From map
to compass

Listening and collective improvisation in organisations. Experience from AMIS.

How does a group come up with something none of its members could have thought of alone?

Most development projects start with a map: a plan, a timeline, a fixed goal. AMIS started with an open question, with no given answer: what happens in an organisation when artistic practices of listening and collective improvisation are allowed to shape how people create together? Over two years, researchers and artists at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm (KMH) have tried this out with staff from Scania, PostNord and Implement Consulting Group. Much of the work has been about listening: becoming receptive to what has not yet taken form, rather than going straight to solutions. Such listening is what makes improvisation possible. Out of the work grew a compass, a way to find your bearings when the plan is not enough.

Insight 1

Vagueness is an asset

The phases where things are still undecided produce ideas you cannot plan your way to, provided time, a place and an open question give a frame to stay in.

Insight 2

Artistic practices create points of contact

Kinds of knowledge that rarely meet, such as engineering, economics, design, experience and intuition, can meet without one vocabulary taking over.

Insight 3

Sustainability starts with imagination

Thinking beyond your own expertise, holding contradictions and reconsidering habitual needs for control are preconditions for working with sustainability.

Insight 4

Ideas survive only in a context

What a workshop sets in motion fades if everyday work has no time, place or people to receive it. Then everything depends on one person having the energy.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF PROCESS

Development work is often described as a move from A to B: needs analysis, ideas, selection, delivery. We have been interested in what happens between the points, in the relationships between people, materials, environments and ideas as the work goes on.

It builds on an experience from music. In collective improvisation, listening is distributed across the group. No single person leads, and the music is shaped by how everyone listens: to each other, to the instruments and to the room.

The project's researchers are themselves practising musicians and artists, and the knowledge has grown out of doing, together with partners as co-researchers, in a series of lab days at KMH and at partner sites. One of them was built as a listening ecology, *Becoming Rain*: a space where listening was distributed between bodies, materials and technology rather than belonging to the individual. The question shifted from what each person can perceive to what the room makes it possible to perceive, and for whom. There was no best place to listen from, and participants were expressly allowed to be unsure, bored or lost.

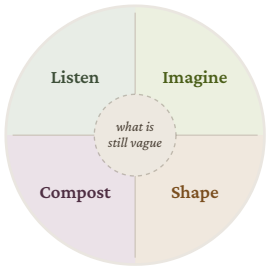
The same is true of a work team. What can be perceived, and who gets to speak, depends on how the meeting is arranged, not only on each person. The compass, which we developed and describe on the next page, is a way of making that question part of the work.

Improvising is not making things up. It is listening your way forward when the plan is not enough.

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Research team: Klas Nevrin, Thomas Arctaedius, Janna Holmstedt, Nina Bozic · Read more: `nevrin.se/research/amis`

OVER ~

THE COMPASS



The compass helps a group find its bearings in the phases where the plan is not enough and the way has to be found as the work goes on. At the centre is what is still vague, the blur before form. Around it are four winds, four ways of moving:

Listen. Sense what is already in the room before adding anything.

Imagine. Keep several tracks open and follow what does not seem to fit together.

Shape. Give something a temporary body: a sketch, a score, a prototype.

Compost. Let go of what has done its work, so that there is room for something else.

The winds are not steps in a sequence; a group can listen and shape at the same time, and different people can be in different winds. The compass helps the group notice where it has stopped, and which wind could set it moving again.

The compass also helps the group see three forces at work in any development effort. The *map* is what is prescribed: plans, goals, KPIs, deadlines and roles, everything that says what is expected. The *terrain* is what is inherited: habits, rooms and routines that shape the work, often without anyone noticing. The *weather* is the mood in the room right now: energy, tensions, what no one says out loud. Too much *map* and too little *weather* make for brittleness. *Weather* without a *map* overwhelms. *Terrain* that no one sees turns things to stone. The compass does not replace the *map*, but helps the group see when plans and goals still guide the work, and when they no longer match what is actually happening.

Each wind has practices and materials: card decks of key concepts, relational techniques and wild cards, as well as listening exercises, photo walks, scores and short formats that fit into an ordinary working day. In *multivoicing*, for example, two people start from a theme, a question or a shared experience. They do not share what they think of it, but where it lands with them, and boil it down to a seed, a short phrase passed to the next pair. *Invitations* shift attention from judgement and haste to curiosity. *Ways into listening* do the same for the senses: they point listening in new directions without prescribing what to hear.

WHAT HOLDS

Friction arose where the listening way of working met familiar forms of management: calendars, goals and agendas built to show what something leads to, which leave little room for what cannot yet be justified. What carried over most easily was what was concrete and small enough: settling into the room before a meeting starts, short listening exercises, formats that give energy without taking a whole day. Several teams built their own versions of the exercises.

The same conditions also land differently on different people. The open-ended phase can feel freeing to one person and draining to another, and the time, energy and security it takes to join in are not evenly distributed. Often a few people quietly hold the whole together, and it is put down to personal ability rather than something the meeting should provide.

Hence we speak of *relational carrying capacity*: the ability to hold what no one can hold alone, and to contain different ways of perceiving without using them up. It must be distributed and built into the setting. If not, it becomes individual: someone carries, no one sees. So the clearest message is not a method but conditions an organisation must protect:

TO PROTECT

Time that does not have to be justified in advance

Permission not to know

Someone who keeps the room open

THE NEXT TERRAIN

Picture a workplace where, beside the meeting room, there is another kind of room: one for what has no form yet. The question of such rooms now runs in several directions. When AI enters organisations, judgement often ends up with the individual or in rules, while the middle level is missing: shared ways to test, listen and take responsibility. We have also explored how a language model can be a counterpart in creative conversation, and how a group can share responsibility for its conditions and for how the answers are received.

In the sustainability transition no one owns the answer alone, and the cultural sector is exploring similar questions about room for collective ways of working.

Such practices do not spread by being scaled up, but through changed ways of paying attention and taking part. How they last over time, without stiffening into a method and without the cost landing on a few people, we have not answered. That question is best asked with an organisation that wants to try.

Want to take this further?

We are continuing the work after the project, with workshops, talks and longer collaborations with organisations that want to try this.

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