions above has arisen because Agger and Tortzen's definition has been the starting point for the interpretation of the concept of co-creation in a Danish context. The common characteristic of the above-mentioned definitions is the emphasis on *the who* of co-creation as a necessary condition for the concept.

The review of the literature on co-creation in a Danish context confirms our assumption about the airiness of the concept. When we ask in the title of this article whether co-creation is a pipe dream, it is this property of airiness that we are asking about. The only thing that can be said to characterise the concept in an action-guiding direction is *the who* of the concept, which is highlighted as a necessary condition for fulfilling the concept. In a way, this provision contradicts our hypothesis that co-creation is an airy concept, precisely because *the who* of co-creation sets

conditions for what it means to co-create, thus making the concept less vague, less ambiguous and less generalised.

When introducing a new concept like 'co-creation', it is relevant to look at what criteria we have for introducing new concepts in general. When we introduce new concepts in a research context, it is typically to identify new contexts and in the case of co-creation - a new practice. It can be assumed that there must be a reasonable demarcation between co-creation and collaboration for us to be justified in introducing a new concept like co-creation. If co-creation is nothing more than collaborating with an external actor, why bother introducing a new term at all? If the meaning of co-creation is contained in 'collaboration + external actor', is there any reason to use the term instead of the excellent sub-elements of the concept that we already have an intuitive understanding of?

There are two fundamental problems with understanding *the who* of co-creation as a necessary condition for co-creation. The first problem is that this understanding can only be used to create action-guiding processes in the form: 'collaboration + external actor'. In this interpretation of the concept of co-creation, the concept does not identify any processes that are unique to the concept of co-creation. This interpretation identifies the same processes that characterise a normal collaboration process with the clause that it must be between external actors. We have assumed above that a reasonable criterion for introducing a new word is that the word contributes to, for example, identifying a new type of process. The second problem goes in the opposite direction: Emphasising *the who* of co-creation does not make the term airy - it excludes too much that a more adequate term might describe as 'co-creative'.

The second problem will be explained more clearly through a short analogy.

Let's imagine we define collaboration as: "Work that several people, organisations or the like perform together (The Great Danish, 2018)" and "The people involved must be from Denmark and Germany".

With this last condition, we have significantly limited the concept of collaboration. By adding extra conditions, there are more things that need to be the case for the sentence 'I collaborate' to be true. However, analogue to our concrete study of co-creation, it does not make sense for us in practice to limit a concept in this way, thereby reducing the designation of a specific practice to who performs it.

**IN OUR INTERPRETATION OF THE CO-CREATION CONCEPT, THE WHO OF CO-CREATION IS NEITHER A NECESSARY NOR SUFFICIENT CONDITION FOR CO-CREATION.**

It is not a necessary condition, as you can have a co-creative practice without this practice taking place between an internal and an external actor. It is not a sufficient condition, as you can have a collaboration between an internal and an external actor - without this being legitimately characterised as a co-creative practice. In our interpretation, *the who* of co-creation should be understood as a contingent possibility: there *can* be a co-creative practice between internal and external actors.

Even if we take *the who* of co-creation as a necessary condition, the concept still does not appear to be demarcated from collaboration. As mentioned above, the concept is therefore also not

action-guiding regarding processes other than those we classically understand as collaborative processes. Our review of relevant literature in the field confirms the impression of a general confusion about what co-creation actually refers to. In other words, organisations and employees can't look to the literature for concrete actionable definitions of co-creation. This, of course, places even greater demands on the leadership of each organisation to fill in this element. As all organisations are situated in a given context, management will also need to be aware of how certain interpretations of the concept of co-creation have obscured other possible interpretations of the concept (Heidegger, 2007, p. 41).

However, the lack of definition of co-creation can lead to the illusion that management has control over the organisation's understanding of co-creation. This apparent freedom inherent in the task of developing a local definition of co-creation, however, hides the fact that the local definition will discursively always be in competition with many other understandings of co-creation.

Not only does the lack of conceptual clarification of co-creation challenge the content dimension, but also the employees' psychological ownership of the organisation's local definition of co-creation.

Without psychological ownership, implementation work will rely solely on extrinsic motivation, which in our experience causes problems in relation to full implementation (Justesen, 2019). International research indicates that motivation/psychological ownership is supported by, among other things, employees perceived (Van Zyl, van der Vaart & Stemmet, 2017):

- Control over the situation
- Cohesion with others in the situation
- A feeling of mastery in the situation
- Personal investment of time and resources in the situation.

If we look at the above list of elements that contribute to psychological ownership, it really becomes clear why it is problematic to start implementing 'airy' concepts such as co-creation. If the concept is not actionable, it will be difficult to feel in control and build an expectation of mastery.

**ONE OF THE BASIC ASSUMPTIONS IN THE LITERATURE ON MOTIVATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL OWNERSHIP IS THAT THE INDIVIDUAL'S EXPECTATIONS OF THEIR OWN MASTERY AND THE POSSIBILITY OF SELF-DETERMINATION ARE CRUCIAL TO THEIR MOTIVATION TO ACT (RAVN, 2021).**

In motivation theory, the experience of self-efficacy is closely linked to the individual's own expectations of their own success ('self-efficacy'). That is, the person's belief in their own ability to organise and perform the actions necessary to master future tasks. (Avey, 2009).

In this light, it will be interesting to investigate whether the implementation of co-creation - as the introduction of a new and changed way of performing tasks in the public sector - has clearly and unambiguously defined expectations for employees' future tasks. Otherwise, it would be difficult for employees to have expectations of their own abilities. On the other hand, motivation theory

also suggests that self-determination is a crucial factor in building motivation and psychological ownership. Thus, there are two requirements that may seem contradictory in motivation theory. On the one hand, a demand for clear instructions for action and on the other hand, a need for autonomy and freedom of action. An important balance that must be managed when implementing methods in any organisation.

Based on the preceding theoretical framework and using Tønder Municipality's organisational setup as a starting point, we have chosen to investigate the following questions:

- To what extent has the management of Tønder Municipality succeeded in creating an unambiguous definition and understanding of co-creation in the organisation?
- How has the management of Tønder Municipality succeeded in creating psychological ownership for working co-creatively?
- What recommendations would employees give to management to create an even stronger implementation of co-creation in the organisation?

## **PART 2: EMPIRICAL DATA - TØNDER MUNICIPALITY**

This chapter analyses and maps the employees' perception and experience with co-creation and their recommendations for future managerial efforts to strengthen the implementation of co-creation in Tønder Municipality.

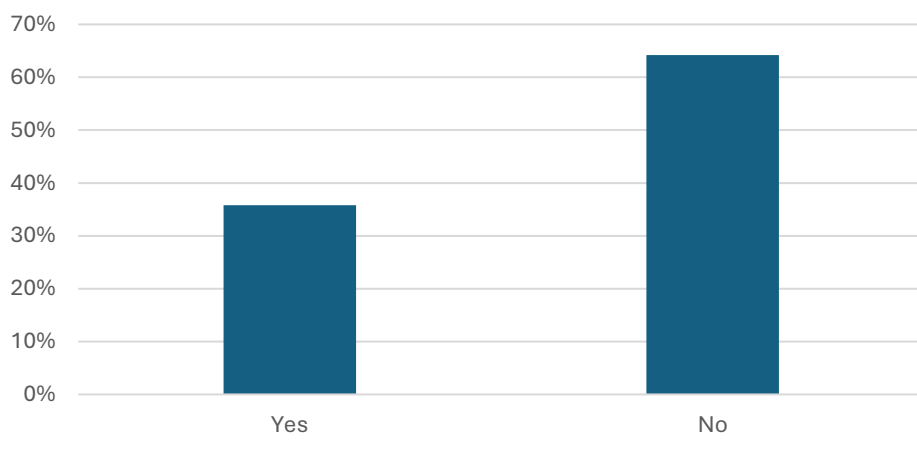
The empirical data in this article is based on a quantitative questionnaire survey distributed to 147 employees in Tønder Municipality, 107 of whom completed the survey. The questionnaire is grouped into three different categories that can be summarised as understanding of co-creation, ownership of co-creation and mastering co-creation. These categories can be seen as an extension of Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory with a particular focus on two of the basic psychological needs for human motivation: Self-determination and mastery.

Each category contains 3 to 5 questions that aim to uncover relevant employee perspectives on the co-creation project in Tønder Municipality since it was launched in 2017. Below, the most relevant results for each category will be reviewed.

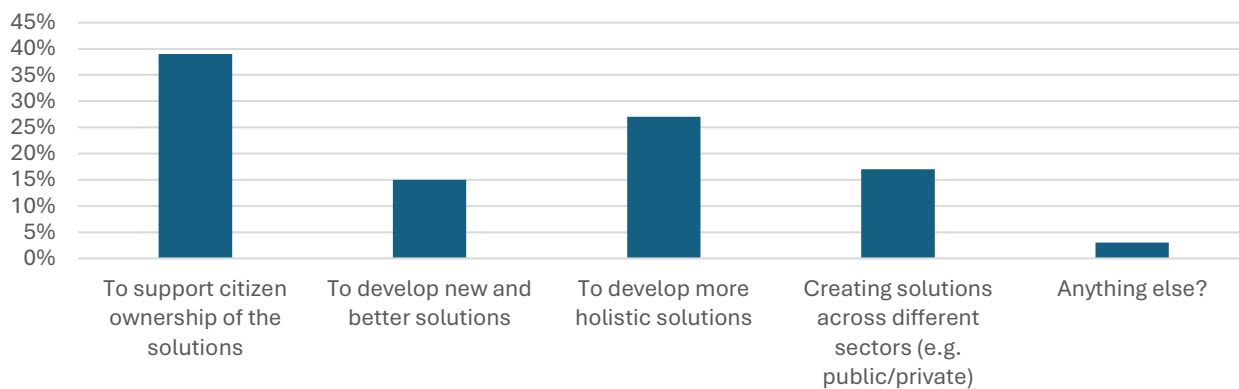
### **UNDERSTANDING CO-CREATION**

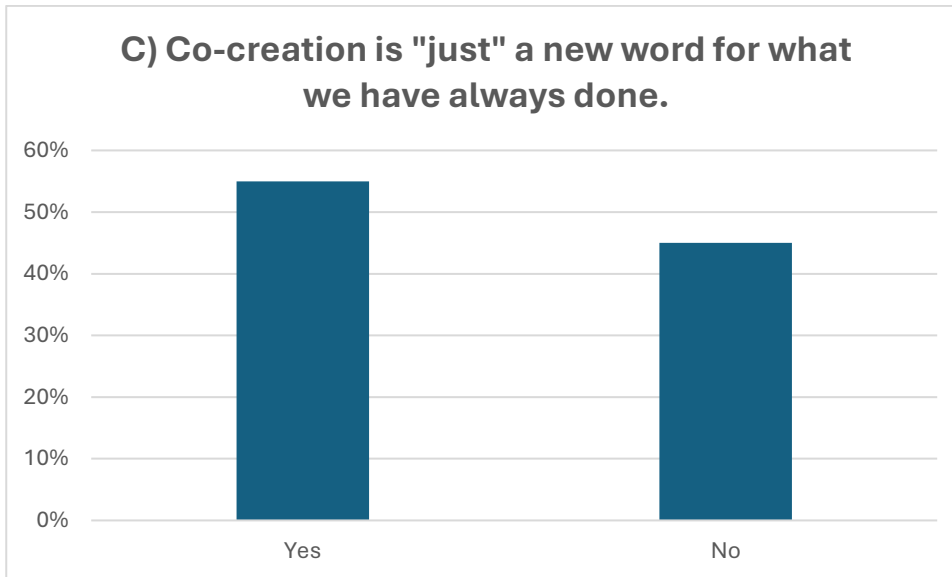
In order to uncover whether the management of Tønder Municipality has succeeded in creating a common, unambiguous definition and understanding of the concept of co-creation in the organisation, employees have answered a number of questions. The questions deal with, among other things, the difference between the concepts of collaboration and co-creation, cf. the theory section.

**A) I believe that collaboration and co-creation are the same thing.**



**B) What do you think is the most important purpose of co-creation?**



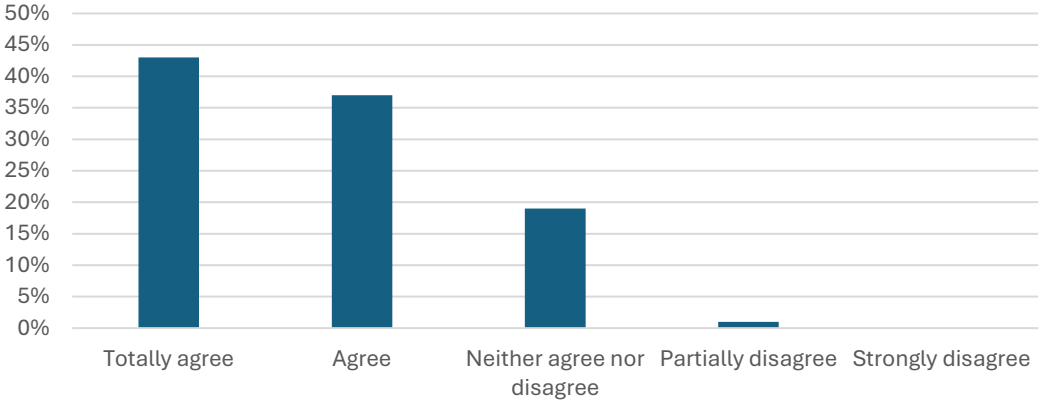


It is clear from the above dataset that there are many different perceptions of what the purpose of co-creation is in Tønder Municipality. According to Tønder Municipality's definition of co-creation described above, the purpose of co-creation in Tønder Municipality is psychological ownership and several respondents diverge from this perception. In relation to question C), 55% of respondents believe that co-creation is just a new word for what they have always done. When comparing questions C) and A), the result shows that 39 respondents answer "co-creation is the same as we have always done". 79% of these 39 respondents answer "co-creation is the same as collaboration".

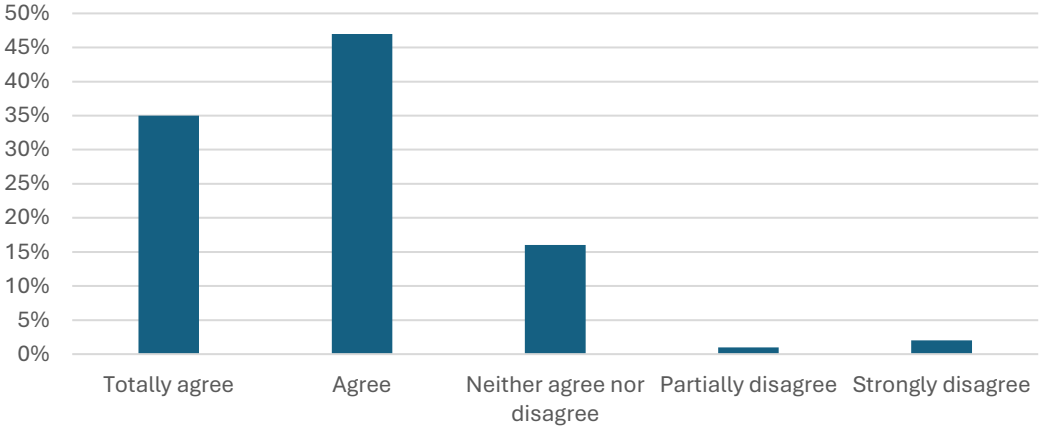
### **PSYCHOLOGICAL OWNERSHIP OF CO-CREATION**

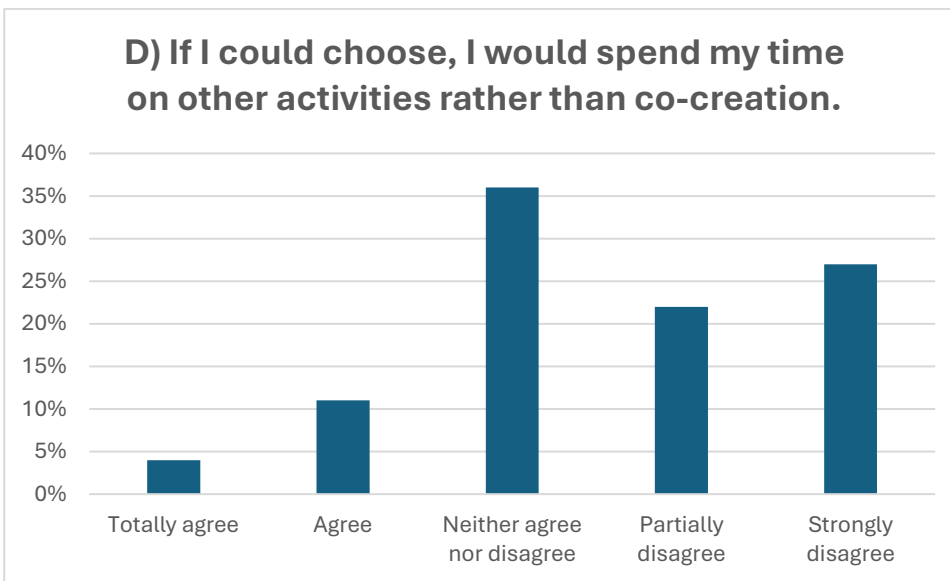
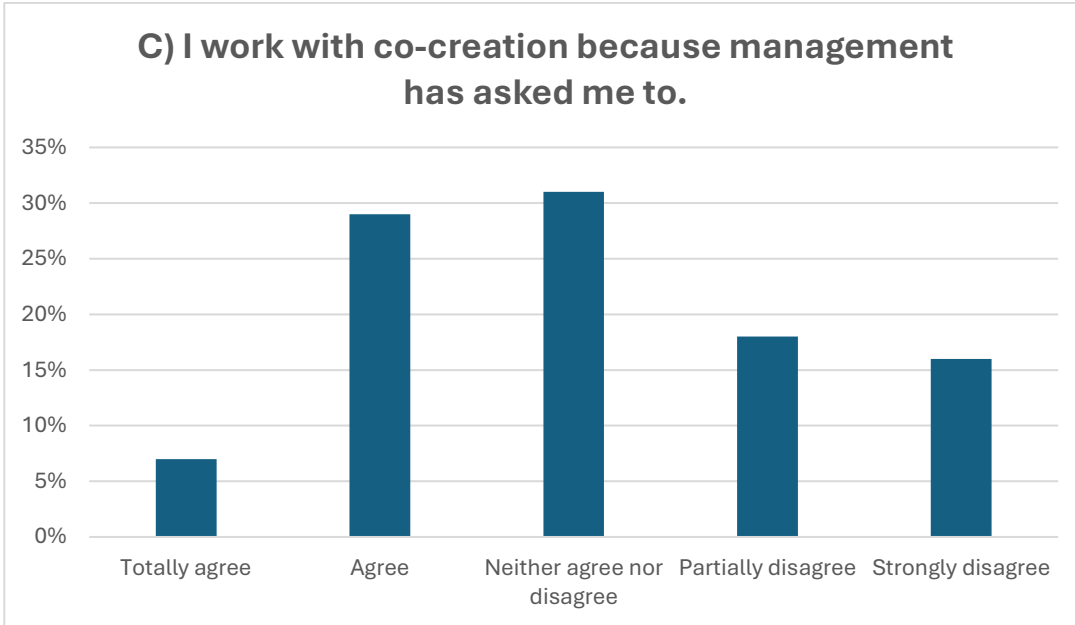
In continuation of recent psychological theory on psychological ownership (Avey, 2009), we have examined psychological ownership among employees in relation to working with co-creation. According to the theory, the questions concern the employees' experience of autonomy and interest in working with co-creation.

### A) I find it exciting to work with co-creation



### B) I find that working with co-creation is important for me to succeed in my task.



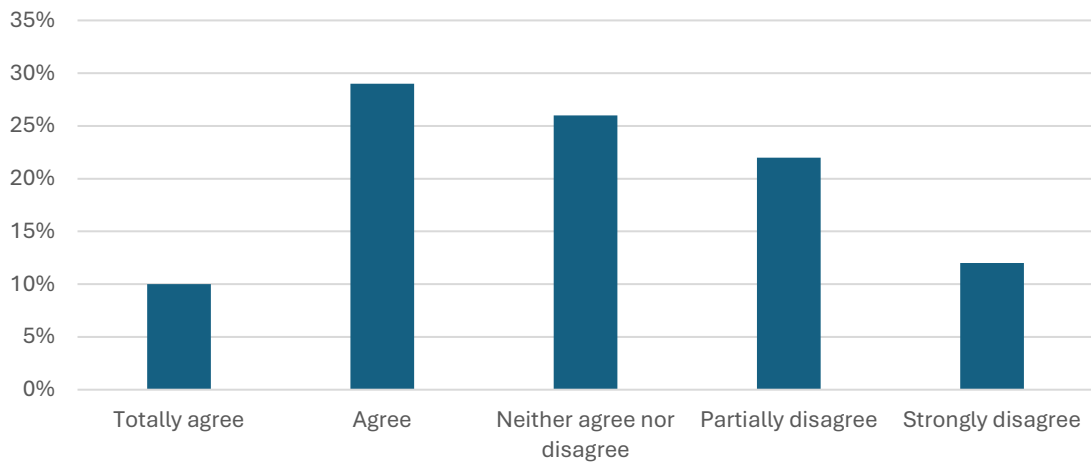


According to the collected empirical data regarding ownership of co-creation, there is a relatively high level of ownership and motivation among employees to work with co-creation, which points towards a high degree of intrinsic motivation. This suggests that there is a high degree of motivation and readiness among employees to change current practice to a more co-creative practice.

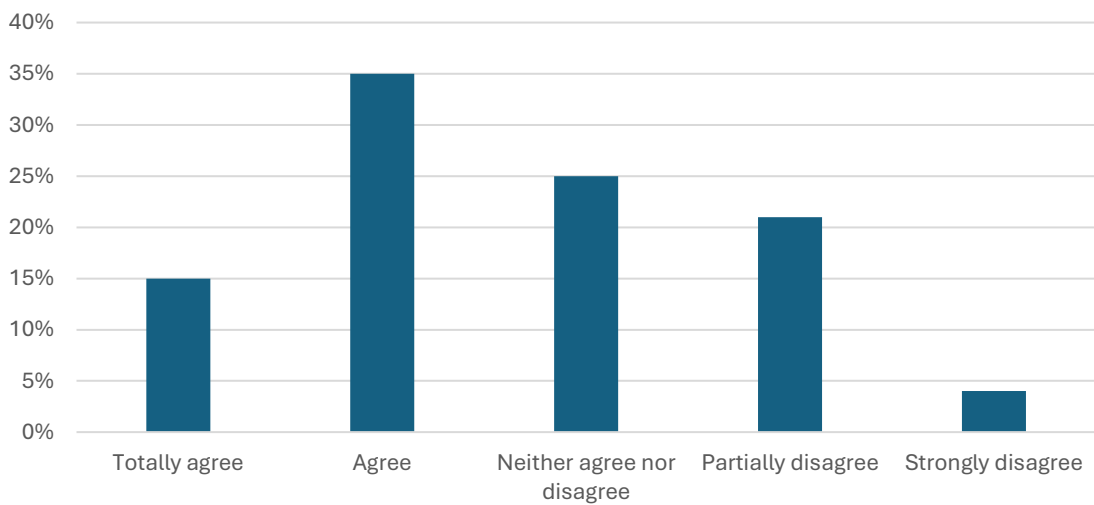
### **COPING WITH CO-CREATION**

We have also uncovered the employees' perception of their level of mastery in relation to having to work co-creatively. The perception of mastery is considered to be of crucial importance for the employees' desire to initiate trial actions in the work with co-creation. The questions in this section reveal, among other things, whether employees have a clear perception of what it means to work co-creatively and the employees' assessment of their own ability to work co-creatively.

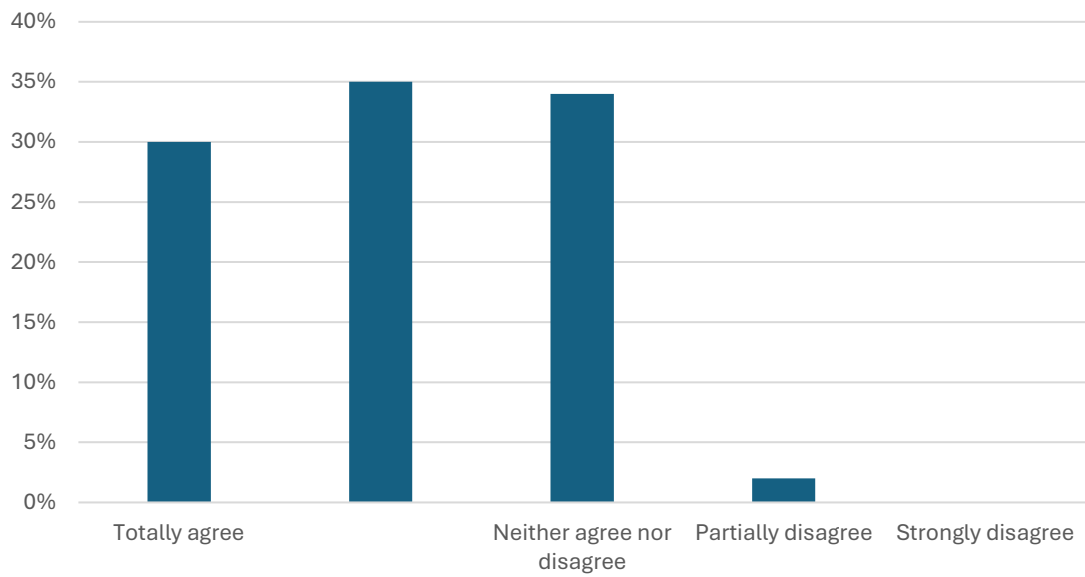
**A) It's not clear what I need to do to work co-creatively.**



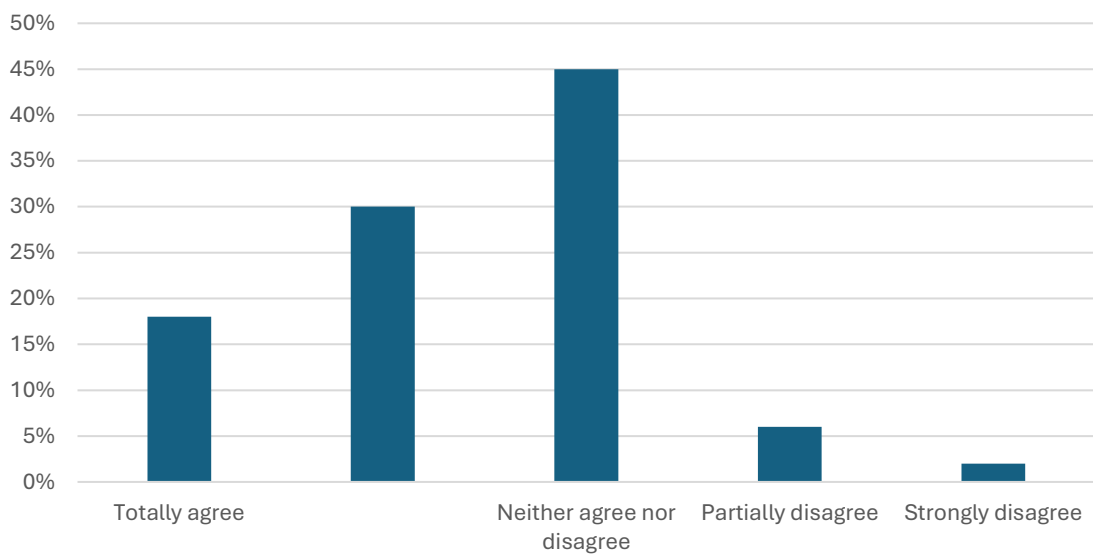
**B) It is difficult to work with co-creation at the same time as the other requirements and frameworks for my work.**

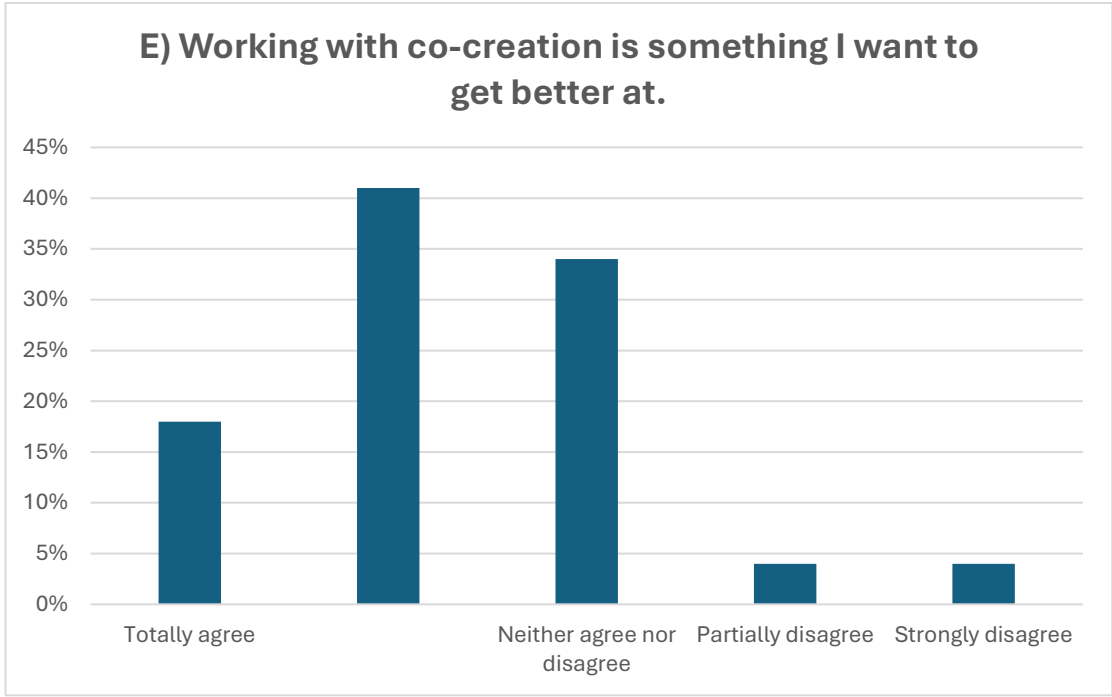


### C) I am good at co-creation.



### D) Co-creation has added something new and valuable to my work.





The above responses point to possible problems in the organisation regarding the implementation of co-creation. There may be various reasons why 50% indicate problems with conflicting demands at work. But it seems obvious to point to the conflicting goals that exist in different management paradigms that co-exist in an organisation.

Finally, you can compare the numbers: 59% of respondents expressed a desire for competence development in co-creation and 55% believe that co-creation is just a new word for what they have always done. If you cross these figures, you get the following picture:

|   |     |             | E) Working with co-creation is something I want to get better at. |       |                            |                    |                   |       |
|---|-----|-------------|---|-------|----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------|
|   |     |             | Totally agree   | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Partially disagree | Strongly disagree | Total |
| C) Co-creation is "just" a new word for what we have always done. | Ja  | Count       | 7   | 19    | 26                         | 4                  | 3                 | 59    |
|   |     | % within C) | 12%   | 32%   | 44%                        | 7%                 | 5%                | 100%  |
|   | Nej | Count       | 12  | 25    | 10                         | 0                  | 1                 | 48    |
|   |     | % within C) | 25%   | 52%   | 21%                        | 0%                 | 2%                | 100%  |
| Total   |     | Count       | 19  | 44    | 36                         | 4                  | 4                 | 107   |
|   |     | % within C) | 18%   | 41%   | 34%                        | 4%                 | 4%                | 100%  |

This crossing of data sets yields the surprising result that of those who say co-creation is just a way of doing what they've always done, 44% have a desire to become better at co-creation.

## WORKSHOP

The ambition of the workshop was to explore the results of the survey and put the results into perspective for an even stronger implementation of co-creation in practice. The participants in the workshop were presented with the results from the survey within the three main themes:

1. Understanding of co-creation
2. Ownership of co-creation
3. Coping with co-creation.

After discussing the conclusions, we asked the participants to discuss recommendations for the managerial strategy for implementing co-creation in the organisation. Comments from the participants in the workshop can be roughly divided into 2 aspects. On the one hand, the participants focused on the overall spread of the understanding and vision of co-creation in the municipality. On the other hand, the participants focused on the many dilemma-filled situations that employees experience in their daily work.

In relation to the translation of the concept of co-creation, the workshop participants point out that it has largely been up to the individual employee to be curious to explore the concept of co-creation:

*"It has been difficult to find Tønder Municipality's definition of co-creation. Co-creation is mentioned in many places, but without a description of how it should be put into practice" (employee statement).*

Based on this perspective, the participants in the workshop were not surprised by the high level of ownership of co-creation, which can partly be explained by the fact that the employees have largely been left to determine the purpose of co-creation in practice.

The participants pointed directly to the need for management at all levels to have a common and harmonised definition of co-creation. Some of the participants pointed out that an overall articulation is not sufficient, but that the local management should help the implementation on its way through a recurring and insistent dialogue about co-creation between employees and management. There is also a call for a concretisation of co-creation in relation to the individual disciplines, for example through case material.

In addition to the question of defining and translating co-creation, the participants in the workshop discussed the many dilemma-filled situations that employees encounter when working co-creatively:

*"It can be problematic to work co-creatively when the other partners (other departments, external partners) have a completely different focus" (employee statement).*

In line with the above, the workshop participants pointed to a long list of situations where an unclear alignment of expectations between the organisation and the employees leads to dilemma-filled situations where employees become uncertain about which choices/actions are the right ones. The easy choice is therefore to do what you usually do. Employees therefore requested support tools for handling these dilemma-filled situations. This could, for example, be through a fixed structure for feedback to the individual employee. Or a video where co-creation is illustrated in dilemma-filled situations, such as handling situations where citizens do not initially want co-creation.

### **KEY MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CO-CREATION IN TØNDER MUNICIPALITY**

The surveys in Tønder Municipality indicate that employees are highly motivated in their work with co-creation. What particularly challenges employees is the lack of a clear definition of co-creation and, as a result, the divergent expectations of employees' efforts.

Employees also point to a challenge in relation to middle managers' psychological ownership and efforts in relation to implementation in the local context. Continuity and consistency in the management chain's prioritisation and understanding of co-creation is crucial.

The psychological ownership of the management chain also becomes particularly important when seen in the context that the organisation will have to continuously prioritise between

The psychological ownership of the management chain also becomes particularly important when viewed in the context of the organisation's ongoing need to prioritise between different, but often conflicting, expectations. It is therefore important to have a clear and consistent direction throughout the organisation's work with co-creation.

However, a clear and consistent direction throughout the management chain requires strong psychological ownership of the direction and the interpretation of the direction.

**THE EXPERIENCES FROM TØNDER MUNICIPALITY THUS POINT TO THE NEED FOR A STRONG MANAGERIAL PREPARATORY WORK IN THE MANAGEMENT CHAIN AROUND THE ACTUAL CONCEPT CLARIFICATION, BUT ALSO AROUND A COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT PRIORITY CO-CREATION SHOULD HAVE IN THE ORGANISATION COMPARED TO OTHER IMPORTANT GOALS, SUCH AS CASE PROCESSING TIMES, BUDGET COMPLIANCE, ETC.**

On the other hand, the experiences from Tønder Municipality also point to the need to stimulate employees' sense of mastery around co-creation. Supporting employees' development in the right direction is thus a separate managerial task. The study points to the importance of establishing fixed feedback or incentive structures that support this work. The point is not so much a reward structure, but rather that employees are systematically given the opportunity to continuously assess their own mastery level in relation to management expectations.



**"On the other hand, the experience from Tønder Municipality also points to the need to stimulate employees' sense of mastery around co-creation."**

## **DISCUSSION SECTION**

Based on the theoretical foundation and the collected empirical data, we will explore how a better definition of co-creation is possible - i.e. A more operational concept of co-creation.

The new definition aims to specifically address the following two barriers to co-creative behaviour. The barriers are expressed by the following statements:

- I) co-creation is just another word for what we have always done.
- li) co-creation is impossible in my current position.

The first barrier we have derived from the empirical data, of which 55% agree with this view, while 62% agree either with this view or that co-creation and collaboration are the same thing! This barrier can be considered an understanding barrier to co-creation in practice. The second barrier is not derived from the empirical data, but rather from the definition of co-creation as it has been described in the literature, cf. Previous sections.

What both of these barriers have in common is that they prevent behaviour change - and specifically, they prevent co-creative behaviour. In the first case, this happens because people identify what they usually do with the term 'co-creation'. Of course, this means that you're doing exactly what you usually do, and therefore no real behavioural change has occurred. In the second case, there is no behavioural change because, in principle, you see co-creation as impossible in your work function. This also means that you do not change your behaviour because you do not act on something you are convinced is impossible.

In this way, the two barriers support our basic hypothesis on a theoretical and empirical level:

- I) if we have a lack of conceptual clarification of the concept of co-creation, this leads to obstacles in performing co-creation in practice.

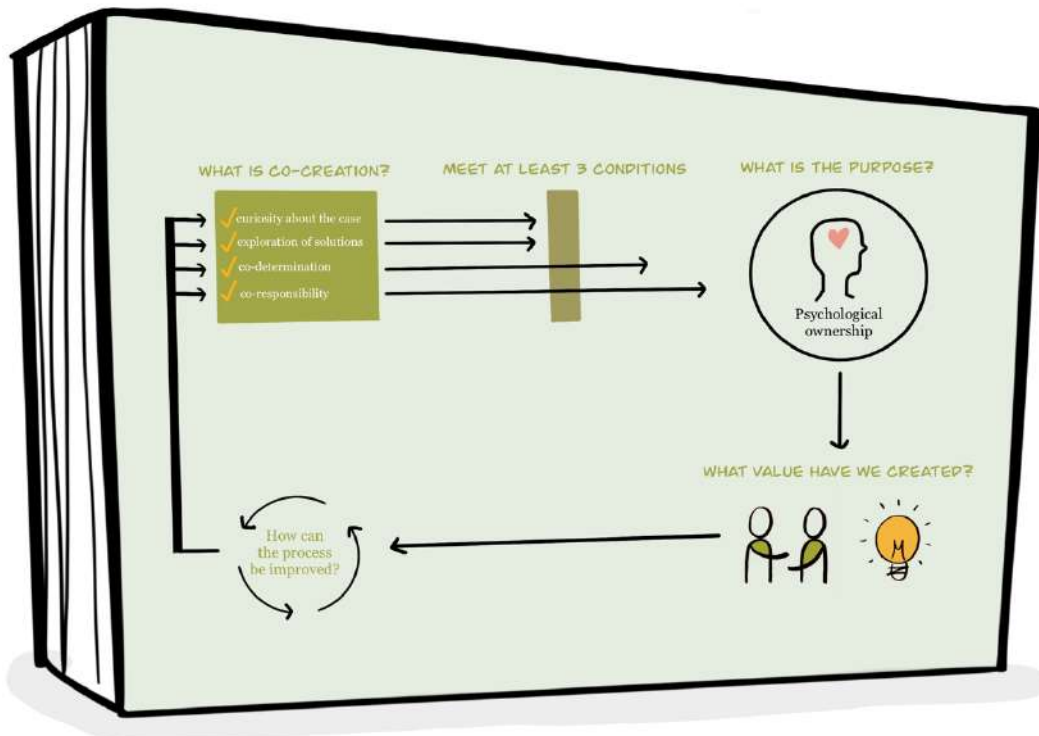
The new definition of co-creation aims to address these two barriers and at the same time present an alternative understanding of the co-creation concept.

According to our theoretical basis described earlier, the purpose of this report is to make the concept of co-creation a concept with a greater degree of weight than the previous interpretation of the concept. This means that the new interpretation of the concept of co-creation must have a more unambiguous and precise content that will make the concept more action-orientated. The standard by which we will assess our new interpretation of the concept is whether the concept fulfils this requirement.

The concept of co-creation will be presented through a model. The model gives concrete content to our concept of co-creation as it provides an action guiding procedure for how we can co-create solutions together. We have set up the following conditions to assess whether you have co-created:

1. Curiosity about the case: Has the actor been involved in exploring and understanding the case we are starting from?
2. Exploration of solutions: Has the actor been involved in finding possible solutions?
3. Participation: Has the stakeholder been involved in the decision-making process to select the best solution?
4. Co-responsibility: Has the stakeholder committed to concrete actions to contribute to the solution and/or to implement the solution in practice?

As a starting point, you must be able to answer yes to at least three of these questions in order to characterise your endeavour as co-creation. In this way, we have given more content to the concept, as there are now concrete conditions that must be met for a practice to be characterised as 'co-creative'. We have also opened up the possibility that co-creation, as an activity, can occur in other relationships than between an internal and an external party.



The first part of the model is about what co-creation is. We answer the question by presenting four conditions, of which at least 3 must be answered in the affirmative for us to meaningfully talk about co-creation.

Then we have specified the purpose of co-creation: psychological ownership. This means that we can subsequently assess the quality of our co-creation process by evaluating to what extent our process has generated psychological ownership for the relevant parties involved. In Tønder Municipality, the purpose of co-creation is defined as psychological ownership of the shared solutions. This can be understood as a value that has been selected and privileged among other values and is the special quality mark of the co-creation process. The idea here is that the purpose statement helps to give content to the concept of co-creation. It is by knowing the purpose of an activity that we can direct our actions to fulfil that purpose.

We can then consider what value we have created based on the process. Here you can consider your co-creation process in terms of other values that are relevant in the given context, for example: economic value, qualitative value or democratic value. Other more traditional metrics, such as impact and outcome, can also be used to assess the co-creation process. In some cases, it may be particularly relevant to look at whether our efforts are commensurate with the outcome of the process.

The final part of the model, How can the process be improved, points back to all elements of the model. In relation to the field What is co-creation? it can be considered whether we actually lived up to the four conditions. In relation to the purpose of co-creation, we can consider how we can realise a greater degree of psychological ownership in a similar process. Finally, consider whether we can create more value by changing the process, or whether there are other values that need to be considered in future processes.

The specified purpose of co-creation gives further qualifying content to the concept of co-creation, as in addition to the conditions mentioned above, we can now also assess the success of our co-creation initiative based on how much ownership it creates in the actor and other relevant values in the specific context.

By linking to the specific conditions mentioned above, we have made it possible to assess whether we have co-created. This specification provides a possible way to overcome barrier i): both because it makes it possible to indicate how to act co-creatively (fulfil at least three of the conditions) and it allows us to assess the truth of the statement: "Co-creation is just another word for what we have always done," as we can examine which conditions for co-creation are met in the specific case.

With this new interpretation of the co-creation concept, the second barrier mentioned above disappears: "ii) Co-creation is impossible in my current position." With the previous versions of co-creation, which focuses on the who of co-creation as an essential condition for co-creation, many public servants could utter this sentence and be right in their observation, because as we know, not all public servants have direct citizen contact. With the old interpretation of the co-creation concept, some employees would in principle be prevented from co-creating based on their job function, but with the new definition of co-creation this is not the case. The new version does not exclude anyone from co-creating based on their job function. Therefore, the new version of co-creation can also be used to overcome the second barrier and pave the way for potentially more co-creative behaviour[1].

## SUMMARY - ARE YOU IN CONTROL OF YOUR CO-CREATION OR ARE YOU WORKING WITH PIPE DREAMS?

We started this article by referring to a recent research project from Aalborg University, which shows that despite the fact that there is a lot of talk about co-creation in Danish municipalities, there are only a few places where it has resulted in innovation and new solutions for citizens.

In the article, we have attempted theoretically and through the study of a specific case to demonstrate that some of the issues associated with successful implementation are to be found in the very conceptualisation of co-creation. In this way, we try to contribute to an understanding of why it is apparently so difficult to implement co-creation in practice.

Applying co-creation in municipal case management involves a new way of working with citizens and other stakeholders. The organisation, target groups and purpose of co-creation can vary from municipality to municipality and from project to project. However, there are some common features of co-creation that differ from previous practice in the municipalities and that place clear demands on management when implementing co-creation.

One of these common features is paradoxically, as we have tried to demonstrate theoretically and practically through the case in Tønder Municipality, that there is currently no clear action-guiding definition of co-creation in Denmark.



It is generally agreed that co-creation is about involving external stakeholders in order to develop a new innovative approach to welfare tasks. A precise definition and understanding of co-creation is not much further along in Danish literature. The concept of co-creation can therefore be characterised as a relatively 'airy' concept that is in no way actionable in relation to what it actually means 'to co-create'. It is in this way that we believe that co-creation today can be considered a pipe dream.

In the article, we argue that the interpretation of the who of co-creation in a Danish context obscures other possible interpretations of the co-creation concept, which may be more action-orientated. In this context, we have shown how the who of co-creation is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for co-creation, but rather a contingent possibility.

The survey in Tønder Municipality also shows that many of the employees surveyed articulate problems and doubts about the municipality's expectations of their co-creative efforts. However, the doubts do not stop there, as the survey also points out that employees face daily prioritisation dilemmas between the municipality's various objectives. This doubt that the survey has uncovered can be traced back to a lack of clarification of what it means to work co-creatively.

Our mapping also clarifies that it is not an easy or uncomplicated task to achieve a clear and exhaustive common understanding of co-creation in an organisation. It requires an awareness of competing discursive understandings in the surrounding society and ownership of a given definition in the organisation's management chain.

The main challenge for management is thus to create cohesion and a common understanding of what it means to work co-creatively in their organisation. The mapping in Tønder Municipality shows that it is particularly challenging to create a common mindset throughout the management chain, partly due to competing goals and management paradigms.

We have introduced the concept of psychological ownership as a key element both in relation to the purpose of co-creation itself, but also as an essential element in the implementation of co-creation. International research indicates that psychological ownership requires a sense of control, mastery, etc.

This makes it crucial for the implementation that the local management takes on the task of making the definition of co-creation actionable, but also to organise processes that ensure psychological ownership in the organisation's management chain.

Based on the model above, we have tried to establish a new interpretation of the co-creation concept that is more operational and action-guiding, as it provides concrete conditions for what it means to 'co-create'. In this way, we have made our contribution to co-creation becoming something more than just a pipe dream.

The model puts a clear focus on what co-creation is, what purpose co-creation has, what value it creates and how the process can be improved.

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[1] However, legislation can still create a barrier to co-creative behaviour. See Torfing, Sørensen, Røiseland (2016) for an in-depth review of barriers to co-creation.

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